In Memory of Christine von Weizsäcker (née Radtke)

20 February 1944 – 16 October 2026

Many ENSSER members have known Christine, worked alongside her, and shared with her a commitment to science, responsibility and sustainability. Christine was a founding member of ENSSER, as she was of many other organisations dedicated to responsibility and sustainability, peace and democracy, biodiversity and citizen science. ENSSER extends its sincere condolences to the von Weizsäcker and Radtke families.

In 1977, Christine began developing the concept of *Fehlerfreundlichkeit*, often translated as "error-friendliness"[1]. Drawing on the role of variation and error in biological evolution, she argued that the capacity to accommodate and learn from errors should be a central principle in technological development. Nuclear power technology, she maintained, fundamentally defies this principle: its potential for catastrophic consequences leaves little room for error. In the early years of public and scientific debate on genetic engineering, she was also among those who drew attention to the lack of error-friendliness in this emerging technology.

Christine took part in the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, where genetic engineering was increasingly promoted as the technological solution to hunger and a means of advancing sustainability. Over the following decades, she closely observed the growing cooperation—sometimes behind the scenes—between public-sector scientists and corporate actors working in the interests of biotechnology companies. She never shied away from challenging the arguments put forward by these scientists, as well as by the corporate lawyers and managers accompanying them. In her characteristic style, she once summarised the exaggerated promises made about genetic engineering with the words: "Genetic engineering is the answer! But what was the question?"

It was therefore only natural that Christine became deeply involved in the negotiations that led to the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety, working alongside the Third World Network (TWN) and other civil-society organisations. Among those who played important roles in these debates and negotiations were Yoke Ling Chee (TWN, Penang, Malaysia), Beth Burrows (Edmonds Institute, Edmonds, USA), Phil Bereano (University of Washington, Seattle, USA), Doreen Stabinsky (then California State University, Sacramento, USA), and Dan Leskien (then Friends of the Earth, Brussels, Belgium). The negotiations had their origins in the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), adopted at the 1992 Earth Summit. Article 19, entitled "Handling of Biotechnology and Distribution of its Benefits", provided an opening for those who viewed the promises of biotechnology with caution and recognised the need for international binding rules evaluating, mitigating and in the best case preventing its risks especially when applied at landscape level.[2]

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[1] Christine Weizsäcker, Ernst Ulrich von Weizsäcker: Fehlerfreundlichkeit. In: Klaus Kornwachs (Eds.): Offenheit – Zeitlichkeit – Komplexität. Zur Theorie der Offenen Systeme. Campus, Frankfurt / New York 1984, p. 167–201. Ernst Ulrich von Weizsäcker: Error Friendly Technologies. In: Bulletin of Science Technology Society. Vol 4, 1984, p. 337–339.

[2] CBD Art. 19 3. The Parties shall consider the **need for and modalities of a protocol** setting out appropriate procedures, including, in particular, advance informed agreement, in the field of the safe transfer, handling and

Christine, TWN and other civil-society and scientific actors were instrumental in bringing about an international discussion on the “need for and modalities of” a biosafety protocol. A policy-science symposium[3] contributed to the process that led the negotiators during the second Conference of the Parties to the CBD, meeting in Jakarta in 1995, to decide to begin negotiations on what would become the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety.

Throughout the ensuing years of negotiations, Christine was a familiar and highly respected presence. Negotiators and observers knew her positions, sought her advice and valued her criticism. She was always ready to engage, to question assumptions and to challenge arguments, while remaining open to dialogue. When the negotiations began to move in a direction that did not reflect the positions of the biotechnology industry, senior managers from one of the leading US plant biotechnology companies attended a specific working group meeting dealing with liability clauses. At a meeting of the company organised with NGO observers, even Christine was surprised to learn that the company's senior management had not been properly informed by its representatives at the negotiations. They were unaware of the actual content and direction of the discussions. We all noted that industry representatives engage in PR not only towards the public but also within their own companies, concealing developments that do not serve their employers' interests.

One of her close allies in this work was the late Dr Tewolde Berhan Gebre Egziabher, who headed Ethiopia’s Environmental Protection Agency. He was Africa’s chief negotiator and finally the lead negotiator for the G77. Their friendship and collaboration were important to the effort to finalise a text that gave practical expression to the precautionary approach enshrined in the Rio documents. Without explicitly naming the approach, the Protocol established a framework for precautionary governmental decision-making when knowledge about the potential consequences and risks of a technology—in this case, genetic engineering—remains incomplete.

Against this background, it was entirely fitting that Christine was among those invited to contribute to the conceptual development and establishment of ENSSER. She took part in the European Network Meeting in Berlin, Germany in December 2008 and in the founding meeting in Tromsø, Norway in August 2009, hosted in connection with GenØk. At that time, GenØk was the leading scientific institution in the world engaged in biosafety research and advice not aligned with industry interests.

We still remember our meeting with the astonished German consul in Tromsø. Accustomed to dealing with travel difficulties encountered by German cruise-ship tourists, he now found himself presented with the founding documents of ENSSER. We explained the network’s mission and asked him to provide the stamp and signature required to establish ENSSER as an association under German law.

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use of any living modified organism resulting from biotechnology that may have adverse effect on the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity.

[3] 1996, Third World Network, Biosafety – Scientific Findings and Elements of a Protocol https://twn.my/title2/biosafety/misc/Biosafety.pdf

Christine brought her experience, knowledge, instinct and kindness to the work of building ENSSER. She supported the network and several of its members through difficult exchanges with those typically powerful scientists, policy actors and others who defended established, and increasingly commercialised, non-independent science, against any form of scrutiny. Her ability to combine intellectual independence with a readiness to engage made her an invaluable colleague and ally.

