

Why do we need “A sustainable Germany”?

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“Where would we be if we all just sat there and said ‘where would we be now’, but nobody was prepared to go and find out where we would be if we actually went?”

Kurt Marti, Swiss theologian and writer

Convert to green energy, use energy-saving lightbulbs, reduce heating costs, leave the car at home, buy organic and fairtrade products – there are lots of ways to care for the environment and help to eradicate poverty. Everyone knows what to do, everyone is in favour – and yet, despite this, every day we hear news stories about climate change continuing to accelerate, biological diversity dramatically declining, raw materials running out in the foreseeable future and setbacks to the breakthrough in eradicating poverty worldwide.

Everyone agrees that it’s time to change course, it’s time for a new direction - but most people expect someone else to take the initiative. People urge politicians to take drastic action and draft new laws, big business declares that it is simply following consumer demand and that the consumer is sovereign, who in turn points out that one individual cannot really make a difference on their own.

What is sustainability?

It was in 1713 that Hans Carl von Carlowitz, *kursächsischer Oberberghauptmann* [chief mining official for the Electorate of Saxony] coined the concept of sustainability for the German people. The forests of Central Europe had almost completely disappeared through trees being felled for mine construction and fuel. The shortage of timber spread, and Carlowitz drew attention to the fact that for every tree that is felled, another has to be planted, so that there is “constant and *sustainable* use”.

The basic principle that over-exploitation is “cutting off the branch we’re sitting on” has found acceptance in the work of the United Nations. There, development is defined as sustainable if the needs of the present generation are satisfied without risking the potential of future generations to satisfy their own needs. The Rio Declaration, the final document of the UN Conference on Environment and Development signed by over 180 heads of state and government in 1992, makes a similar statement: “The right to development must be fulfilled so as to equitably meet developmental and environmental needs of present and future generations.”

Pressure is mounting

We’re simply going round in circles, or at least we appear to be. And we could have made more progress. However, this venture, which everyone agrees is necessary, already has a name: sustainable development. Not to forget, everyone is making an effort: nearly every business has published an environmental or sustainability report and introduced appropriate management systems, the German Federal Government has drafted a sustainability strategy and convened the “Council for Sustainable Development”, which is involved in putting the strategy into practice. The United Nations have also provided a tailwind, by declaring 2005 to 2014 the decade of developing sustainable development. And there’s more: Al Gore won an Oscar for his film “An Uncomfortable Truth” and, together with the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), a United Nations committee that represents senior climate scientists, the Nobel Peace Prize for 2007. Meanwhile, the market for environmentally-friendly and fair trade products is growing, the

proportion of renewable energies in electricity production is now 17 % in Germany. The “Bild” newspaper is looking after climate protection, Hollywood stars are driving hybrid cars and highlighting the plight of poor children in developing countries, in short: sustainability is on the agenda – as long as it doesn’t get in the way, fits in with our existing lifestyles and doesn’t affect existing economic structures.

But the earth is not sustainable. Nearly one billion people are starving, CO₂ concentrations in the atmosphere have risen four times faster since 2000 than in the preceding decade. And the urgent need for drastic measures is increasing. If the new trend towards consistent climate protection and the abandoning of fossil energy extraction don’t succeed over the next ten to 15 years, the consequences of climate change will be catastrophic, according to the IPCC. Even now there are signs that climate change is destroying habitats, costing lives and undermining development opportunities.

“Climate change is calling for a civilisation change. The changeover to a post-fossil civilisation will be the defining project of this century - especially for industrialised societies.”

Zukunftsfähiges Deutschland, p. 25

But resistance to consistent climate change is massive, because the necessary measures affect the foundations of our economic system, because powerful actors are afraid they will lose influence, power and money, and because, in essence, the majority of consumers do not want to give up what they’ve become accustomed to. Thus, all too often, we are left with empty political declarations of intent and symbolic measures, which serve the public image more than actually changing anything. Instead of actively putting climate protection measures in place, more and more restaurants have installed outdoor heaters, new coal-fired power stations are being built, airports are being extended, motorway speed limits are not being enforced and night storage heaters not banned.

However, with regard to climate protection, it is perhaps a fortunate circumstance that fossil resources are dwindling, because this puts direct economic pressure on abandoning the fossil-dependent age. Low-energy housing, solar panels and fuel-efficient cars are thus becoming more attractive solely on cost grounds. But at a national, and indeed also on a worldwide level, dwindling resources are leading to growing inequality, because poorer people are the first victims of increasing prices; they have to spend proportionately more of their budget on their basic needs than more well-off people, for example, on food or energy, they do not have the money to invest in saving resources (for example, heat insulation) and because of their lack of power they remain outside the distribution network. Poorer people also suffer the most where there is a growing risk of conflicts escalating over the distribution of scarce resources.

