Early Warning and Long Term Sustainability

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Key note speech

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Mrs. Lord Major of Bonn,
Dear Majors,
Distinguished Guests!

It is my pleasure to address this particular audience, both in my today's capacity as chair of the German Council for Sustainable Development and as someone who used to bear political responsibility as a former Member of the Federal Parliament, a Federal Minister and as a major of Frankfurt, one of the big cities in Germany.

At first glance, it seems a little bit odd to address this Conference on Early Warning with a speech about sustainability. Maybe, it even appears out-of-step to talk about intergenerative justice between generations when the primary concern of Early Warning is focussed on the question of how to get prepared for emergency responses. One is about long-term issues, the other one seems to be clearly releated to the immediate needs of the people.

And I want to be very clear on this point: My earnest and deepest respect goes to those men and women of the emergency response teams who are first on the scene when e.g. a tsunami translates into a human catastrophe. I shall not forget to mention my appreciation of the work of the people that saves lives and provides first aid to those suffering from a catastrophe.

Ladies and Gentlemen!

I would like to make a couple of points to you. They all come along one basic thesis. I am convinced that Early Warning and disaster control are linked to non-sustainable trends in our production and consumption patterns. Granted, there are natural disasters that are not manmade. Not each and every disaster can be tracked down to be of anthropogenic origin. But in one way or the other, the mere extent of damage they produce is often related to human settlement, to human behaviour, or the way we are provoking risks. We need to be building a

clearer understanding of this fact. I think the common agenda of early warning and sustainable development is somewhat hidden and needs to be discovered.

My first point is on experiences with early warning. In Germany, we have quite a tradition of early warning, more in a societal and not in a technical sense. As an example, let me refer to the German term “Waldsterben”, the forest-dy-off. During the 80ies, Waldsterben was a real buzzword. It claimed that the forest suffers from industrial air pollution. And it predicted that the woods are doomed to dy off and disappear. And indeed, at that time the air was heavily contaminated with sulphur, ozon and nitrogen – and with respect to some other pollutants it still is today.

The ecologic impact of airborne pollutants triggered serious pollution control measures. In some areas hundreds of hectares of forest were being almost completely deteriorated. But in general, Waldsterben turned out to be an exaggeration. However, as an early warning item it served the purpose. This, of course, was no rational political decision process. It rather was a public controversial debate loaded with emotions and ideologies – to some extent it still is.

In any case, the Waldsterben gives us a good example for lessons learnt:

Any „early warning“ has to rely on scientific evidence. Political exaggeration or the media hyper-reacting is bad. Constantly crying ‘wolf’ and other ‘gloom and doom’ messages is no responsible attitude. In the long run this kind of messages may even counteract its purpose. But, in the case of Waldsterben, it would have been much worse if the warning had turned out to be right.

Science is very important, but even scientists do not know everything. When we have to assess the relevance of phenomena that might or might not develop into a disaster, we experience science as „work in progress“. That was the case with the mad cow disease and, today, it obviously is the case with the limited knowledge about the bird flu and the possibility of a pandemic. Everyday we find ourselves surprised by some new information. What one day was delivered as state-of-the-art knowledge almost certainly gets overthrown by new evidence on the other day.

There is one major lesson for the way we are dealing with warnings – be it early or even not so early warnings: Credibility comes with a reliable communication of evidence. Evidence is credible when it conveys a sense of urgency without crying wolf.

Ladies and Gentlemen!

My second point is on one of the most general and the most important Early Warning issues, the climate change.

It is often said that the climate change is an experiment with the planet earth. What is worse is that this kind of experiment is different. However, an experiment can be repeated as often as one might want to do so. With climate change, this is different. We have only one try.

The hurricane Katrina was both: a real time early warning and proof of global warming. Katrina was predicted and with unforeseeable social consequences, it was more expensive than calculated, and it displayed a message from the future: Indirect costs of energy supply will outscore direct costs.

There is no way to know exactly whether the calculations on the oil peak are right. But, basically, it does not matter whether the oil peak is calculated to happen 2010 or 2020. With oil prices booming our way of using up oil energies will sure come to the end, anyway.

Both the evidence of Katrina and the peak oil demonstrate the potentially devastating character of the impacts of climate change. This is no far-fetched prediction of gloom and doom. This is what raises the concern of major corporations that are used to think business cases along long term developments:

- The global mean sea-level rose by 1-2mm annually in the 20th century. It will continue to rise by as much as 6 m by 2150.

- In the US alone, protecting coastal property from the combined effects of erosion and inundation due to sea level rise could cost anywhere from $100 billion to $300 billion.

- A five-fold increase in extreme rainfall events is expected by 2050.

- Climate change could place up to 35 percent of the world's species at risk of extinction by 2050.

- Any success in poverty reduction and the achievement of the UN - Millenium Development Goals are at risk.

Immediate effects of natural disasters are a real threat to the growing world population. In 2005, more than 20.000 insurance incidents have been registered. GDP losses have peaked out to 165 billion USD.