We remember Christine as a sharp thinker with a generous heart. She was deeply committed to her causes and convictions, yet always willing to engage with those on the other side of a debate and to explore the common ground among actors with different perspectives. She understood that standing firmly by one's principles need not preclude listening, dialogue and mutual respect.

We also remember the family homes in Bonn and, later, in Emmendingen, where colleagues and friends were always warmly welcomed. There, Christine and her husband Ernst delighted in sharing good red wine and engaging their guests in discussions that often continued late into the night. These gatherings were an expression of the same qualities that marked her public life: curiosity, generosity, intellectual openness and a genuine interest in other people.

Critical Scientists Switzerland (CSS), founded in 2015 as a Swiss counterpart to ENSSER and now one of its member organisations, also had the privilege of working closely with Christine. During the preparation of the 2019 report *Gene Drives – A Report on Their Science, Applications, Social Aspects, Ethics and Regulations*, a joint project led by CSS in collaboration with ENSSER and the Federation of German Scientists (VDW), we met twice at Christine's and Ernst's home in Emmendingen. We are convinced that without these meetings, the report would not have come together in the way it did. The welcoming, stimulating atmosphere they created was invaluable, particularly during the challenging phases of writing.

One memory captures Christine's remarkable personality particularly well. While the rest of us were immersed in discussions, she would be busy preparing a wonderful meal, sharing recipes and chatting about family and everyday life. Then she would join us, listen to the discussion for a few minutes, and offer what was often the most insightful and pertinent contribution of the entire morning. Her ability to grasp complex issues, get straight to the heart of a matter, and do so with such warmth and ease was extraordinary.

It was therefore only natural that CSS wanted Christine among the first guests of our podcast *Beyond the Fix*. In an episode devoted to technofixes, innovation and precaution, she shared precisely the kind of critical and far-reaching reflections that made her such an inspiring thinker and colleague.

Christine leaves behind a lasting legacy in the debates she helped shape, the institutions she helped build, and the many people she inspired, challenged and supported. We will remember her with gratitude, admiration and affection. Her wisdom, courage and humanity will be deeply missed.

Some reactions to Christine's passing from ENSSER members:

"I remember with great affection the very special way she welcomed me. I was deeply impressed not only by her remarkable capabilities, but also by her warmth and her extraordinary ability to make others feel welcome. I will always remember her with great affection and gratitude."

"Christine was a precious colleague and fine scholar."

"I feel there was so much still to talk with her about and learn from her. Things about old law negotiations and about former ministers in these negotiations, that Christine knew about."

"Christine was always a forward-looking example and inspiration to all of us."

"She has been a leading authority when I started my career more than 25 years ago... I highly value her insight and input in so many discussions."

"Christine - a wonderful, wise woman."

"Working with Christine gave me a wonderful sense of reassurance. She had so much experience, wisdom and warmth that you felt, whatever difficulties lay ahead, things would somehow work out."

“Christine was the kind of leader I will always look up to. She gave thoughtful and valuable – and, as with many wise souls, sometimes lengthy ;) – insights and guidance. Yet she never took herself too seriously and had the graceful humility to give others room and support to flourish in discussions too. I will miss her counsel, her generosity and her wise smile.”

List of major ENSSER events with Christine's active participation

- Conference "Advancing the Understanding of Biosafety - Social Sustainability and Biological Safety Scientific Findings, Nagoya, Japan, 2010
- Conference " Advancing the Understanding of Biosafety - GMO Risk Assessment, Independent Biosafety Research and Holistic Analysis", Hyderabad, India, 2012
- Post Neonicotinoid Symposium, Berlin, Germany, 2015
- Side events at COP 14 of the CBD and COPMOP 9 of the CPB, Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt, 2018
- Preparation of "GENE DRIVES - A report on their science, applications, social aspects, ethics and regulations", CSS, ENSSER and VDW, 2019
- "The Integrity of Science - A conference about the conflict between public policy and independent science, in honour of Dr. Árpád Pusztai (1930 – 2021)", Edinburgh, UK, 2023
- Conference "Science and policy in times of multicrisis and dissent - Issues of framing, authority, evidence – and political-economic power", Athens, Greece, 2025

If you want to listen to Christine talking about biodiversity, biosafety and sustainability, please go here:

Podcasts:

- Biodiversity, Biosafety, and the Principles Involved – with Christine von Weizsäcker (Earth Charter, 2020, in English) https://earthcharter.org/podcast-list/christine-von-weizsacker-podcast/
- Beyond the Fix – Why Technofixes Won't Save us – with Christine von Weizsäcker (CSS, 2024, in English) https://criticalscientists.ch/en/projects/current-projects/technofixing-podcast/637-03-christine-von-weizsaecker-on-why-technofixes-won-t-save-us

Sustainability Lecture 2023 Universität Tübingen (in German)

https://uni-tuebingen.de/forschung/zentren-und-institute/internationales-zentrum-fuer-ethik-in-den-wissenschaften/publikationen/newsletter/biodiversitaetskrise-klimakrise-vielfachkrise/

Video available at

https://timms.uni-tuebingen.de/tp/UT_20231123_001_nachhalttag_0001

45:32 - Introduction by Prof. Dr. Thomas Potthast (ENSSER member)

50:55 – Lecture by Christine von Weizsäcker