BUILDING NEW ALLIANCES

At the Progressive Society’s initial Stakeholders’ Meeting on 8 March 2018 the groundwork for the initiative has been set successfully. The introduction of Progressive Society’s goals, the launch of the new website and a pledge of support by several invaluable partners marked the kick-off of this exciting new initiative, building on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) towards a truly progressive Europe.

The meeting’s moment of surprise came rather early. Jeffrey Sachs, adviser to UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres and chief designer of the SDGs, appeared on screen to join the conversation. He welcomed the project pledging his commitment to it: “I look forward to work closely with you to build a world of sustainable development and achieve the SDGs.” Furthermore, he suggested in his message (watch it here in full) to the stakeholders present “that the SDGs are, in fact, the Socialist and Democrat Goals,” elaborating that “the countries at the top of the chart implementing the SDGs are those with a socialist background.”

Moments before, S&D-Group Vice President Udo Bullmann set the stage for Progressive Society’s launch. Using the occasion of International Women’s Day he invoked SDG Number 5: “Gender issues are core issues of this new approach we would like to develop together.” Moreover, he laid out Progressive Society’s initial vision: “we have to prepare ourselves for a new set of mind, strategies and methodologies on how to develop our political alternative, to communicate and to work together.” He also stated that “we cannot do this alone. It can only work if we find a new mode of collaboration, a new mode of dialogue with people on the ground.” After his remarks and Jeffrey Sachs’s video message, a short, but engaging and thought-provoking debate on the initiative’s four major topics followed.

Fighting inequalities in a holistic approach

The debate, which was expertly moderated by Andrea Westall (Senior Research Fellow at Open University UK) and Saïd El Khadraoui (Adviser to the European Political Strategy Center), started off with the overarching subject of inequality. Progressive Society’s goal of a multidimensional approach to fighting inequality - in economic, social, environmental and territorial terms - was reflected by the speakers’ remarks. Inigo Macias (Oxfam) opened the discussion by calling for “an economy that from the start puts work and wages ahead of capital gains” since those most affected by the crisis are not the ones that enjoy the opportunities of the current economic growth. Regarding territorial inequality, Frédéric Vallier (Council of European Municipalities and Regions) underlined the political importance to combat regional disparities. “The territories that have been left behind are those that go to the populist, right-wing and eurosceptic parties.” In a similar line, Conny Reuter (Solidar) offered his analysis on why the centre-left has struggled to get its message for wealth redistribution across to voters in recent elections: “There is a fight about redistribution.
It’s just not the redistribution of wealth - but of poverty! The poor are in competition with each other.” In context of the migration crisis, right-wing parties exploited this competition more effectively. He urged the stakeholders to take this further into account. “For too long, we have been only talking about income inequality. But inequality has to be discussed in a holistic approach - in terms of housing, education, culture and other issues.” The topic of inequality remained a focal point, also in the discussions of the other three topics.

“**You cannot grow eternally**” - **Ecological transformation as a social lever**

Collecting the best practices for ecological and social sustainability from all across the continent represents Progressive Society’s bottom up approach. Innovative ideas from the local and regional level will serve as blueprints for a smart and sustainable European society, if they are considered on a larger scale. Introducing their campaign *Cities4Europe - Europe for citizens*, Anna Lisa Boni of Eurocities pointed out candidly that: “Business as usual is not working anymore. To translate problems into opportunities, we need a new mode of co-creation.” The cities and municipalities have a key role to play in this regard. “Local governments are the enablers which allow the creative and intelligent to come up with solutions and react to citizens’ responses.”

**Financing the transformation**

Empowering citizens locally to unleash social progress was also the main theme in the third section of the debate. On a sound financial plan for a sustainable transition, Ivailo Kalfin, former Bulgarian Minister of Labour and Member of the High Level Group on Own Resources (so-called Monti High Level Group), emphasised that “investment has to go to the lowest possible level, because municipalities and NGOs are much closer to the people.” A more general issue was raised by Marco Cilento (European Trade Union Confederation): “Europe should do better in mobilising resources. The member states need to implement policies that remove inequality by investing in both the SDGs and the social pillar.” On whether the goals and the social pillar will already be included in the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), S&D-Vice President Isabelle Thomas shared “some good news.” She mentioned that some aspects of the report that sets out the EP’s position ahead of the negotiations “show that the political debate has evolved on this issue”, namely that “the next MFF should be aligned with SDGs; climate goals must be are taken more seriously into account; and the social pillar must be implemented for example through the launching of a Child Guarantee.” However, fellow Vice President Kathleen van Brempt criticised that Europe’s austerity measures were still “imposing a budgetary straightjacket on the cities.” Her remark was well received by Silvia Ganzerla (Eurocities) who stated that inequality could only be seriously fought by making funds available at the local level. She added that “having integrated approaches is part of the solution. We need to combine different funds and have co-creation in a bottom up way.” Furthermore, Emelie Weski (Nordic Financial Unions) urged the S&D-Group to push even stronger for social progress on the EU
level: “Without the S&D-Group’s political pressure, there will be no social factor taken into account when discussing the so called sustainable finance action plan.”

“Let’s change what we measure to change what we do” - Looking beyond GDP

In the final part of the debate, Guido Boccardo, Progressive Society’s adviser for the transformation of governance, convincingly laid bare the main fallacy of the dominance of GDP in the formulation of policy targets. “If we take GDP as the measure of well-being, then our final outcome will only focus on economic growth, without considering the externalities on society and the environment.” Complementing macroeconomic indicators is necessary to widen the perspective, since goals based on GDP (like in the European Semester) are fixated on fiscal discipline and are therefore “limited in vision.” Barbara Caracciolo of Solidar went even further and called for a “new definition of progress that puts the well-being of the people and the planet at the centre.” This demand was addressed by Tanya Cox (Plan International) who argued that it wasn’t for the lack of social parameters and measurements: “The EU has its own Quality of Life index, but the problem is that it’s not used in policy- and decision-making. This has to change.” MEP Seb Dance concluded the discussion with a rather inconvenient reminder for policy-makers: “The simple solutions are never the ones leading to sustainable change.”

Introducing progressivesociety.eu

“We should have a meeting like this each month to share inspiration,” said Kathleen van Brempt before presenting the newly launched website progressivesociety.eu. Since it is unfortunately not possible to meet every month, the website and initiative’s Facebook page will ensure a constant exchange of ideas and information for all stakeholders and citizens. In addition to providing thorough background information and the team behind the initiative, “the website shows our activism, which is something profoundly progressive.” Moreover, the website has an appealing and user-friendly interface. Kathleen van Brempt also praised the emblematic logo: “The logo of Progressive Society represents our vision: on the one hand, it is shaped as a circle, symbolising a circular economy and an inclusive society; on the other hand, the dots represent all our partners in their diversity and size. So we have of course the large stakeholders such as the member states, but also smaller ones like trade unions and NGOs and, most importantly, the smallest ones, who are the citizens.” Isabelle Thomas concluded the stakeholders’ meeting by once again reflecting on the discussed topics. On the question whether the EU can offer an alternative economic and social model, she pointed out that some suggestions had been proposed. Yet she urged the stakeholders present to fight for the realisation of the SDGs, although “it is perhaps the most painful thing.” She surely is right about that. But as her colleague Udo Bullmann stated in his opening remarks: “Today is a starting point to get closer to Goal 17 of the SDGs: Build new alliances to strengthen partnerships for sustainable development.”