



Power to the Youth: Copenhagen, Future Energy Supply and Intergenerational Justice

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A recent poll by the popular German youth magazine *Bravo* (2009) brought to light: Our young people are not politically apathetic. In fact, the opposite is true: They show that they have a much better feeling for the urgency of issues than some wise experts. In a representative poll of more than 1,000 children and teenagers, 89 percent of respondents stated that climate change and environmental pollution pose the most important threat – more important than the financial crisis, violence at school, or terrorism. For today's youth, the environment is priority number one on the political agenda.

The inherent injustice of today's unsustainable practices

This is for good reason: In twenty or thirty years, we as today's youth will have to live on an ecologically beleaguered planet. The earth's temperature is rising at a dangerous pace; extreme weather and natural disasters, such as storms, tornados, droughts and floods are increasing both in number and intensity; the shortage of drinkable water and fertile land will continue to worsen, thereby putting food production at a serious risk. Already today, more refugees have to flee from natural disasters than from war. At the same time, armed conflicts for land, water, and energy resources are increasing. The civil wars in some African countries or the events in the Middle East foreshadow what our generation will experience in the future. Biodiversity is being destroyed, rainforests are burned down. Finite fossil fuel reserves are consumed at breathtaking speed. We as today's younger generation will have to deal with these global threats, whereas the responsible decision makers will have already been out of office for a long time – and may not even be alive any more. Who is prime minister for fifty years? And who lives for a hundred years?

Another liability will be left to us: Nuclear waste. Plutonium is lethal to human life for the next several hundred thousand years, and the construction of a safe repository for such a long time period has proven to be technically impossible. Two of three planned repositories in Germany which were supposed to store the dangerous waste for thousands of years are now flooded by ground water (Asse and Morsleben), and the third one has recently been given up by government due to serious doubts from geologists – as well as the occurrence of corruption in the initial planning phase (Gorleben). The final consequences for human health and environment from the failure of these repositories – Asse and Morsleben are already in use – are not even fully foreseeable as of today. How can we justify to our future generations in a hundred or a thousand years that we have deposited our unsafe nuclear waste in unsafe places? The biggest problem we leave for following generations is indeed our energy system which is mostly based on coal, oil, natural gas, and uranium. Our current ecological debt weighs thousandfold more than our financial state debt.

Solidarity between generations means sustainable development

Sustainable development concerns everyone, but the success or failure in achieving it has the greatest impact for young people. It is young people who will have to deal the longest with the mistakes made today. Thus, one of the main challenges of sustainable development is to achieve solidarity between generations, including the generations still to come. Sustainable development was defined by the UN World Commission on Environment and Development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” (Brundtland Commission 1987: 8)

Accordingly, an energy system is considered sustainable if the environment can meet the needs of future generations to at least the same extent as it meets the needs of present generations, i.e. the stock of nature capital is to be maintained. This requires fast the fulfillment of the following management rules (Deutscher Bundestag 1998: 28):

1. Renewable resources may only be consumed as fast as they are renewed. For instance, biomass may only be consumed as fast as it can grow again.
2. Non-renewable resources (such as oil, coal, natural gas, and uranium) may only be consumed at a speed at which they can be substituted by renewable resources or other substituting technologies.
3. Human emissions in the environment must not exceed the environmental capacity to absorb these emissions without damage. For example, greenhouse gas emissions may only be so high as to not harm the climate.
4. Technologies that endanger human health and the environment in a significant and irreversible way must not be established.

It is obvious that these management rules are not respected today: The consumption of fossil fuels is by far higher than the rate of replenishment; human emissions are creating global environmental threats such as climate change and biodiversity loss; and nuclear power plants produce radioactive waste and contain the risk of extremely dangerous accidents. The current structure of our energy system is not sustainable.

Short-term thinking and democracy

The shortsightedness of decision making is determined by the political system of a parliamentary democracy as we understand it today. In a parliamentary system, the time horizon of politicians is confined by the next election. Politicians who want to deviate from this short-sighted thinking are often kept from doing so in the name of maximizing votes in order to keep a majority and stay power. Future generations do not hold a vote since they are not born yet. The voice of the future is therefore not heard.

Never in history has mankind had such a huge opportunity to shape the future – climate change alone will seriously affect the living conditions for the next hundred generations – but the mechanisms of democratic decision making have failed to adjust

to this chance. Thinking in terms of decades or centuries is unusual, thinking in short decision cycles dominates the political as much as the business arena. Thus, we have to find new mechanisms to protect the rights and interests of following generations in our democracy.

Unfortunately, even today's politically skilled youth cannot bring their interests to bear in our democracy. In Germany, almost 14 million young people were excluded from the latest parliamentary election; their right to vote was refused only because they were younger than the age limit of 18 years. If teenagers also had a vote, politicians would have to pay more attention to them. At the same time, *real universal* suffrage would address the most fundamental shortcoming of our democracy, the exclusion of a sizeable portion of the population from the demos. Imagine the next ten generations being allowed to vote: The actual energy policy would radically switch towards renewable energies, and climate protection would be a number one priority. It is up to us, the youth generation, to protect our children and future generations.

The girl who made the world silent

In 1992, the speech of Severn Suzuki, an eleven-year-old girl from Canada, made the world leaders at the UN Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro silent for five minutes. She said:

“Coming up here today, I have no hidden agenda. I am fighting for my future. Losing my future is not like losing an election or a few points on the stock market. I am here to speak for all generations to come. I am here to speak on behalf of the starving children around the world whose cries go unheard. At school, even in kindergarten, you teach us how to behave in the world. You teach us how not to fight with others, to work things out, to respect others, to clean up our mess, not to hurt other creatures, to share and not be greedy. Then why do you go out and do the things you tell us not to do? You grown-ups say you love us. But I challenge you, please make your actions reflect your words.”

Ten years later, at the 2002 UN World Summit for Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, one of the delegates told me he sees two ways of achieving sustainable

development, namely a realistic one and a utopian one. The realistic way would be, according to the delegate, that aliens land on earth and force humankind to act sustainable. The utopian way would be that humankind itself fights on its own for the transition to sustainability.

We must, however, believe that humankind is capable of finding the path to sustainability – because there is no other choice. We must use every chance to make our production and consumption patterns more efficient and increasingly based on renewable resources, in order to tackle climate change, poverty, shortage of resources, loss of biodiversity, and nuclear threats. We as the young generation must wake up decision makers who are too often caught in short-term interest protection. We must remind them: It is *our future* you are negotiating about! Let us hope that Severn Suzuki's words are not forgotten when world leaders negotiate the post-Kyoto-treaty in Copenhagen. Her words are more important today than ever.

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