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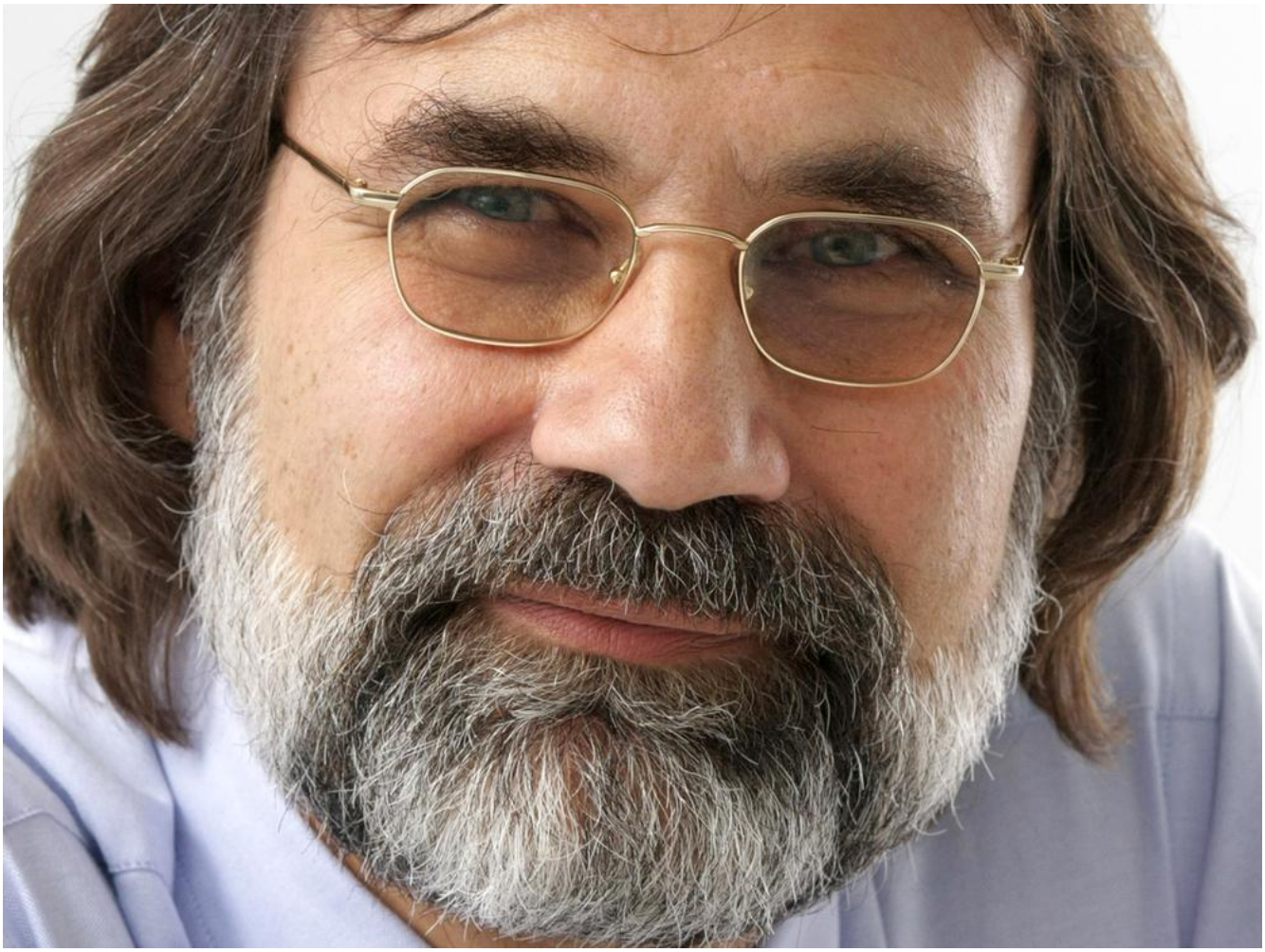

Q&A: 'People have to be at the centre of the energy transformation'

In June 2021, the EU's Group of Chief Scientific Advisors (GCSA) published the Scientific Opinion entitled "A systemic approach to the energy transition in Europe", arguing that the clean energy transition in the European Green Deal must keep people at its centre. In light of tomorrow's RePowerEU announcement that is critical to the future of energy supply in Europe, we invite GCSA Vice-Chair Nebojsa Nakicenovic to comment on the centrality of a just transition and the importance on staying focused on a clean energy future even at times of intensifying pressure.

17 May 2022 - By KEVIN CASEY

Tell us why the European Commission even needs a scientific opinion at all. Does not the evidence speak for itself?

This publication (A Systemic Approach to energy Transition in Europe) is part of the Science Advice Mechanism (SAM) of the European Commission. From my perspective, this is a very unique way of providing scientific advice to the decision makers. Many governments have chief scientific advisors with that function. What is unique about SAM in the European Commission is that it has three independent parts.

First, there is the Group of Chief Scientific Advisors who provide the scientific opinion. There are very clear process rules about how that happens. The other independent part is the so-called SAPEA (Scientific Advice for Policy of the European Academies). This is a consortium of over 100 European academies. They provide a scientific evidence review, similar to the climate change assessment of the IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change).

The assessment is a scientific analysis of what we know about a particular topic. They (SAPEA) do not provide a scientific opinion or scientific advice, importantly they look into the possible options. We, the group of seven chief scientific advisors, based on this evidence review — evidence, so factual scientific knowledge — provide a scientific opinion to the European Commission.

There is also a unit in the Commission that catalyses this process. The three groups work closely together but we are independent. That explains the context. Why would we provide a scientific opinion? It is because the topic is considered really crucial and central to multiple crisis facing Europe and the world.

Does a just transition require a transformation of the economic model of energy services? People own the problem, should they not own the solution too?

That is precisely what we have tried to address in our scientific opinion - based on the scientific evidence. We didn't go beyond the scientific evidence.

Energy cannot be seen as a silo. We – people – have to be at the centre. That means it has to be an inclusive process involving everybody and, importantly, not leaving anyone behind. Because there is a great danger that any transformation, unfortunately, leads to winners and hopefully there will be many, many winners but also – I wouldn't say "losers" – but there are people who fall through the cracks who might be left behind and do not have an escape hatch. This is what was a high priority - to identify how to do that.

The EU's Group of Chief Scientific Advisors argue that the clean energy transition in the European Green Deal must keep people at its centre. ©Alexanderstock23, Shutterstock

In our scientific opinion – and in fact we say explicitly, it is essential that sustainable energy, lifestyles, and behaviours become the preferred choice for the people – become a natural choice. For that, we have to create an environment that allows that. This is clearly very, very complex, I don't think anybody has a silver bullet on that question.

The world has changed since the paper was published in June 2021. In particular war, inflation and recent dire warnings from the IPCC about rising temperatures. How does that affect your opinion on a just transition?

I have to be very careful to distinguish what is in our scientific opinion based on the evidence and what is my personal view. It's important not to mix the two or I would not be reflecting the scientific advice mechanism which I think is very unique – I just want to make that clear. Here is my private opinion based on our scientific opinion but not in it.

Geopolitics are changing. There is no doubt that we are in a crucial moment in history. And this is why we argued before – again, my view – that we shouldn't lose sight of the long term objectives .

We are likely to exceed 1.5 degrees – it is almost certain that by 2040 we will be above (the limit prescribed), perhaps even earlier. From the scientific point of view, this is not new.

From the policy point of view and behavioural point of view, this is something one needs to somehow internalise. We will exceed that goal and we will bear the dangerous consequences. But, we should not lose the perspective of doing our utmost to reach 1.5 degrees in the future – and for that we need to act now.

This is another dimension of justice – intergenerational justice. We have to make sure that we leave the planet to the future generations (hopefully) in better condition than what will occur over the next decade or two.

Is it even possible for the EGD to achieve 'a clean, circular economy, a modern, resource-efficient and competitive economy' by 2050?

Again, we are in the realm of opinion. Nobody can tell what the future will be like.

I was very enthusiastic when in 2015 all of the world adopted the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and when there was the Paris Agreement on climate change. I think those were the two really important visionary steps towards this aspirational transformation that we were talking about.

I would also argue that the European Green Deal, Fit for 55 and New European Bauhaus initiatives are even more actionable in some sense. They provide a clearer agenda for how the world and life might and should look in 2050.

I don't want to sound too pessimistic and again let me add, this is my personal perspective - you know, 30 years is a long enough time to achieve this transformation.

We have done that before. The most recent example is of mobile phones. It all started in 1990 and today, everybody in the world has a phone. Even the poorest people have a phone because it has enabled new economic activities, because it's beneficial for many (despite the nuisance of always being reachable!)

Another example just to show in principle this is doable, is the replacement of horses by motor vehicles. That also took 30 years in most of the countries. We have 30 years to replace our vehicle fleet by hydrogen and electric. We have just enough time for the transformation if we act immediately.

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A Systemic Approach to energy Transition in Europe