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1. Introduction

During the C20-Summit in Hamburg on June 18/19 the local section of Friends of the Earth has organized a workshop with the title

“Can the polluter pays principle help to speed up the transformation to a sustainable world?”

The description of the workshop was:

While it is perfectly normal that I have to pay compensation to my neighbour if I damage his car, this principle is hardly in use for the Commons. The “cost shifting principle” is the core business model of many companies, the cost being shifted to the local community, to other countries, or to future generations. Most people find this unfair. This feeling might be a way to gain general support for the introduction of the polluter pays principle which is urgently needed in order to stay within the planetary boundaries

There was a short introduction into the topic (slides attached), afterwards a lively discussion took place.

2. Discussion

There was general consensus that the introduction of the polluter pays principle is indispensable for the transformation into a sustainable world.

There is no lack of scientific knowledge about the dangers of polluting the earth with CO₂, particulate matter (PM), or nitrous oxide.

In case of CO₂ there is a clear understanding what has to be done in order to keep the global warming below two degrees: Stop fossil subsidies immediately and ramp up CO₂ prices in a predictable and ambitious manner (IRE). But nothing happens. A good explanation is given by Giddins’ paradox. „It states that, since the dangers posed by global warming aren’t tangible, immediate or visible in the course of day to day life, however awesome they appear, many will sit on their hands and do nothing of a concrete nature about them. Yet waiting until they become visible and acute before taking serious action will, by definition, be too late.” (GID). As many people think that way politicians are not pressing for measures that will increase prices for most products.

The challenge is therefore to find narratives that are strong enough to create enough discomfort with people, so that they are in favour of measures to curb the pollution.

One narrative could be the number of deaths resulting from air pollution. A number of 22,000 premature deaths per year in Europe from coal alone was mentioned in the discussion. According to the European Environmental Agency almost half a million people per year die prematurely in Europe because of air pollution (EEA). One way forward – which might not work in all countries - is the close collaboration with lung doctors to make people aware of the issue.

One very promising way forward are schemes where prices are raised and the money collected is given back to people in a visible way, which means that they are reminded every month or every year that money is given back to them and that the money is not disappearing in the “system.

One example is the so called “Lenkungsabgabe” in Switzerland which is raised on fossil heating fuel and is evenly distributed back to all citizens. The amount charged is currently based on a price of 84 CHF per ton of CO₂ (LEN). Another example comes from Indonesia where the government has cut fossil fuel subsidies dramatically in 2015 and has used the money – to the advantage of everybody - in the health care system (IND).

When just CO₂ is in scope the system of collecting money and redistributing it to citizens is called “carbon fee and carbon dividend”. Many NGOs, e. g., www.citizensclimatelobby.org fight for this goal. But there is also support from circles outside the “usual suspects” (BAK).

Other contributions during the discussion:

- There is more or less a common understanding on how CO₂ should be priced, but there is less agreement on how other pollutants should be priced. There are prices for some pollutants published by the German Environmental Agency (UBA)
- Scarcity for resources, e. g. phosphorus, is not properly factored into the commodity prices
- What is the proper organisational level to address issues like CO₂ prices, worldwide, G20, EU, national?
- Can we somehow manage to put a stigma to polluters as it was successfully done with smokers or Greenpeace managed to do it with whale killers?
- What approach works in the individual countries? E. g, Germany is famous for its affection for the forest. It has worked in the 80s with “Waldsterben”, maybe it can work again.
- Many people have managed to minimize their ecological footprint in their private life, but are frequent flyers because of their job. What can be done to minimize these flights?
- Whenever it is proposed to raise prizes for certain goods many people see this as an assault to their personal freedom and cry “eco-dictatorship”. It should be clear to everybody that the freedom of one person ends where the freedom of another person is affected. In the end this means equal pollutions rights for everyone, but strictly limited by the earth’s carrying capacity.
- We should not only take the perspective of the Global North, but also consider the living conditions in the Global South, their standard of living must clearly go up.

There was a general consensus that a big transformation is needed. The current system is completely unsustainable. Although a better world sometimes looks far away, there is always hope. There was a referendum in Switzerland last year. The Green Party had called for the move to an ecological footprint of 1 in Switzerland by 2050. A respectable 36% were in favor nationwide, in one canton (Geneva) there was even a majority in favor of the proposal (SWI)

Let’s work to convince the missing 15%!

3. Sources

BAK – A plan including carbon fee, carbon dividend, and border tax adjustment proposed by a group of Republican politicians lead by James A. Baker III,
<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/07/science/a-conservative-climate-solution-republican-group-calls-for-carbon-tax.html>

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GID - Giddens, Anthony and Philip W. Sutton (Eds.). Sociology: Introductory Readings. Cambridge. Polity Press: 2010. p. 98.

IND - <https://www.iea.org/newsroom/energysnapshots/fossil-fuel-subsidies-in-indonesia-2005--2016.html>

IRE - [Executive Summary/Chapter [1/4]] of Perspectives for the energy transition – investment needs for a low-carbon energy system ©OECD/IEA and IRENA 2017, available under http://www.irena.org/DocumentDownloads/Publications/Perspectives_for_the_Energy_Transition_2017.pdf

LEN - [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lenkungsabgabe_\(Schweiz\)](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lenkungsabgabe_(Schweiz)) (Sorry, only in German)

SWI - Swiss Ballot Initiative on a green economy
<http://www.footprintnetwork.org/2016/09/26/switzerland-made-history-green-economy-vote/>

UBA - <https://www.umweltbundesamt.de/publikationen/environmental-costs-in-the-energy-transport-sectors>