

**Expert talk**  
**„Climate Change and Democratization:  
A Complex Relationship“**

Berlin, June 16th, 2010  
Minutes: Stefan Schaaf



The link to the full debate: <http://debatte.boellblog.org/>

For the Heinrich Böll Foundation (HBF) it has recently been one of the core issues to find solutions to the problems caused by climate change. A second major topic is democratization. Are democracies better able to come to grips with climate change? Will the problems caused by climate change hinder democratization? The complex interrelationship between these two trends was explored at an expert talk on June 16th at the Foundation's office in Berlin.

At the outset, Barbara Unmüßig stressed the importance for the HBF to link these issues. So far, the interrelationship has not been explored in depth, experts on both issues have not really talked to each other. In Germany, only two academic authors (Claus Leggewie and Harald Welzer) have published their theses. Therefore the HBF asked Peter Burnell, professor at the University of Warwick, to examine it further. His paper has led to a controversial internal debate.



He explained that he wanted to explore the possibilities to develop double or even triple win scenarios – to develop adaptation strategies through a more participatory approach and to enhance the capacities of governance. He outlined the basic questions again: Does democratization impact on attitudes towards climate mitigation and adaptation? Do the responses to climate change have an impact on the democratic prospect?

He then summed up the comments to his paper, noting that it has quite obviously been provocative. The precise connectedness between capitalistic economic development and political change is contested still, he noted. „Democracy does not guarantee development, development can happen without democracy.“ Neither it is clear whether economic development and a policy against climate change are compatible or not. Various values exist alongside each other, although they may be contradictory: sustainability, freedom and democracy, good governance, the satisfaction of basic human needs, to name a few.

Sometimes certain values get priority, others therefore have to wait. Many developing nations are in a vulnerable position in regards to climate change, he said, they have little power in international negotiations, they are defective or fragile democracies, and most of them suffer from poverty. They need support from the developed world to grapple with climate change, to improve their governance and raise living standards. About this there is considerable agreement. Another point: the gender dimension has been widely neglected in the debate about democratization as in the debate about climate change.

And finally: the role of China. He called the world's largest greenhouse emitter „the elephant in the room“, because it is also the largest non-democracy and because its international influence is steadily increasing. He called for a close look at the examples of China and the US – both major contributors to global warming, but with very different political systems. It should be asked what kind of political system is necessary to give the adequate response to the challenge of climate mitigation and adaptation. He noted some dissatisfaction with the answers the liberal industrialized democracies have come up so far. Is it their leadership's fault – or are our societies not willing to change their lifestyles, or may be we need a different institutional framework?

Following were comments by the participants, beginning with Hermann E. Ott, a member of the Bundestag for Alliance 90 / the Greens. He framed the two most pressing issues like this: Is our market economy able to stay within the limits of our planet? and: What are the impacts of the current developments on democracy? Third, there is the question of social justice. He said, there is „either triple-win or nothing“. But: „Our parliamentary system is not delivering“, there is an inability to lead. He felt that Burnell's paper left the question too open which system is better suited to combat climate change. Ott is convinced that democratic societies are more responsible towards their people. Autocratic regimes especially in resource-rich countries are acting almost independently from their societies. He wants to distinguish between the economic system and the political system. He asks if the markets can deliver the solutions to climate change or if some political guidance is needed. If one looks at Japan, where there has been hardly any civil society input in the debate about climate change, it shows how much a vivid civil society helps in raising awareness and move the political system. China on the other hand is called a good example of an authoritarian system with a good response to climate change. The elite is aware of the problem and pushes for renewable energy. But it remains an authoritarian system where people these days are being evicted from their land in order to build huge wind farms. Still, in the end, Ott said, he hasn't lost faith that a triple-win scenario is possible.



Klemens van de Sand took issue with Burnell's thesis that there have to be „cruel choices“ between democratization and a strong climate policy. Also he wanted to suggest a few things the HBF could do. In his field, in development cooperation and the struggle against poverty, economy and politics are intertwined. Often his work involves creating institutions to get the populations involved. Climate change obviously deepens poverty and inequality, adaptation programs need to focus on the most vulnerable parts of society – on the individuals and not on nations. This being a given, he made a few points: these programs need to become more efficient, which provides win-win-opportunities. In India, good



water management programs alleviate poverty and work only with deep involvement of the rural population, who are required to organize themselves to collectively manage their water supply. The same principle applies to reforestation or rangeland management. The pressure to institutionalize people's participation increases. Foundations like HBF can and should assist and advise here directly, but also by helping partner organisations to raise awareness in the media, to institute accessible complaint procedures or to create a dialogue among the stake holders.