The fact that the number of people fighting for a share in dwindling commodities is growing does not make the solution any easier. Rapid economic growth in emerging economies such as Brazil, China and India goes hand in hand with a steep increase in energy and raw material demand. A few figures from China highlight this development: between 2000 and 2005 the number of cars rose from 4 to 26 million, a new coal-fired power station is built every 6 days, the middle classes now produce the biggest CO₂ emissions worldwide. However, the figure of 1.2 cars per 100 inhabitants in China needs to be compared with 50 cars in industrialised states, four tonnes of CO₂/head and year are emitted in China, compared to ten tonnes in Germany, two and a half times more.

So what right have people in the industrialised nations to forbid the Chinese from driving cars or even from emitting CO₂? Doesn't every human being in the world have an equal right to use its natural resources for a good life?

Different – better - less

Of course, nobody could really disagree with this. And that's why the question of justice arises again, both at a national and a global level. It's about the nature conservation and distributing the dwindling resources equitably. In order to achieve this, poverty has to be eradicated. Eradicating poverty is more than just about distributing goods, it is above all about the division of power: all people have the same right to make use of the earth's resources, but, more than that, they also have the same right to decide what constitutes equitable use and how it should be presented.

“Poverty is not caused by a lack of money but by a lack of power. The poor are not primarily victims, they are would-be actors. They are far removed from simply being in need, waiting for assistance, they are actually citizens, who are forced to survive without rights, possessions, land title or political influence.”

Zukunftsfähiges Deutschland, p. 193

This truly is a challenge for people living here in Germany. We are talking here of the world export leader - it is still seeking a permanent seat on the UN Security Council, its influential voice has found an audience in the European Union, the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organisation - and now it is being asked to share its power with poor people, with developing countries?

However incredible this idea might seem to many, there actually is no alternative. It's not just about morals and ethics, which also tie in with Christian beliefs: Christ's commandment to love one another, sharing with our overseas neighbours, preserving God's creation. It is quite simply about shortages and over-burdening the atmosphere. There are insufficient resources available for everybody in the world to be able to live like we do and the atmosphere cannot continue to absorb such high emissions of CO₂, without it affecting all of us. Yet, there is enough for everyone – if we adopt a different lifestyle.

The ecological footprint

The “ecological footprint” offers a clear standard for sustainable use of the environment. It can be used to calculate an individual's ecological consumption, in other words, how much energy, raw materials, ground and land each individual consumes through their lifestyle. Take a glass of orange juice as an example: it's not just the fruit juice, but also the water needed for irrigation, the ground on which the orange trees grow, the energy required for transportation, refrigeration, packaging, etc.

The “ecological footprint” shows us clearly that our ecological consumption is beyond a sustainable level. By over-exploiting resources in Germany, we are robbing other people and future generations of development opportunities and of the basis for a good life. If everybody was to consume energy and raw materials at the rate we do in Germany, the earth would not be big enough – we would actually need four planets. But there is only one. That's why the concept of sustainability links justice with saving the planet.

The fact that there is no alternative has now filtered through all layers of society. People are aware that things cannot continue the way they used to. The principle of “faster – greater - more” must give way to “different – better - less”. For “different” and “better”, we are already moving in the right direction with renewable energy and efficient appliances. But “less” is already causing us problems, because it means giving up something and that is something we do not find easy.

However, reducing consumption is already happening, even in Germany. The high energy prices in 2007 and the beginning of 2008 resulted in increased sales of energy-saving lightbulbs and time switches and reduced consumption of petrol, diesel and heating oil. Yet, at the same time, there was social condemnation over these increased prices. They had the greatest effect on the weakest, but they also led to more land being used to grow biofuels, which in turn led to an increase in food prices and to further social and environmental condemnation.

In order to allow all people an equitable share in exploiting the resources available, we in the industrialised countries have no choice but to drastically reduce our consumption. Giving up is therefore not one of a range of options, not something that can be confidently left to ethically-minded people to get on with. Giving up must be undertaken by the whole population and, if we are to maintain a successful coexistence, virtually nobody will be able to opt out.

There are two points worth noting here: firstly, the sooner, the better. As long as there is still some room for manoeuvre, adapting to the inevitable will be less painful and there will be a choice of possible solutions. Secondly, actively shaping the framework conditions is better than passively waiting for a solution just to happen. This would mean that the solution would be left up to the market. The distribution of goods and services that are increasingly in short supply would thus be regulated by price. The issue of whether to use the car, and of mobility in general, would be solely dictated by money – and those without money would simply have to stay at home. Or freeze. Distributing the shortfall solely via the market, in other words through higher prices, is socially unjust. What’s more, if countermeasures are put in place too late, it will also be environmentally disastrous.

