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

For the good of our planet, husbanding its resources is essential. We all understand the importance of living more in harmony with nature. But still, there is a gap between the knowledge of the necessity for change and the actual efforts towards a more responsible attitude towards the environment.

Despite several attempts to formulate agreements at an international level, it is rather the bottom up approach that manages to convince people to accept their proper responsibility. Besides, language is considered to be the most suitable instrument to change attitudes and patterns of behaviour. Individuals serve as multipliers and spread their ideas and motivation within their communities through language.

In this essay, the focus is on a Western European perspective. With its dense population and high consumption, it definitively makes sense to make changes in this region; and in accordance with my approach which stresses the concept of subsidiarity, it seems logical to focus on the own context first before talking about other regions or countries.

To understanding this contribution, the inherent character of an essay is essential: it is an open genre that encourages people to write from their subjective point of view without restrictions in terms of the form or the content. This position is supported by the famous English essay writer Aldous Huxley. He defines an essay as a “literary device for saying almost everything about almost anything” (Huxley, 1958, p. 1). The openness of the genre was already apparent when it was introduced by the Frenchman Michel de Montaigne in the 16th century. In his collection *Les essais*, he intentionally kept his distance from the scientific discourse of the time and wrote in a subjective way about phenomena in the society of his time.

The city I moved to three weeks ago, Tübingen, is an exemplary city in the sense of green development. In 2008, the mayor, Boris Palmer, initiated an extensive campaign for climate protection. The initiative is called *Tübingen macht blau*, which is actually a play on words referring to the colour of the sky above the city that needs to be kept clear (and therefore blue). It informs people about how they can live in better harmony with their environment and support them in their efforts to save money by increasing energy efficiency. Beside the propagation of the use of solar equipment and better insulation, car sharing opportunities and the public transport is being developed throughout the city and the mayor himself leads by example as he goes to his meetings by train or by bike instead of using a car ("Tübingen macht blau", n.d.).

The German word for sustainability is *Nachhaltigkeit*. It was initially used in German forestry and described practices that in some regions have been in use since the 15th century. In 1713, the term had its first appearance in a written document, namely the *Sylvicultura Oeconomica* of Hans Karl von Carlowitz. At this early stage, *Nachhaltigkeit* defined economic activity in harmony with nature, but only in the context of the forests, as the
population had to react to the rapidly declining stock of wood.

It was over 200 years later, in 1952, that the term was used in a global economic context (Wey, 1982, p. 157). It is obvious that during that period, massive population growth and completely different economic production brought their specific environmental problems, which also led to an extension of the meaning of the term.

From the early 1980s, the term of sustainability served as an integral component of the concept of sustainable development. Yet, it is not the original idea of sustaining alone that the population is worrying about, but it is particularly the economic component implicated by the term development which has become essential. The importance of the economic sphere is also underlined in a current definition set by the Oxford Dictionaries. They define sustainable development as an “economic development that is conducted without depletion of natural resources” (“Oxford Dictionaries”, n.d.).

If we have a look at the definition from a functional sentence perspective, we find that ‘economic development’ has adopted an exposed position in the first place of the phrase, which is the position of the theme. It provides the given information of the sentence and is followed by the rhyme which specifies the theme. In other words, in a capitalist society, it is in the first place the economy that determines our behaviour, and it is possible to see these priorities in language use.

In the example that has been presented we have seen to which extent social change involves linguistic adaptation: language as a human phenomenon per se is adapted by the speakers according to their needs, and this is not only the case when new specific vocabulary is needed to name new techniques or methods. Thus, language change is in this sense the result of changes in society.

We have seen that language and society are interlinked and language reflects the attitude of societies. At the same time, it is also the language that can have an effect on peoples behaviour. Language is the main manner humans communicate with each other and each communicative act can cause specific reactions. This is why, on the one hand, it makes a difference if we pay attention to what we say and the way we say it. But in a more general sense, this emphasizes the impact of face to face communication as the most direct way to inform and exchange views. Direct communication within the community has made the initiative Tübingen macht blau a successful initiative, considering the concepts of participation and subsidiarity.

If people have to obey to rules without being integrated in the process and without understanding why they are supposed to act that way, they possibly cannot identify with the topic that is to be dealt with. But if we make them understand what the topic is about and give them the opportunity to participate in decision making, we can probably manage to convince them entirely. And, if a person decides himself after thorough reflection and assessment, he will be able to convince people of his environment as well. Besides, research on participation have revealed that people are more satisfied with politics if they at least have the impression that they can participate, even if they do not make use of this option.

This model of civic involvement is possible in societies where the principle of subsidiarity is applied. People in the respective communities know best what their needs are and which measures are best to reach their objectives. This is why subsidiarity is not only the most responsive, but also the most efficient way to progress.
This kind of word-of-mouth advertising is only possible in smaller units and communities where there is social cohesion and people get together to exchange views. The local authorities need to encourage this subsidiary self-organization by providing information and incentives.

This factor brings us back to the importance and the impact of language. In a community where people know each other, they talk about what they are doing and exchange opinions concerning certain topics. And this is the place where awareness of sustainability can be transmitted to others and a long lasting change can be established, namely not in the administration or in politics, but in society.

Examples of initiatives like the one in Tübingen, can become sort of a role model for other communities who can get information about the initiative and adapt it to their own community. Obviously, every community is different and that is why individual adaptation of the initiatives is necessary if the projects are to succeed – which is another advantage of the subsidiary principle that does not provide ready-made solutions that do not fit.

In Germany, environmental awareness used to be linked to the stereotype of the tree huggers, a minority of strange people who wear woollen socks, eat funny things and protest against everything that is fun for others. In the last couple of years, this attitude has changed: people have become more conscious of the ecological footprint they leave. Nowadays, more people from all sorts of different backgrounds are willing to make their contribution to the protection of the Earth, as is the case in the city of Tübingen. I'm convinced that the principle of such green initiatives can be applied individually to other communities, if not all the communities of the world, so that every initiative makes its contribution to the protection of the Earth and its resources.

Yet, we live in democratic societies that protect our needs and allow us self-realization. But there are still problems in the world that can be changed if they are articulated. It is by language that we can reach each other and affect other people in their thoughts and behaviour.
References:


