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## Digging our own grave – democratically

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# The Current Column

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## Digging our own grave – democratically. The case for an ecological democracy

*Bonn, 15 September 2017.* On 15 September each year, the United Nations celebrate International Day of Democracy. The theme this year is conflict prevention, that is, the contribution made by democratic institutions to peace and stability.

Like most people in Europe, we can consider ourselves fortunate in Germany that we live within a political system in which we can assert our human rights and basic civil rights and realise individual freedoms. Our political institutions promote non-violent conflict resolution, a key requirement for peace and stability.

But we are wrong if we think we can rest on our laurels here. Despite our democratic system, we have for decades been jeopardising our prospects of a peaceful and stable future. Climate change is advancing unchecked, destroying people's lives and livelihoods, and is set to fuel further conflicts in future - conflicts over resources and survival, including here in Germany. We have been aware of this for a long time, but we are not doing enough to address the problem. Even worse, our democracy encourages us to put the climate issue on hold rather than resolve it.

The dilemma is due in part to the short-sightedness inherent in our political structures. This is expressed in the interests of voters and in the promises and decisions of politicians and parties, most of which concern short-term pledges. In a representative democracy, these are two sides of the same coin. Consequently, despite all our research findings and despite having seen the catastrophic effects of our lifestyle for some time now, convenience, lack of information and power struggles all too often win the day over intelligent political decisions regarding sustainability. This also explains why Germany and the rest of the world continue to cling on so tightly to the coal industry, despite its highly detrimental impact on the climate, why we still drive cars with combustion engines, and why we keep on consuming vast quantities of meat. And this despite the fact that most voters and politicians are aware that the price for their short-sighted interests is paid by people in other countries, by their children and grandchildren, and even by themselves. Germans may be environmentally conscious, but the election results of recent years endorse a business-as-usual approach. In such a context, how could the people's elected representatives find the courage to vote for the restructuring needed for sustainable development even if they wanted to? This may be irresponsible, but it is democratically legitimate.

Democracy primarily describes political decision-making processes and not specific policy contents provided they stay within constitutional boundaries.

But what about when the resulting policies systematically undermine our livelihoods and we end up biting the hand that feeds us and future generations? Such a system is deadly.

This is not a plea against democracy. On the contrary, it is a call to all proponents of democracy to use the 15 September as an opportunity to kick-start a discussion on the further development of our political system. In order to be fit for the future, a democracy must support the transformation to sustainable development by protecting people's livelihoods from being destroyed. It needs to prevent us destroying ourselves.

Numerous ideas have already been put forward for a sustainable democracy that is living in the true sense of the word, building on principles such as responsibility and political co-determination. They include introducing sustainable development as a state objective at constitutional level or upgrading it to this status, subjecting legislation to consistent sustainability impact assessment, appointing ombudspersons for the future and parliamentary representatives to champion the interests of future generations, giving a political voice to children and young people, limiting mandates for representatives, or convening future councils comprising citizens selected at random.

Commitment is key to the success of these and similar forward-looking institutions. We need more than dialogue forums and other talk shops in which citizens and experts already committed to sustainable development produce declarations of intent which are then filed away in ministers' drawers. What we need is courage to engage in democratic experiments with innovative institutions that not only advise but effectively supplement traditional institutions such as governments and parliaments.

With the German parliamentary elections and the UN Climate Change Conference in Bonn (COP23) just around the corner, it is high time that we subject our democracy to a sustainability check. SDG 16 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development aims to promote "peace, justice and strong institutions" for sustainable development. It is about creating the institutional basis for achieving all the SDGs. For democratic countries like Germany, this means that our democracy will only make a truly lasting contribution to conflict prevention, peace and stability as envisaged by the UN if we adapt our institutions to meet the challenges facing them, thus enabling them to promote long-term, sustainable policy.