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“Resource Equity - Rethinking resource politics and entering backyards”By Cathrin Klenck and Lennart Kümper-Schlake, March 17th 2013**Teaser**

In the light of “Peak Everything”, we call for “Rethinking Everything” and challenge the prevalent approaches towards resources in politics, economics and society. To adequately address resource equity, small and comfortable solutions will not bring about the needed transformation.

Abstract

The world’s resources have either peaked (e.g. oil, gas, uranium) or have been massively degraded (e.g. biodiversity, land) by human economic activities. The predominant models of everlasting economic growth and constantly rising material consumption foster “Peak Everything”. To adequately address resource equity, new approaches towards resources are needed in politics, economics and at different levels of society. To lead to relevant change, small and comfortable solutions like being tentatively proposed by decision-makers will not be sufficient. Therefore we call for “Rethinking Everything” and take the effort to challenge the prevalent approaches linked with resource politics.

1 “Peak Everything” obliges to “Rethink Everything”

When dealing with resources, one is confronted rather quickly with a so-called “peak everything”: The peak extraction levels of numerous fossils and metals have been reached while at the same time the availability of resources like biodiversity, water or land is in sharp decline. Hence, we cannot think about the constituents of fair, coherent and sustainable resource politics anymore without taking “Peak Everything” into account. Mere strategies of substitution won’t solve the resource problem.

What’s the consequence then? “Peak everything” implies that suitable strategies to tackle the resource crisis rather won’t be small, easy or comfortable ones. If we take “peak everything” seriously, we have to “rethink everything.” We cannot consider the resource topic in isolation. It is intertwined with the multiple and interdependent crises (e.g. economic and financial crisis, climate crisis, poverty, and food crisis) that we are facing

today and that are driven mainly by the hegemonic economic model based on the logic of unlimited growth, competition and consumption. Hence, when discussing resource equity, we have to question these prevalent structures determining our economic, political and societal systems – and their inherent power structures.

One important first step to challenge the status quo in resource politics is to think beyond boundaries. That exercise was undertaken by the Berlin Future Workshop from October 21 to 24 organized by the Heinrich Boell Foundation (HBF). Starting from the situation in Germany/Europe, some important obstacles to resource equity were discussed. The findings are quite pessimistic and frustrating: Resource equity is far away from being taken into account by today’s mainstream approaches towards resources in economics, politics and society (see part 2). But when taking the challenge to think beyond boundaries, i.e. to

not consider the resource topic in isolation, to take into account global interdependencies and to challenge the predominant growth models,

first potential steps towards more resource equity can be identified (see part 3).

2 Resource equity – prevented by today`s economies, politics and societies

The hegemonic economic model has tremendous costs in terms of ecological degradation, climate change and social injustice – reaching from local to global levels. One look at the food sector in many regions of the global south states a good example: food sovereignty is heavily undermined due to food price speculation, draughts caused by climatic changes or the production of agrofuels. Although there is more knowledge about global interdependencies and planetary boundaries than ever before, decision-makers as well as individuals are far away from being shocked into action. Due to a fear of losing privileges and achievements, only very little meaningful changes of behaviour or action can be observed.

The economies - self-service mentality towards resources and privatisation of common goods

Current economic growth is characterized by the externalization of negative social and ecological effects within countries, across nations and regions. Competing for the lowest prices, the economy is trying to keep production costs as low as possible. However, the environmental and social effects of production and consumption are not at all reflected in the market prices at which we can buy products. – Or how could one think, that a 10 €-jeans would include the costs for the water, the energy and the air consumed for the production of cotton, not to mention the economic loss through reduction of soil fertility and local biodiversity? These common pool resources and the functionality of ecosystems are taken for granted. Moreover, along with these environmental effects, social conflicts about tenure and property rights or working conditions arise where production sites, particularly in the global South, are meant to predominantly fulfil the interests of investors, companies and consumers in the Northern hemisphere. In this system neither producers nor consumers take over responsibility.

