



"Renewable energies: New prospects or risks of conflict?"

(Summary of the discussion on 22 April 2013)

The roundtable on Monday, 22 April 2013 at BICC (Bonn International Center for Conversion) had the aim of discussing the consequences of the energy transition in Europe for the African continent. It was organized by BICC in cooperation with AfricAvenir and the German Development Institute / Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE).

In its subject, the event was framed by the project "Paradoxes of Sustainability—how socially responsible are green technologies?" by AfricAvenir, that brings forward recommendations for a fair design of the European energy transition for Africa. The panel was made up of Silas Kpanan'Ayoung Siakor (Sustainable Development Institute, Liberia), Michael Brüntrup (DIE), and Marie Müller (BICC). It was moderated by Christof Kögler (BICC).

Opening the event, Professor Dr. Conrad Schetter, Director for Research at BICC, gave an introduction highlighting the controversial nature of the topic and the need for more critical thought on the issue. Preceding the panel discussion, Usha Ziegelmayr—project coordinator "Paradoxes of Sustainability" of AfricAvenir—gave an overview of the project framework and its main conclusions.

The first two speakers focused on the agricultural and forest commodities that are produced in Africa for bio-energy. Being the first to speak on the panel, Mr. Siakor drew on examples from Liberia and pointed out that what is perceived in Europe as something positive has very severe impacts in Africa and perpetuates the development model of exporting raw materials and importing expensive technology. Especially in the context of weak governments, major governance issues are not being addressed that could ensure balanced deals with corporations active in the exploitation of resources necessary for generating renewable energies. Concluding his statement, Mr. Siakor stressed that in his view, a transition of lifestyles based on overconsumption would be even more important than the energy transition under review.

Next on the panel was Mr. Brüntrup who made the point of potential gains through a transition in energy provision. He pointed out that the need for bio-energies will have an important role to play, also within Africa, in the long run. African countries should thus not refuse the export of raw materials as this export production does not counter food security. Highlighting the fact that there is wealth to be achieved, he stressed the importance of instruments for ensuring good governance in the relevant sectors.

Finishing the first round of statements, Mrs. Müller shifted the focus to mineral extraction necessary in the context of new technologies for renewable energy production. She pointed out that there are numerous examples of conflicts surrounding resource extraction. Various dimensions of these conflicts are to be differentiated, encompassing war economies on the national scale as well as grievances around direct consequences of mining activity at the local level.

Concluding, Mrs. Müller referred to specific measures at hand to avoid some of the potentially violent effects including free prior and informed consent and assistance to civil society to improve the governance of extractive industries, but also measures by the European Union to regulate the behaviour of European companies abroad, as recently done in the case of transparency requirements for mining companies.

A major issue in the following discussion crystallized in the question of who is responsible for creating sustainable conditions of raw material production for renewable energies. Here, the role of the governments in Africa was highlighted. While the state is seen as the one responsible that has direct influence on the design of trade relations, the discussion also pointed to the unbalanced power relations many African governments find themselves in. Relative short time spans and weak government institutions were aspects put forward undermining an effective role of oversight by the state.

Acknowledging these constraints, options for international regulations were debated and the point was made that national bodies in African countries alone were not able to exert enough leverage on corporations and other powerful actors. Still, the need for a capable and accepted institution was just as much a point of contention as the concrete form such an institution could take. The role of the European Union as a consumer government was emphasized by some, for its regulatory abilities are much higher than that of some African states. Beyond the state, the responsibility of corporations as well as the individual consumer was questioned. While it was argued that often corporations are the most important actors considering technology transfer and the provision of job opportunities, they were also criticized for not adhering to their own guidelines and taking advantage of poor governance in their host countries. The consumer was considered to have limited power, and at times overburdened with responsibility. Yet the process of rethinking one's own lifestyle and reflecting on possible ways to deal with the transformation is still ongoing. One of the first steps in achieving responsible supply chains of the renewable energies would be transparency. One means of acquiring that is to conduct studies on the global footprint of raw materials used in terms of ecological and social consequences.