

A Test for sustainable Policymaking

<http://www.social-europe.eu/2009/10/adapting-to-climate-change-a-test-case-for-sustainable-policymaking/>

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The international climate negotiations in Copenhagen are just a few days away and we can already see parties moving towards the final showdown. Debates about national commitments are heating up and diplomatic efforts are getting more and more serious. Despite this growing attention, public debates are primarily concentrating on the nature of reduction targets, on common long-term visions and on other difficult questions, ranging from technology transfer to the need for more research and development

efforts.

Most people assume that climate policy is just more or less about finding solutions for how to reduce global emissions. Generally speaking, this is right. But the picture is not complete without mentioning another important aspect: adaptation. Adaptation has to be the second pillar of a successful climate policy and has to receive more attention.

The need for adaptation to climate change has been neglected high priority status for some time now. Neither the 4th Assessment Report of the IPCC nor other important studies on climate protection have (even if they implicitly mentioned adaptation in their calculations) really initiated a process of thinking about adaptation as a major issue. The same is true for European and national debates. By today, not even half of the EU member states have published an adaptation strategy for the coming years.

The EU's target of limiting global warming to 2° C above pre-industrial levels is – with regard to latest scientific evidence – comparatively ambitious. And accomplishing this mission already implies an unavoidable change in the global environment: a temperature rise of exactly 2° C.

Therefore, two major tasks have to be successfully managed at the same time: On the one hand, stopping emissions from entering into the atmosphere, but also, on the other hand, protecting people from the worst effects this anthropogenic disaster might have in the future.

The list of affected areas and policies is long and might even be incomplete due to our limited knowledge about the real implications of a warming planet. Climate change will need adjustments in nearly every part of our societies. Even if we stopped emitting half of global greenhouse gases by tomorrow, we would go through some major changes. True, we are not as much affected as people in Southern Asia or Australia, suffering from floods or droughts. But still, our environment is changing rapidly.

We can already observe some vulnerable sectors: farmers in Southern Europe cannot grow their crops anymore, a lack of water supply is threatening arid regions, the glaciers in the Alps are melting faster than ever before resulting in soil erosion and dramatic landslides in this region. The list of those more or less dramatic examples could be extended without any difficulty.

Climate change has obviously also a social dimension: How can we guarantee access to information and resources for adaptation not only to the richer part of society, but to poorer parts as well? Improving resilience and distributing knowledge is therefore

essential for adaptation policies.

The European Commission has recently published a strategy, analysing how global warming could affect the European Union and how we have to adapt to climate change. It has been an important first step towards bringing more attention to the need for early actions. If we start taking the reality of changing environmental conditions into account while considering major decisions for the next decades, we will save money and resources compared to the costs of not acting.

The recognition of adaptation needs in climate policy is not about giving up on climate protection at all. It is all about long-term planning, building capacities and being aware of the responsibility for protecting the resources of future generations.

In the end, climate policy does not only consist of climate protection. It includes, at the same time, answering the question of how to protect us against a changing climate.

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