Industries and corporates keep on treating public goods like they don´t have any value at all. This is one reason why certain groups of scientists and decision-makers call for the economic valuation of the loss of public goods and services obtained from ecosystems and biodiversity. Their argument addresses the invisibility of some resources: If the “true” production costs of a product would have to be paid by the companies, this would increase their interest in lessening the ecological footprints of their products. This would, they say, help to overcome the current market failure of devaluing nature and its services. However, while one cannot ignore those debates, we underline that such approaches won´t eliminate environmental and social injustices: the faith in market mechanisms might lead to a rising monetization and privatization of nature. The exclusion of local users from their resources is very likely to follow, decreasing resource equity would be the result. Hence, we rather need to look at power imbalances at global and national levels that finally lead to resource inequities. Confronted with corporate power as well as unfavourable trade structures, resource-rich countries in the global South are often in a weak bargaining position and so are local users vis-a-vis their political leaders. The challenge is to remain nature public, make companies and the consumer account for ecosystem services and resources they use, and to strengthen resource politics to ultimately minimize negative social and ecological effects.

Equitable Resource Politics - at the margins of political will and power

Looking at the political realms, in resource politics one can observe an astonishing lack of both will and power to safeguard social and ecological interests – both nationally and internationally. In German and European resource politics for example, raw material supply and economic interests prevail at the expense of developmental or climate interests. There is no policy coherence in the sense of

resource equity, rather one observes a dominance of national interests in resource politics. Political action is mainly short-term oriented and thus lacks the political interest and will to generate “wise” choices in the field of global equity that would only pay off in the long run. Mere profit-orientation as well as path-dependency also strengthen the status quo, block innovative approaches and the necessary far-sighted strategies and courageous decisions. A look at the German Parliament provides an appropriate example. Its Study Commission on “Growth, Wellbeing and Quality of Life“ was supposed to explore the need of growth in economies and for society, to develop holistic indicator sets for prosperity and social progress as well as to evaluate options and limits for decoupling growth, resource consumption and technical progress. One consensus of the Commission was that resources are obviously depleted – but some members retained an unswerving commitment to the logic of growth: A contradictory argumentation that reflects the opinion and attitude of great parts of society. Nature and society seem to be dissociated more than ever before.

Consumption - a misleading path to wellbeing

When taking into account the global challenges and the urgent need of new approaches, the way social and economic welfare is still being conceived is completely misleading: It is based on material consumption and economic output. This ignores that there are many activities and goods that are not and may not be measured in monetary terms, but are fundamental and constituent for human wellbeing. Moreover it neglects that material consumption alone does not necessarily lead to more happiness and satisfaction. The question of changing behaviour and path dependencies is thus a very relevant one. It is important to identify points of entry and meaningful incentives in order to overcome the protection of vested interests and NIMBY (Not in my backyard!) attitudes that damage social cohesion and ecological integrity. An important task is thus to identify the “triggers” that could transfer awareness and knowledge into a feeling of responsibility and thus meaningful action.

3 Entering Backyards: Towards a Culture of Responsibility

To adequately address resource equity, small and comfortable solutions won't lead to the needed transformation. Therefore we call for “Rethinking Everything” - rethink the respective approaches towards resources in economies, politics as well as among societies and individuals. Based on the discussions held on the Berlin Future Workshop in October 2012, we suggest approaches that are likely to support resource equity. They are mainly based on participation and responsibility - be it individually or collectively, be it within or across countries and (world) regions.

Addressing the Individual: Entering Backyards

On a societal and individual level, one observes growing unease with the prevailing definition of welfare. Increasingly, (young) people challenge the dominant models of how work and life are being balanced, of how food and products are being generated and (over)used, of how our consuming model is

being perpetuated at the expense of our planet. At the same time, many people have the impression that political power is being delegated to levels that seem out of reach and possible influence. Increasingly, people feel that there are alternatives to the dominant idea of unlimited growth, to seeking individual fulfillment solely in their work, to further ignore social, ecological and economic implications of their lifestyles and consuming models both on local and global level.

