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Climate protection and investing in social cohesion: Charting the course for the UN climate conference!

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The Current Column

of 30 October 2017

Climate protection and investing in social cohesion: Charting the course for the UN climate conference!

Bonn, 30 October 2017. When it comes to climate protection, time and speed are of the essence. If global warming is to be kept below two degrees Celsius, worldwide greenhouse gas emissions need to be reduced to zero by the middle of the 21st century. To enable this, emissions need to be halved every consecutive decade. The success of this momentous project is by no means assured.

At the 2015 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Paris, it was resolved that the 2018 Climate Change Conference should take stock of the situation and examine if UNFCCC member states are actually implementing their climate protection promises. However, this year's Climate Change Conference (COP23) in Bonn will already be a key litmus test for global climate policy. Following the major breakthrough in Paris, things are not running as smoothly. For one thing, President Trump has announced the United States' withdrawal from the climate treaty. Although the president was alone in his stance at the G20 summit in Hamburg, many wavering governments will be asking themselves why they should make major climate policy efforts if even the economic heavyweight USA is not prepared to change direction towards low carbon development. The concern is that the supportive alliances for ambitious climate protection are crumbling.

At the COP23 in Bonn it will therefore be important to make clear, during the negotiations and at all the side events, that the group of climate pioneers is not wavering, and that cities, companies, research institutes and citizens are driving the climate process onwards. Support here is also coming from the United States of America. The "We are still in" initiative will be represented in Bonn, with nine US states, 252 American cities as well as 339 US universities and 1,780 companies from the US underscoring their support for ambitious climate change. Here, the sovereignty of interpretation regarding the future and specific and concrete steps towards implementing climate policy obligations will be at stake. The German Development Institute / Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE) and the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA) are hosting a high-ranking conference on 4 and 5 November in which actors from different fields of society and all regions of the planet will come together to discuss how climate protection, the modernisation of business and society as well as social cohesion can be conflated with one another. Demonstrating how climate protection can succeed in making our planet more stable and our societies more resilient can serve to unleash the vigour required to implement the Paris Agreement.

During the COP23, Germany will also be the focus of attention. The federal government still in place as well as the future coalition partners currently negotiating the basis for the next federal government need to make it apparent to the global audience how Germany can still achieve its climate goals for 2020, namely a 40 percent reduction in emissions compared to 1990. The German environmental ministry has made it clear that the current efforts are not sufficient. Germany is important to the global climate process. It has regarded itself as a climate policy pioneer ever since COP1, which took place in Berlin in 1995. How should countries such as India, South Africa, Indonesia, Vietnam, Argentina or Poland be persuaded to accelerate the pace of establishing a zero carbon economy by mid-century if even the much-admired economic powerhouse Germany, which withstood the global financial crisis better than most other economies, does not have the strength to do so? The fact that the 2017 climate negotiations take place in Germany is therefore both an opportunity and an obligation.

Concerns about right-wing populism, nationalism and xenophobia are troubling many – not least in western countries. Populist rage often arises from a lack of confidence and fear for the future. The Paris Agreement and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development can be key instruments for shaping the future and creating attractive development narratives. Climate protection will not succeed as a "programme of abstinence" – in rich or poor countries. Climate protection will only succeed by going hand in hand with investments in social cohesion and reducing inequalities.

Climate protection is twinned with the policy of justice. The 2017 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Bonn can and should awaken an appetite for the future, for the creation of more attractive towns and cities, for the establishment of a more efficient agriculture that accommodates the needs of both the planet and those that inhabit it, for the preservation of the environment, with all its incredible beauty, and for co-operation between governments, cities, artists, scientists and young people across national borders. Creativity, a pioneering mood and a desire to sculpt the future could replace despondency, cynicism, isolationism and blindness to the future. Does that sound naive? The rebuilding of Europe from the rubble and hatred of two World Wars was a similarly naive, yet ground-breaking vision. Ultimately, the global climate problem could provide the impetus for the largest and first truly global modernisation programme in the history of humans.