In the following open debate, Barbara Unmüßig pointed out the immense time pressures in the face of climate change. Jörg Haas agreed. He wanted to see a more precise look at the meaning of „democratization“. It can mean many things to various people. He doubts corporate democracies like ours can address the problems of climate change adequately. Our economic governance does not like the sort of long term planning a successful mitigation of climate change would require. A lot of capital is needed to switch to renewable energies. Such a change is not possible without planning and an industrial policy, which was a no-go for the last 20 years. But industry is already asking the political system to give them guidance. The current system is too volatile and unpredictable to make investment decisions. On the level of international negotiations, he noted pointedly, the West needs China to be authoritarian, because that country's reduction goals are so stringent.

Reviewing the state of empirical research on the relation of climate change and democracy, Thomas Saretzki argues that currently there is no „hard evidence“ available that we could simply take as a certain and unequivocal knowledge basis for policy debates. He suggests that the issues, which apparently go to the heart of the identity of the Greens or the HBF might also be conceptualized as trade-offs between different policies (climate vs. democratisation). The term „cruel choices“ for him as a policy analyst sounds too moral and dramatic for something that in his view could soberly be described as problems of policy integration.



Tilman Santarius pointed out the basic fact that democratization and climate protection are both essential goals, there can never be a „cruel choice“ between them. The question is what kind of political system, which institutions, can deliver both. The desired reduction of CO<sub>2</sub> output by 90 or 95 % will mean alternative ways of consumption and production are needed. To get there, neither democratic nor authoritarian systems seem yet to be capable. We need authority over the economy, he said, we need the politicians to share their authority with the local, but also the international level. And we need not only poverty alleviation, but also wealth alleviation. To debate this and thus to question our values and lifestyles is only possible in democratic societies, he said.



Lili Fuhr agreed that a transformation of our economies is necessary, but would be extremely difficult to manage. She asks how can resource rich, but poor countries be brought to leave them in the ground?

Hermann Ott came back to the issue of China. He called it a case in itself. China is the only authoritarian regime dealing with the challenge of climate change. He agrees we have to talk about economic systems but points out that corporations have a larger influence over authoritarian systems than over democratic ones. He notes that in the thirties it was

Germany's and Japan's outdated political systems that failed and threw the world in chaos. Today it is the US and the EU as well that need to adapt their political systems to the tasks ahead. The EU needs to integrate fast. The alternative is doom, as Dennis Meadows told him. (Meadows expects that in 2100 only one billion people will be left on our planet.)

Jörg Haas would prefer to distinguish between „expertocracies“ like China and „corporatocracies“ like the US. In Britain, as an example of institutional innovation, a group of experts by law is monitoring the climate policies of the government. He misses US and EU leadership and hopes that countries like Brazil, South Africa, India and China manage to formulate a new climate regime. Barbara Unmüßig disagreed and pointed out that in China as well as in many other authoritarian regimes (e. g. Pakistan) companies and economic interests are closely linked to the political system. She also questioned if legitimacy of a political regime can only be created by elections. It was suggested that the „output“ of a regime – like finding the right answers to climate change, providing security, feeding the people – creates legitimacy as well.



After the break Julia Leininger talked about institutional preconditions to combat climate change. She focused on national institutions. She made three points:



Firstly, we should not overestimate the capacity of democracy assistance to support democratization. Attempts to support democratization are only successful if they aim at processes and trends that are already in place (catalytic function).

Secondly, institutions are a precondition for any political order. Functioning and strong institutions are a precondition for coping with climate change. Good governance as it was defined by the

World Bank refers to the state as an entity that provides public goods in an efficient and transparent manner. From this perspective there could be a tension with democratic institutions which are inclusive and representative. If one strengthens state capacity it does not necessarily mean a stronger democracy, Ethiopia serves as an example because the Ethiopian regime established a strong aid management system, which also support the regime's reluctance to democracy assistance from the outside. Nevertheless, democratic and governance institutions are not per se opposed and should not be ruled out against each other.