In our view, this growing unease offers great potential to push alternatives. And this is already happening. People increasingly organize themselves to produce their own food or renewable energy, they share, fix or recycle products instead of turning to the next shopping mall. The idea of retaking responsibility (and thus regaining influence) for manifold aspects of life appeals to more and more people – and is closely interlinked with how one approaches resources and resource (over)use.

Activating the Commons: Towards Resilient Regions and international resource governance

One concept that is based on retaking responsibility and that is spreading across the globe in the last years and months is the idea of the so-called Transition Towns. As an option for a political, economic and societal counter model, the transition movement relies on community-driven projects in areas of food production, transport and mobility, energy generation, education, housing, waste processing, art etc. as small-scale local responses to the global challenges of climate change, economic hardship and shrinking supplies of cheap energy. They are self-organized initiatives that rebuild resilience by growing independencies to markets and the underlying political system. Together, these small-scale responses are much greater than the sum of the individual initiatives, because they help showing a potential way for decision-makers in politics, business and individuals especially in societies of the global North so far. These units mainly follow the design principles of stable common pool resource management, where the regulatory framework is based on responsibility, accountability and participation on local to regional level.

Sub-national regions are not confronted with the same political constraints as the national level, thus other developments are possible. Whilst national policies are strictly divided into different sectors and national interests need to be represented internationally, regions potentially allow for more participation and policy integration. Resource politics should aim for holistic developments close to the idea of sustainable development. The vision of a balance among economic activities, social progress and the integrity of ecosystems is not new. In recent years, a concept came into discussion that is based on indigenous traditions and values and postulates the return to a "good life": "Buen Vivir". As the western model of growth tends to neglect non-monetary values, buen vivir focuses on a life based equally on ecological and social norms. The concept is currently emerging in many debates on post-fossil societies since it addresses the dichotomy between nature and culture.

Initiatives such as the Transition movement, or other decentralized mechanisms of dealing with resources as well as indigenous concepts like "Buen Vivir" that are rooted in the global South bear great potential. In order to challenge power imbalances and vested interests on a larger scale, those movements must politicize and need to build alliances. They have to get organized to challenge power imbalances and vested interests in resource politics. Questions of international governance and regulatory approaches in resource politics have to be tackled.

We thus suggest the exact opposite of how resources are dealt with currently. National supply strategies are shortsighted and bound to fail if we take into account the challenges that go along with resource politics: Climate policy, environment policy, trade policy, development policy, economic policy, agricultural policy. In resource politics, all of these sectoral policies need to be dealt with coherently. Questions of human rights, poverty and freedom, but also of overconsumption and inequitable resource distribution and access have to be integrated as well. Since these are global challenges, resource politics urgently need to be internationalized and dealt with in fair and legitimated international for a where all relevant stakeholders are involved. The debate about innovative institutions, suited mechanisms and regulatory approaches needs to speed up.

Approaching Off-Site-Effects: Internalization of Externalities

Politics and politicians have to (re-)conquer influence on corporate power in the economy of resources. Binding rules have to be set up in order to protect social and ecologic interests and human rights, as well as to generate transparency in resource issues. The Berlin Future Workshop aimed at approaching off-site effects in the economy of resources: The internalization of externalities via a suited legislation has to be developed. Today's production systems and value chains neglect negative ecological and social effects at the expense of the public and their goods. A mandatory disclosure of externalities would need to aim for the establishment of accounting and more transparent standards.

The Berlin Future Workshop proposed to tax fossils, non-renewable resources as well as solid and liquid emissions.

