Sustainable development - a new vision for Europe?

Ms Margot Wallström, EU Commissioner for Environment

Dear Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for inviting me here this evening to speak to you. I understand this is a very popular series of evening events.

I hope though that it will not only be me who is speaking but that we will have a discussion as well. At least that is what I was promised in the invitation!

I want to talk about sustainable development as a new vision for Europe. I am sure you are interested in visions for Europe. Visions are important for motivating people, as history has abundantly shown. The vision that I am going to present tonight is a practical one, one where we are already taking the first operational steps.

I believe the phrase "sustainable development" inspires hope. But while the concept has permeated through many speeches and publications, it now means too many things to different people.

My goal therefore is to make the meaning of sustainable development clear and operational. The key to this is to focus on specific issues and endorse some principles.

1. The first principle is that sustainable development is concerned with the welfare of both present and future generations. Too often, if a policy has benefited us in the short-term then we have turned a blind eye to the long-term repercussions.

2. The second principle is that we should base our actions on an holistic assessment of the links and synergies between the economic, social and environmental dimensions of our policies. Too often, our economic policies have been designed with no consideration for their environmental or social consequences and some of you coming from business might say the reverse of course. Considering the wider impacts of your actions may sound like an obvious statement - but it's not obvious that we've applied such basic common sense in the past. For example, subsidies to agricultural practices that are bad for the environment and cost consumers.
Of course, both of these principles sound like "motherhood and apple pie" concepts. Nobody could ever disagree with either of them. Once again, we come back to the question of how to operationalise our vision.

Our strategy will therefore, secondly, set out the chief unsustainability threats that Europe needs to tackle over the next 25 years and beyond.

As I said earlier, over the years sustainable development has started to mean many things to many people. But whilst few can agree on what is sustainable, most can agree on what is unsustainable. We will therefore operationalise sustainability by highlighting a few of the crunch unsustainable issues that we need to tackle.

We have in the Commission provisionally identified six key unsustainable themes. Each topic is complex and cuts across many policy areas. Each is an issue with severe potential consequences, where the time scale is long and which is of concern across Europe.

The themes we are currently looking at are:

- Combating climate change caused by greenhouse gas emissions. Of course, this is a major issue both for the environment and from an economic point of view.
- Efficient natural resource management, i.e. a decoupling of economic growth from resource use, and the protection of biodiversity. Saving our natural resources should be a general rule of good economic management we depend on them for the future.
- Public health including both protection of health (for example, through an effective chemicals management system), and the financing of health care.  
- A policy towards land use and transport that allows for sustainable mobility. Transport is critical for our economy and an element of our personal freedom. At the same time it imposes enormous environmental costs in terms of air pollution, climate change or noise.
- Combating social exclusion and poverty through adequate social, education and labour market policies. This is not only a moral responsibility only an inclusive society will be a stable democracy.
- And finally, addressing our demographic problems caused by an ageing society, for example through a reform of the pensions systems.