

Per Mickwitz

EEA 25 years – A much needed institution in challenging times

This is the speech given by Per Mickwitz at the 25th anniversary of the European Environmental Agency on June 19th 2019 in Copenhagen. Since the speech was not read, the actual speech differed a bit from this written version. Per Mickwitz works as director of the International Institute of Industrial Environmental Economics at Lund University. He was speaking at the anniversary as the chair of the Scientific Committee of the EEA.

Twenty-five years ago, when the European Environmental Agency was founded, there was a lot of hope and EEA was a unique organization in the interphase between knowledge and policy. It was a bit like when I was born. My parents felt that I was unique, and they were full of hope.

One should not stretch this analogy too far though, because contrary to my parents' hope, which was directly due to my birth, the general feeling of hope in Europe 25 years ago was less due to the establishment of the EEA and more linked to the general political situation. The cold war had ended, and the prospects for Europe were quite good. Two years after the Rio conference, sustainable development was to be implemented and many new institutions were being established, such as the International Institute of Industrial Environmental Economics¹ in Lund (that I am a director of) and half a year later the Finnish Environment Institute - SYKE² that I used to work for.

Now the EEA is 25 years old. It has much more experience than when it started, but there is much less hope in – and for – the world. Before I say something about the challenges for the EEA in today's world, I will say a bit about the experiences at 25.

When I was 25, I had a master's degree from the University of Helsinki, which neither of my parents had. At 25 I really wanted to be independent. But if I am honest, I also wanted to make my parents proud.

If we look at the EEA, one can view the European institutions and especially the Commission as its mother and the member states as its father. The EEA very much – and rightly so – aims to be independent of “its parents”, but at the same time it wants to make its parents (the Commission and the member states) proud. When a new report or new knowledge produced by the EEA has been appreciated, has been used in debates and sometimes even has shaped policies; then the EEA is all smiles. Just like any 25-year-old when the parents recognize their achievements.

If we look at the world where the EEA operates now compared to when it started – the demand for EEA or more broadly for knowledge for policy making is even bigger than it used to be. Despite all efforts Europe and humanity are in a big mess. Last year the IPCC 1,5-degree report³ brought clear messages that “*Human activities are estimated to have caused approximately 1.0°C of global warming above pre-industrial levels*”, that “*Global warming is likely to reach 1.5°C between 2030 and 2052 if it continues to increase at the current rate.*” And “*Climate-related risks to health, livelihoods, food security, water supply, human security,*

and economic growth are projected to increase with global warming of 1.5°C and increase further with 2°C.” A month ago, the IPBES report⁴ pointed out that “1 million species already face extinction, many within decades, unless action is taken to reduce the intensity of drivers of biodiversity loss”. Third, the international resource panel in March published the Global Resources Outlook⁵ which showed that material extraction is still increasing and stated that “[t]he extraction and processing of materials, fuels and food make up about half of total global greenhouse gas emissions (not including climate impacts related to land 10% use) and more than 90 % of biodiversity loss and water 30% stress.”

In order to address the underlying causes of these sustainability crises the socio-technical systems by which energy, mobility and food are produced and consumed will have to be transformed. No organization has delivered this message as clearly as the EEA in for example the SOER 2015 report⁶, in the report “Perspectives on transitions to sustainability”⁷ and by the end of this year it will be even more clearly stated in the SOER 2020.

The sustainability crisis is, however, not the only challenge the EEA, Europe and humanity is faced with. Our time is characterized by disbelief in institution and a resistance to facts and knowledge.

Today the public, or large parts of the public to be more precise, are skeptical to public institutions like the EEA or universities, i.e. the institution I work for, or even to science. At the same time a wide spread resistance to knowledge and a culture of alternative facts has emerged. When the Swedish Professor of philosophy Åsa Wikforss got to know that Kellyanne Conway defended a clearly incorrect statement about the size of the audience when President Trump got sworn in by saying “Our press secretary, Sean Spicer, gave alternative facts” Åsa Wikforss got angry. What does an angry Professor in Philosophy do? She writes a book. Åsa Wikforss wrote a book called “Alternative facts – on knowledge and its enemies”⁸.

I am not going to go through the whole book, or even its main conclusions, but inspired by it I will give you some thoughts on the relationship between science and EEA in this time of knowledge resistance.

My main message is that the EEA will have to build the knowledge it produces even more carefully on science, but at the same time EEA should defend the role of scientific knowledge in the society.

First, what is knowledge? Åsa Wikforss synthesizes the insights of philosophers since Plato by stating that at least three conditions have to be fulfilled for something to be knowledge:

1. one should have a belief,
2. the belief should be true, i.e. it corresponds to reality, and
3. the truth of the belief should be based on good causes or facts.

Science and research are processes of systematically producing knowledge by testing beliefs based on facts.

Science is under attack. And therefore, all with insights on science and a voice should defend science by explaining its role, its methods and the difference between scientific knowledge

and general convictions. Since the EEA has a strong voice and a lot of knowledge – the second part of my message is that EEA also has a responsibility to defend science.

As I stressed in the beginning of my speech, there are many more intermediary actors, between knowledge and policy, now than when the EEA was founded. I already mentioned the IPCC, the IPBES and the International Resource Panel. But in addition to these organizations there are also individuals such as Ellen MacArthur or Greta Thunberg.

