

DIALOGUE SEMINAR

Environmental protection and climate change as a challenge for EU policies

– the role of ethics, lifestyles, solidarity and global justice

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Panel 1: What is the role of ethical arguments in the current debate on protection of environment and tackling of climate change?

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The role of ethical arguments in the debate on protection of environment and tackling of climate change

Not only in this conference, we have a common starting point: It is possible that climate change will severely damage the natural foundations of life on earth. Climate change is closely linked to the development of our societies as well in the global north as in the global south: it can increase poverty and can lead to growing injustice. The whole process of climate change can go faster, and be much more serious in its consequences than was assumed before. That seems to be the message of the latest IPCC report. But again, also in the last weeks and months, the reaction of politics, the public and the mass media is astonishingly shallow, more or less routinized, with a felt desire to go on to the day-to-day business of politics – like everybody got tired of still growing levels of catastrophe forecasting. The reaction to the latest IPCC report might, therefore, indicate the necessity to look again at principle ways to justify environmental and climate policy, but not as a purely academic exercise, but with the intention to link these reflections back to the design of climate policy. This is what I would try to do in the next few minutes. My thesis is that there are three basic different approaches to legitimize climate policy:

- the approach of risk minimization, linked to natural sciences,
- the approach of cost reduction, linked to economics, and
- the approach of caring for the earth, linked to ethics

(1) Should we act to prevent or slow down climate change even there is no certainty that it will take place, no certainty that it is man made, no certainty that our actions will be successful? Even from a natural scientist's point of view one could say yes. The reason is: There *might* be a possibility that all three of those questions have to be answered positively: the probability is quite high that climate change will take place, is human made – and our climate policy measures could be successful. And that would mean: grounded by the principle of precaution, we should act. This argumentation solely relies on the power of rationality, it appeals to the possibility to gain logical insights – however, beyond the rationale of existing power structures.

(2) There is another line of argument to reinforce this decision – it is purely economic and was demonstrated in very clear terms by the Stern Review on the Economics of Climate change, first published in October 2006. Stern and his team could show that in the long run it will be much cheaper to engage in climate protection fast and not wait for the future – where it would be much more expensive to get to the same results if we start to change only in a decade or so. Stern did show that the percentage of global GNP that should be invested into mitigation and adaptation measures would be easily affordable to the world community – if it would act immediately. Maybe we would have to discuss why – in the logic of the Stern Review – we now already lost 7 years. It might be that we would have to come to the conclusion that this has something to do with short-term oriented market mechanisms.

But there are no insights that I could tell you that are really new: The reasons why we do not act fast enough are well known. Let me summarize and repeat them briefly because – to my opinion – these are the reasons why we need the third type of approach – ethical arguments – beyond the logic of probability and economics:

- Costs and benefits from using up non renewable energy are very unequally distributed. For the old industrial world, it would be much more profitable to continue the old paths of its development and postpone the transition to a society that fits into the ecological boundaries of this planet.

- But these costs and benefits from using up non renewable resources are even more unequally distributed between the generation now living and those to come. And our economic system betrays us to take this insight as important as it really is – the illusion of

positive interest rates, the illusion of the expectation of efficiency gains from technological progress nourishes the false belief that man made financial capital can substitute more or less the natural capital that we destroy.

– Short term economic and financial crisis – like the ones that we dealing it in the last years, months, and days – seem to be more pressing than those crisis that are developing slowly, go nearly unnoticed at first, and make other people suffer that those who bear the main responsibility for it.

Therefore, as already said, we need a third access, an ethical approach. In their efforts for tackling climate change, churches follow this approach, and this is their own and specific way they can share with others. The belief in God as creator leads to an attitude of thankfulness, enjoying the beauty of creation, and to an endeavour to live in a way that is respectful to it. The belief in God ties us into a living community together with all other creatures, demanding from us our contribution to form the world into a liveable place.¹ This belief includes that men and women were created in God's image – the foundation for an inviolable human dignity, the right of each individual to live a life of dignity, including the right to use, but not to destroy the gifts of creation.

God's affirmation of the reliability and continuity of life rythms lies at the core of the Covenant with Noah, expressed in God's promise never to destroy the earth again: „As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease“ (Gen. 8, 22). This affirmation of God provides Christians with the courage to make efforts to protect God's creation even in the face of all the developments that would destroy life. „We are allocated a position of co-responsibility in the sustainable use and the beneficial management of the living space created by God.“²

What I have outlined here in brief is the conviction that on the basis of the christian belief we can – on the basis of ethical arguments – follow a different approach to climate change. But this would mean that we had to strive for a clear-cut change of mentality: The mitigation of the consequences of climate change has to be one of the top priorities for politics and for shaping our lifestyles, to maintain the foundations of life for the generations to come. This

¹ Ref. to „Turning to life“, 71 f.

² Huber, Wolfgang (2007): It is not too late to respond to climate change. Hanover: EKD-Text 89, 13.

long term perspective cannot be solved by traditional economic considerations alone; indeed, economics must be re-oriented towards the goals of long term sustainability, towards a critical re-evaluation of the functions of economic growth, a questioning of the predominant life style in the industrialized countries, and the formulation of the liberating effects of an „economy of enough“.

This re-orientation, however, does not mean turning back to ostensibly better days of the past, quite in the contrary – it means to analyze critically the developments of the present and to try to orient political measures and instruments at the ethical values of peace, justice, and caring for creation. This includes to give a voice for those who can not speak for themselves: the poor, and the nature. And it includes to enter into a dialogue with those who are responsible in politics, in the economy and the civil society to develop political and economic guidelines for a just and sustainable policy on climate and development. This is where churches can – on the basis of the foresaid ethical foundation – can speak up to make their distinctive contribution to the discussion.

How could we link this general level of reasoning to the specific situation that we entered after the last IPCC report?

- In the light of ethical arguments, climate change gets a very high priority. It must be separated from short term economic reasoning – and this is where actors from the civil society and the churches may assist politicians by spreading the message. Climate politics has to be revitalised – despite actual and, maybe, forthcoming economic crises.
- Climate change must be linked to two more questions: the question of justice, and the questions of a reversal of traditional economics, that had to be re-oriented towards another ethical foundation: the notion of „enough“ and not maximization of products and services, assisted by addressing lifestyles and discussing the ethical foundations of a „good life in dignity“ for all human beings on earth.

But churches can not only speak up; taking ethical arguments serious, means to engage also in practical measures for climate protection in their own institutions, their buildings, their activities. Only in this combination, the word of the churches is credible. ECEN, the Ecumenical Christian Environmental Network represents many churches and church

institutions who set out to change their own daily practice. We even plagiarized the European Union by inventing – as we called them – Twinning Projects where we transposed good programmes for climate protection that do well in one church to other churches. I could tell you a lot of stories on successful programmes for climate protection in churches – [but we do not have the time for that]. So let me just conclude by giving you some pictures – and we leave you a list of websites that allow further information.