A Vision for The Decade (2014-2024) of Sustainable Energy for All

The United Nations General Assembly has declared the decade 2014-2024 as the Decade of Sustainable Energy for All in order to raise people's awareness of the importance of energy for sustainable development and to strengthen the issue on the political agenda. The initiative has the following objectives: “to provide universal energy access, to double the rate of global energy efficiency improvement and to double the share of renewable energy in the global energy mix” (United Nations general assembly, 2012). Considering these rather ambitious aims, the declaration raises the question of how they can be achieved in practice.

First of all, the process of transforming our energy system has to be a participative one. Sustainability can only be achieved if everyone is aware of the impact of his or her consumer behavior. Using public transport instead of going by car, saving energy by turning off all electronic devices at night and so many other simple actions aimed at reducing energy consumption have to become a natural part of peoples' everyday life. Moreover, people can use their creative potential to find new and innovative solutions for many problems concerning sustainability. That's why local initiatives could play a key role in reaching sustainability. They can represent a forum for many different stakeholders and individuals that permits them to exchange ideas and work together. A good example is the local initiative for protecting the climate started in the German city Tübingen and which is called "Tübingen macht blau". The campaign was launched by the mayor and not only involves public institutions, but also tries to include as many citizens, local companies and civil society groups as possible. For example, the city gives financial incentives to people who buy a new energy-efficient refrigerator or choose a renewable electricity supplier. In addition to that, driving schools offer lessons on fuel efficient driving, a local bookshop has a climate neutral bike delivery service and a group of students collects scrap paper in the copy rooms of the university and transforms it into notebooks. This initiative could be a model for many other regions to create a participative process of establishing sustainability in society.

Nevertheless, this alone is not enough to reach the aims set by the UN General Assembly. Companies, especially the big ones, have to do their share of promoting sustainable work processes and energies. As the United States Environment protection Agency shows, industry, agriculture and forestry are responsible for half of
the Global Greenhouse Gas Emissions (US EPA, n.d.). This is why there is a lot of potential in these sectors for reducing emissions by raising energy efficiency. Due to the fact that the big companies themselves are apparently not willing to change their way of working, it's the responsibility of governments to take the necessary measures.

An example of this could be the Emissions Trading System in the European Union. Within this system, companies receive a certain amount of emission certificates which they can trade with other companies. If the certificates received are not enough to cover all of a company's emissions, it has to buy more of them. The fact that they have to pay for their emissions should incentivize companies to save energy and invest in energy-efficient and low-carbon technologies (European Commission, 2013). Unfortunately, there is not much ambition to put this idea into practice. Many experts have criticized the idea because, they claim, the prices for emission allowances are too low and that there are too many of them within the system (Stonington 2012). Although the big industries vehemently oppose a reduction in emission allowances, European politicians have to make the system more efficient and impose stricter fines on companies which do not respect it if they want companies to work more energy-efficiently. The best measure would be to expand the system to a global level. However, at the moment, this unfortunately seems to be a rather unrealistic demand because a lot of governments will not be willing to adhere to such a system.

Besides increasing energy efficiency, politics must also induce companies in the energy sector to move away from carbon-based energies and invest instead in research on and strengthening of renewable energies. Energy subsidies could play a key role in this issue. For example, in 2011, the European Union member states spent only € 30 billion on supporting renewable energies whereas the subsidies on nuclear energy and fossil fuel power plants amounted to 61 billion €. On a global level, the support for the latter is even six times as much as the one for renewable energies (Ruchser 2013). Consequently, it is not a surprise that most of the big energy companies still opt for traditional energy forms. If governments want to increase the share of sustainable energies in the global energy mix, they have to change their subsidy policy immediately.

Not least we have to consider the "all" in the goal of sustainable energy for all and focus on the developing countries. In fact, the phenomenon of energy poverty must
not be underestimated. It is defined as a “lack of access to modern energy services. These services are defined as household access to electricity and clean cooking facilities (e.g. fuels and stoves that do not cause air pollution in houses).” (International Energy Agency, 2012) According to the IEA, over 1.3 billion people worldwide don’t have access to electricity and even twice as many are without clean cooking facilities. In this context, sustainable energies could contribute to promote social and economic development. Therefore, providing energy access to the whole population should be one of the core concerns of governments in developing countries. If they are not able to fulfill this task, industrialized countries can help them within development cooperation. However, it is very important to respect the principle of ownership of the developing countries. That means that donor countries should focus on capacity building in local energy companies and public administration instead of only providing them with the necessary technologies or opening their markets for the foreign big energy companies.

Moreover, the main focus has to be on the rural population. Given that energy poverty is a particularly relevant phenomenon in rural areas with a poor infrastructure, renewable energies can contribute a lot to the improvement of living conditions in those areas. Small power plants based on solar energy, water or biomass can be run on the spot and can make local populations self-sufficient in their energy supply. And that brings us back to the starting point – because participation of the population is not only important in western industrialized countries, but even more so in developing countries. It would be a good idea to establish “energy partnerships” or “climate partnerships” between local initiatives such as the one in Tübingen with towns or regions in developing countries. A mutual exchange of ideas would certainly be advantageous for both sides and establish a transnational dialogue on sustainable energy-related questions.

So it lies within the responsibility of all of us to make our contribution to the achievement of the goals set by the UN General Assembly. If governments change their attitudes, really devote themselves to the creation of a sustainable way of living and work together with their citizens, these aims could maybe be achieved by 2024. But everyone has to be part of this global process. If the big players such as the United States or China continue prioritizing the interests of their industries instead of those of the world population, “sustainable energy for all” will remain a utopian vision.
References:


Ruchser, Matthias (2013): Energy subsidies: more honesty, please (http://www.diegdi.de/CMS-Homepage/openwebcms3_e.nsf/%28ynDK_contentByKey%29/MRUR-9CQKN?Open&nav=expand%3APress\The%20Current%20Column\Zusatzdokumente%3Bactive%3APress\The%20Current%20Column\Zusatzdokumente\MRUR-9CQKN).