Let us reflect a bit on Greta and the EEA, but let us say Hans⁹ instead, because then it is more like in the fairytale “Hansel and Gretel” recorded by the Grimm brothers, which in Swedish is called “Hans and Greta”¹⁰. Greta has a simple message to the policy makers *“Solving the climate crisis is the greatest and most complex challenge that Homo sapiens have ever faced. The main solution, however, is so simple that even a small child can understand it. We have to stop our emissions of greenhouse gases.”*¹¹ But it is based on science.

Because Greta and her message has been heavily criticized, especially by middle aged men, her message has been scrutinized and scientists have signed letters in support of her message. First 224 academics sent a letter in support of Greta and the other strikers to the Guardian.¹² Then 1228 researchers from Finland signed a similar statement¹³ and after that more than 12000 researchers from Germany, Austria and Switzerland signed a statement in support of Greta and the Friday strikes¹⁰. Similar support letters have been signed in many other countries as well.

Although the EEA and Hans have delivered similar messages as Greta, they have not yet been as heavily criticized as Greta and the Friday strikers. Hans has thus not yet needed similar support statements by researchers that Greta has got. But I hope that if Hans one day needs them, he will get them. Together we will ensure that the knowledge produced at the EEA will stand the scrutiny of the academic community and therefore they will also defend that knowledge and the EEA should that be needed.

On behalf of the Scientific Committee I congratulate the EEA to its first 25 years. At the same time, I, the Scientific Committee and the broader scientific community look forward to working with the EEA, during the next 25 years, in order to produce knowledge based on scientific facts enhancing the sustainability transitions humanity so desperately needs. While this is a serious task, we should have fun while doing it. I can ensure you that the Scientific Committee’s meetings often are fun and I am quite sure this will be a fun evening. Congratulations EEA!

¹ <https://www.iiiee.lu.se/about-the-iiiee>

² https://www.syke.fi/en-US/SYKE_Info

³ IPCC, 2018: *Summary for Policymakers. In: Global Warming of 1.5°C. An IPCC Special Report on the impacts of global warming of 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels and related global greenhouse gas emission pathways, in the context of strengthening the global response to the threat of climate change, sustainable development, and efforts to eradicate poverty* [Masson-Delmotte, V., P. Zhai, H.-O. Pörtner, D. Roberts, J. Skea, P.R. Shukla, A. Pirani, W. Moufouma-Okia, C. Péan, R. Pidcock, S. Connors, J.B.R. Matthews, Y. Chen, X. Zhou, M.I. Gomis, E. Lonnoy, Maycock, M. Tignor, and T. Waterfield (eds.)]. World Meteorological Organization, Geneva, Switzerland, 32 pp.

⁴ IPBES. 2019. *Global assessment report on biodiversity and ecosystem services of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services*. E. S. Brondizio, J. Settele, S. Díaz, and H. T. Ngo (editors). IPBES Secretariat, Bonn, Germany.

⁵ IRP (2019). *Global Resources Outlook 2019: Natural Resources for the Future We Want*. Oberle, B., Bringezu, S., Hatfeld-Dodds, S., Hellweg, S., Schandl, H., Clement, J., and Cabernard, L., Che, N., Chen, D., Droz-Georget, H., Ekins, P., Fischer-Kowalski, M., Flörke, M., Frank, S., Froemelt, A., Geschke, A., Haupt, M., Havlik, P., Hüfner, R., Lenzen, M., Lieber, M., Liu, B., Lu, Y., Lutter, S., Mehr, J., Miatto, A., Newth, D., Oberschelp, C., Obersteiner, M., Pfster, S., Piccoli, E., Schaldach, R., Schüngel, J., Sonderegger, T., Sudheshwar, A., Tanikawa, H., van der Voet, E., Walker, C., West, J., Wang, Z., Zhu, B. A Report of the International Resource Panel. United Nations Environment Programme. Nairobi, Kenya.

⁶ EEA, 2015, *The European environment — state and outlook 2015: synthesis report*, European Environment Agency, Copenhagen.

⁷ EEA 2018. *Perspectives on transitions to sustainability*, European Environment Agency, Copenhagen.

⁸ Wikforss, Å. 2019. *Alternativa Fakta – om kunskapen och dess fiender* [Alternative facts – on knowledge and its enemies], Fri Tanke, Stockholm.

⁹ The name of the current Executive Director of the European Environmental Agency (EEA) is Hans Bruyninckx (<https://www.eea.europa.eu/about-us/governance/executive-director>)

¹⁰ The original German name is Hänsel und Grethel and it was published in 1812 as part of Kinder- und Hausmärchen. The Swedish version "Hans och Greta" was first published in 1825.

¹¹ Thunberg, G. 2019. "'Our house is on fire': Greta Thunberg, 16, urges leaders to act on climate". *The Guardian*. 25.1.2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/jan/25/our-house-is-on-fire-greta-thunberg16-urges-leaders-to-act-on-climate>

¹² Warren, M. 2019 Thousands of scientists back kids' climate strike, *Nature* (567) 291-2.

¹³ <https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSeXNUN44ZL9O88dbchFODLP9QKogVGpFEqNTivYPJ7Eabxhzg/viewform>