In order to sustain the integrity of ecosystems and biodiversity and to support resource equity the value of resources needs to be highlighted and integrated into the value chains. The challenge is to integrate social and ecological costs via other vehicles than market-based mechanisms. This rapidly spreading approach must be seen very critically from a resource equity point of view since it paves the way for a privatization and financialization of nature. Such mechanisms perpetuate the market logic and stand thus in contrast to the transformation we are advocating for. Nature and ecosystem

services must not become subject of commercial interest. Regulatory measures are needed to assure priority for resource equity instead of highlighting nature's potential for the current economic model.

Of course, these are first steps only. And of course, many people and decision-makers stick to a faith in growth and corresponding conceptualizations of "progress" and "development". They may argue that a change of the hegemonic economic model is an utopia and in need for a revolution. But degrowth is about to come, if not voluntarily, societies and individuals are very likely to discover it the uncomfortable way.

4 Entry points for resource equity: Participation and Integration in Resource Politics

The limits of growth are reached - not in the future, but today. Resource inequities, resulting from power imbalances and massive resource consumption ultimately lead to devastating resource depletion, climate change and ecological and social injustice in many regions worldwide, particularly in the global South.

To respect planetary boundaries and address resource equity, a social-ecological transformation is in urgent need. In order to approach it, we have to rethink prevalent approaches towards resources as well as power imbalances in economy, politics and society. And we have to stop dealing with the different aspects of resource (in)equity in isolation. WBGU (e.g. 2011) and other leading think tanks call for improved inter- and transdisciplinary practices to create new knowledge for decision-makers and for the public. First steps to think beyond boundaries were undertaken at the Berlin Future Workshop.

But it's not only about rethinking - it's about taking action, too. As illustrated above, tendencies of decentralisation, citizen's participation and involvement in subnational decision-making processes and economic activities are currently leading to promising projects and initiatives – for example the establishment of independent model regions

like transition towns. Such laboratories for new life models are crucial to transparently represent patterns of de facto resource availability and consumption. And we need those laboratories in order to create new models and narratives about how we want to live. It's not only about path dependencies, power structures and vested interests that are hard to overcome on the way towards resource equity. When talking about barriers for meaningful change, one must not forget the barriers in our heads, i.e. the way individuals and society as a whole have incorporated the mantra of progress based on growth and resource-consumption. These "mental infrastructures" (WELZER 2011) need to be challenged. They only can be altered by trying new life plans and by thus generating a narrative that we want to tell about ourselves. Mental infrastructures can only be changed if every member of society reflects and lives how he or she would really like to live.

Personal involvement in regional initiatives reduces the demanding complexity of resource use and corresponding equity issues. At local and regional levels, the urgently needed integration and participation in resource politics can be approached. On other levels, the implementation of these idea(l)s is obviously more difficult. Decentralisation offers opportunities, but it remains essential to

address the issue of resource equity at an international level. International resource governance is needed, hence we have to speed up efforts to identify and/or set up suited international mechanisms, innovative institutions and regulatory approaches. For this endeavour, the issues of integration and participation are crucial as well: International fora dealing with resource politics can only be considered fair and legitimate if all relevant stakeholders from all world regions are being represented. And to appropriately address resource politics, climate policy, trade policy

and other sectors influencing resource (in)equity have to be integrated.

The current development of the post-2015-agenda offers great entry points to actively address the resource topic on the global agenda. Thus, an integrating resource policy must be regarded as a main pillar when it comes to formulating the SDG's. In order to approach resource equity, we call for a global resources goal that focuses on planetary boundaries, on distributional justice and on the normative consensus of human rights.

Remarks

The essay is based on in-depth discussions during the Berlin future workshop on resource politics/equity which took place 21 to 24 October 2012. It was the second workshop in a series of seven to create inputs to the global HBF-Resource Summit in late 2013 and aims to feed into a HBS resource memorandum. We would like to thank the interdisciplinary group of workshop participants for their valuable inputs, especially our vice-delegates Katja Heubach and Jean Peters for their feedback.

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