Thirdly, adaptation strategies and democracy assistance can be complimentary, e.g. through functional cooperation, mobilization of political institutions and civil society. But all the efforts of a lively civil society like it existed in Haiti before the earthquake do not get far, if there are no functional state institutions and no political will by the elite.

Additionally, she agrees with Thomas Saretzki that one has to discuss policy options, not dilemmas because a dilemma per definitionem cannot be solved but politics is about finding solutions.

Keren Ben-Zeev then reported on the South African experience. She said that on paper, South Africa has impressive mechanisms for participatory decision making, but that in practice, these are often undermined by vested interests and inequality. However, civil society is vibrant, and there is strong independent media. Currently the government is formulating the second version of the „Integrated Resource Plan“(IRP) – a plan of electricity sources for the next 20



years. The first IRP gave priority to coal and nuclear energy, and did not reflect cabinet commitments to increase the share of renewables and independent power providers. The development of the second IRP, under the leadership of the Dep. of Energy, is effectively being managed by a task team comprised largely of energy intensive businesses and other vested interests. The space for their involvement was created by the department's lack of capacity. Given recent electricity tariff hikes and civil society engagement, this process received wide coverage in the media, and the department has been pressured to accept input from the public. So this has turned into a process with a considerable participation of the media and the civil society. Still questions remain on how input will be integrated into the final plan.



In Thailand, as Jana Mittag reported, the HBF and its partner organizations organized a number of consultative meetings to successfully draft a blueprint for a national adaptation policy from a civil society's perspective. Analysing the contributing factors, she listed the momentum ahead of the Copenhagen Summit, an awakening awareness for climate change and environmental issues in Thai society, a lack of capacity in the respective government institutions and the Thai delegation as well as an openness for exchange and consultancy, well developed networks in the field of environmental protection and renewable energy, and the self-confidence in those networks and civil society which can look back on a successful history of protest against large hydropower dams and industrial complexes.

Jörg Haas commented and gave four practical suggestions: (1) to strengthen the resistance to fossil and nuclear energy. The catastrophe in the Gulf of Mexico has raised the price of using carbon-based fuels worldwide. (2) Innovation happens when a few people work hard to change things. If they are inside the government, the better. It helps to identify such people and give them any assistance imaginable. (3) After Copenhagen there is more awareness, but more dialogue between government, business and civil society about climate change is needed. (4) New actors, new coalitions, may be in the business sector, need to be identified.

Barbara Unmüßig then outlined the work and upcoming projects of the HBF in Africa. To strengthen accountability and participation and to find alternatives to fossil energy is high on its agenda, attempts to bring different change agents to the table depend on the political space in different countries and whether civil groups think it is useful to talk also to business or government. The HBF has begun to analyze the national adaptation plans in Africa and will present the results in a few months. Also a study of climate finance is being prepared.

In the final round of comments for this meeting Keren Ben-Zeev asked to look at the kind of democratic institutions needed in the fight against climate change, and what challenges such as this tell us about how to strengthen democratic institutions. Jörg Haas pointed to the British model of institutionalizing the debate. Klemens van de Sand sees a longstanding weakness in the analysis of institutions, a look at the drivers behind the scenes is needed. The HBF and similar groups need more expertise on this, he suggested. Thomas Saretzky pointed out that climate adaptation requires much stronger democratic participation than climate mitigation. He said the different adaptation plans in the 16 German Bundesländer offer interesting comparisons and lessons. Julia Leininger agreed there is a lack of knowledge in informal institutions. She mentioned a study of the participatory budget in Sao Paulo, and another one by Britta Horstmann called „Framing adaptation to climate change“.

Peter Burnell had the closing remarks. He summed up:

- The debate about democratic versus autocratic regimes misses the point that many countries have neither, but are in the process of transition somewhere in between.
- Also, even authoritarian regimes can achieve quite a lot of legitimacy if they deliver what the people need.
- Third, the notion that corporations are bad and the will of the people is good needs to be questioned. Both may be part of the problem, and both have to be part of the solution.
- The linkage between civil society's concern about climate change and a wider political context of participation should be considered.
- Two things that should be done: country-based case studies about positive experiences in participation; and enhancing the work with the media, trade unions and think tanks.

Finally, he sees a paradox that in some developing countries where one would think people are concerned with their economic situation, the right decisions towards climate change are being taken, whereas in the wealthy democracies it seems to be much more difficult to come to the right decisions.