“ (The market) has no regard for the environment or justice. This is why, broadly speaking, it is the responsibility of governments to establish rules. The common good must be put before the market, there is simply no other way of enforcing environmental crash barriers and equitable participation in the face of the goal of competition.”
Zukunftsfähiges Deutschland, p.27

Kickstarting the debate

But what would this society be like, one that was adapted to the essentials, in other words, a sustainable society? What would need to happen to make Germany sustainable? The Bund für Umwelt und Naturschutz Deutschland (BUND) [League for the Environment and Nature Protection in Germany, affiliated to Friends of the Earth] and the Christian development organisation "Brot für die Welt" [Bread for the World] and the Church Development Service (EED) have joined forces to kickstart a debate on these questions. They are using the report

entitled "Zukunftsfähiges Deutschland" [A sustainable Germany], produced by the Wuppertal Institute for Climate, Environment and Energy.

The report

- explains in concrete terms what sustainability means in an industrialised country with international responsibility;
- discusses how Germany can creatively overcome the challenges of globalisation, how politics and society can become sustainable;
- specifies the ways and means necessary to achieve a U-turn towards sustainable development;
- outlines a vision of worldwide justice spanning the generations and
- encourages action from this perspective.

What's it all about?

The central challenges in our time are nature conservation and eradicating worldwide poverty.

The limits to economic growth are shaped by finite resources and the viability of ecological systems. As humans are already in debt in this respect, consumption of resources overall must be put into reverse. This applies in similar fashion to the emission of CO₂ and other climate killers.

At the same time, use of resources within many societies, as indeed between nations, is very unequally shared. The majority of people in Germany consume far too much, while others ought to have the right to consume more.

A level of economic growth in Germany that continues to be based on increasing consumption of resources and low social standards particularly in other parts of the world is not sustainable. Growth trajectories that result in more costs than benefits must be stopped. This applies particularly to those based on fossil energy. They are causing climate change and as a result wreaking havoc. On the other hand, sectors that should expand are those that are sustainable, for example, renewables. Nevertheless, in the final analysis, this means that the days of unflinching commitment to the necessity of economic growth are numbered for industrialised nations. Instead of an economy based on greed, we need an economy based on sufficiency.

This means that each individual should live more responsibly, by showing consideration to their fellow humans and future generations and by conserving nature: individual energy consumption must be reduced to the bare minimum: products such as T-shirts or carpets, which are cheap because they are produced by child labour or exploitative practices, are taboo. They have absolutely no place in the market or should lose their competitive advantage through appropriate taxes. But the responsibility of implementing this cannot solely lie with the individual or the market. Governments must be urged to set rules that support socially and environmentally just management. Pockets of prosperity will not be able to survive much longer in an ocean of misery – and problems concerning the environment and shortages faced by the North will only worsen if the goalposts for social and environmental costs are moved. An era that was primarily driven by the burning of fossil fuels has come to its physical end.

This also means that political and societal structures need to be analysed. When all people have equal rights, it does not only refer to people from developed and developing countries, but also to men and women, to different generations, to immigrants. Political participation by the people must be improved, looking after the family and voluntary work must be valued more in relation to paid work. And available paid work must be shared out equitably and according to actual requirements. A system is under scrutiny, where some are constantly over-loaded with work and others are unemployed. "Short full-time employment for all" would be part of the perspective for future-viable management, i.e. a 30-hour week with simultaneous safeguarding of basic requirements and social risks by state-organised redistribution.

So, a viable future means more than just dabbling in environmental protection. It means facing up to the global challenges of poverty, shortage of resources and environmental degradation. The solution lies in recognising that all human beings are entitled to the same rights of using the earth's resources within the environmental limits of our planet. And for us, this means first and foremost : consume less. We who are now living have been entrusted as responsible guardians to preserve the earth for future generations. We are all only guests on this earth, but we all have a right to be here.

It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view.
The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts,
It is even beyond our vision.
We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of
The magnificent enterprise that is God's work.
Nothing we do is complete, which is a way of saying
That the kingdom always lies beyond us.
No statement says all that could be said.
No prayer fully expresses our faith.
No confession brings perfection.
No pastoral visit brings wholeness.
No program accomplishes the church's mission.
No set of goals and objectives includes everything.
This is what we are about:
We plant the seeds that one day will grow.
We water seeds already planted,
Knowing that they hold future promise.
We lay foundations that will need further development.
We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities.
We cannot do everything,
And there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.
This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.
It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning,
A step along the way,
An opportunity for God's grace to enter and do the rest.
We may never see the end results,
But that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.

We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs.
We are prophets of a future not our own.

Oscar A. Romero

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