

Transnational Politics and Global Responsibility

1) Energy and climate. The global dynamics of societies is presenting us with challenges that can no longer be solved by one country alone, but that need joint global action. Most pressing are the 21st century's twin problems of global warming and the end of cheap oil – and their effects on the future wellbeing of the world.

The industrial revolution and today's income levels as well as social welfare in the developed countries are to a major extent the result of easy – and over decades inexpensive – access to different energy sources, mostly fossil fuels like coal, oil and gas. Mobility in a globalized world, the production of goods and services, and the fulfillment of basic needs such as heating, lighting and cooking, all require substantial energy inputs, and the demand for energy is growing rapidly. In the middle of the 19th century each human being has lived with an energy consumption of roughly 150 watt hours. This has increased to about 2000 Wh today but with a very unequal distribution between the industrialized and the developing world.

This energy consumption has changed the global dynamics of the carbon cycle with consequences that are being under investigation. Climate change as far as we know today will affect terrestrial as well as marine systems, and will also cause massive environmental migration. Temperature increases, changing precipitation patterns with an increasing threat of water scarcity in many parts of the world, and threats to the biodiversity are expected. Worst of all, the latest findings indicate that previous predictions about the negative impacts have been too low. The possibility of irreversible changes such as the melting of the Greenland ice sheet or the freeing of methane kept in the permafrost imply climate changes that surely nobody wants his children and grandchildren to experience.

Already today about 25.000 people die every day from insufficient nutrition, 6.000 – mostly children – die every day from water-related diseases. With increasing water scarcity and desertification of former farmland caused or intensified by global warming, these numbers will grow, if no action will be taken now. These are urgent needs that can only be met if economic growth supported by better management also benefits the people living in the poor parts of the world.

To slow down climate chaos governments need to alter their energy policies – just as the world is sliding into an energy crisis. Dwindling supplies and ever growing global consumption of oil, which provides for nearly half of the world's energy, may cause the price of oil to soar to unseen heights. With global oil demand estimated to rise by another 60% from now until the year 2020, especially in China and India, global production is expected to peak soon, making oil unaffordable to many countries and people.

The challenge is therefore clear: Promoting economic growth for the poorest of the world whilst protecting the climate system from changes that become dangerous for future generations. Translated into energy it means more energy consumption in the Third World whilst at the same time reducing emissions from fossil fuels, the major source of energy today.

Only a few years ago, calls for action against global warming were routinely rejected as alarmist. Sceptical scientists and industrial lobby groups argued that climate change was not yet scientifically proven. This has changed. The broad majority of scientists and the media now accept the mounting evidence that a possibly catastrophic climate change is very real

indeed. And yet, a mix of remnant scepticism and what appears to be collective denial or resignation still prevents fast and comprehensive action on a global scale.

Which actors by which means can be roused to drive change and adjustment processes: governments, business, civil societies?

2) Resource scarcities as security risks. The end of cheap oil also highlights the security aspects of energy: In most oil-producing countries petro-wealth has not led to sustained development but instead to corruption, political instability, oppression, social crises, economic decline, environmental degradation as well as bloody inter-state and civil wars. Today, energy wars are a real threat: Following the war in Iraq, countries like the USA, Russia, China, and others, are now competing for access to oil fields around the world. And as if the industrialised nations' increasing dependence on foreign oil imports was not worrying enough, much of that oil lies in the unstable Middle East, the hotbed of radical Islamic terrorism.

Conflict over energy, clean water, and arable land is becoming an increasingly prominent global security issue. And as experts suggest, shrinking supplies of vital resources combined with the dramatic growth of the world's population, the increasing industrialisation, and climate change will only reinforce this trend.

Is there a way out of the energy crisis and climate chaos? Will most resource disputes be resolved through globalised market mechanisms as optimists believe? How will societies have to adjust to changing environmental conditions? How can a global accord for a sustainable energy policy and climate protection be reached that prevents future conflicts? What are the costs of these strategies, how efficient are they, how sustainable, and how can politics, business and civil societies be alerted to the economic and societal consequences if no action is taken, or if action is not taken early enough?