If emissions are not curbed, warming trends will accelerate further. But only a few EU Member States did fulfil their emission reduction commitments. The Kyoto Protocol falls significantly short of what we will need over the next half century if we are to tackle this problem seriously and properly. We need a clearer understanding of how climate change and domestic demographic trends challenge sustainability efforts. As for Kyoto we have to clearly communicate the fact that even with Kyoto we are still a long way short of what we actually need to do.

Instead, what we are seeing is this: Countries are investing serious money into what they call "sea defense". 40 per cent of the English and Welsh industrial facilities are situated on the shore line. Around 15 000 km of European shore line are labelled as being at risk. The economic value that stands at risk is huge. Within 500 meters on the European shore line, public and private real estate property is calculated to reach up to 1 billion of Euros. No one can imagine the political impacts of such an economic degradation.

What do these figures tell us?

- First, they tell us the story of an early warning that is available to everyone, and, nonetheless, is neglected.
- Secondly, these figures change the equation. Before, climate change seemed to be only a tricky computing play. Now it is serious business.

To put it pretty bold: The warming is the warning. We need a re-globalization that is sustainable. We need to go for clean energies. A seamless energy grid that provides easy access to everyone is needed. Infrastructure is key to sustain transportation and communication challenges in the future.

Countries of the North continue to shift non-sustainable consumption and production patterns on the next generation as well as on people living in other parts of the world neglecting that the poor are especially vulnerable. Not only that they are directly dependent on the natural capital. Most of them are forced to live in areas that are especially exposed to risks. They rarely have access to early warning communicating infrastructure. Therefore, I do really appreciate the effort of this Conference.

Ladies and Gentlemen!

There is one last point I would like to make to you. That one is about the way we keep using the term Nachhaltigkeit, sustainability.

In my mind, mainstream political thinking does not respond properly to the challenge of sustainability. Sure, there is no lack of often big-mouthed declarations that promise to save the world, but there is a lack of action. Even where there are proper actions under way, they often are fragmented, or they stand alone. The same might be the fact with some efforts for early warning. As long as they come as a one-point-solution to a one-issue-challenge, they probably do not deliver as much as they could. We need to place them into the strategy of sustainable development.

Frankly, we are in deep need of a rigorous communication strategy to address the challenge of a not non-sustainable globalization. We are in deep need of more leadership, more visibility, more effectiveness, and more action delivered. This is not only about morality. If taken seriously, the return on moral would outscore any of the current efforts to increase competitiveness. The real challenge for competitiveness is spelled sustainability.

We need quantitative objectives and indicators. One can not manage anything without being able to measure it. Take the example of energy policy. In Germany, a range of ambitious approaches by national, state and local governments and industry, including major investments to improve building materials and modernise energy supply, have been instrumental in contributing to a significant proportion of the emissions reductions achieved. But we still miss quantified targets and timetables for a sustainable energy road map.

It is particularly striking that the German energy policy is missing the point. Our economy is more involved in global markets than any other national economy. So, I would expect

Germany to play a key role in introducing clean energy technologies that have the potential to make a difference on the global level of energy supply. Germany has to replace power plants by orders of magnitude. Thus, the leapfrogging towards clean fossil fuel energies and – I am deeply convinced – “clean coal” is one of the major issues of Germany’s energy policy in the future.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I do not have the slightest doubt: Sustainability is an uphill battle, as is the political effort to decrease and manage the disaster impacts. Engagement towards sustainability is engagement against vested interests. Sustainable policies have to deal with changing production and consumption patterns. To be honest: The majority of people still perceive unsustainable trends e.g. of consumption or mobility as their vested interests. That is true. We are up against a world of powerful interests.

But, there always is a “but”.

If you take, on the one hand side, all our knowledge about future hazards, disasters and risks; and if you balance this with cultural values, windows of possibilities, innovative thinking and pioneering on the other side – then, the huge effort to bring these two sides together can be boiled down to a single word, sustainability is it.

Sure, we must not overpromise people. No instant success can be awaited. No killer application is about to solve all problems at once. Sustainability is a long-lasting issue.

But anyway, I am realistically optimistic because of two reasons.

The first goes back to the years of the Brundtland Commission, the UN World Commission on Environment and Development chaired by the then-Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland in which I had the honour to be a member. We were the first to introduce the concept of sustainability to the broader audience of international politics. In 1987, our report recommended among others an action that was first seen rather marginal. We asked the World Leaders to meet and discuss the idea of sustainability. This meeting took place in Rio de Janeiro 1992 and was repeated in Johannesburg 2002. I would not have dreamt what huge amount of activities and progress we triggered with this idea.

My second reason refers to a recent project of the German Council for Sustainable Development and the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ). The project was an international dialogue on sustainability and growth. We invited representatives from Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South-Africa as the emerging economies. The project is called BRICS+G – a dialogue on sustainability and growth.

It was amazing to learn that the instrument of sustainability strategies is a well shaped political tool in these countries. We found high-ranking officials that shared their experiences and views with us. And, of course, BRICS+G produced some messages to stay here in Germany: E.g., we are asked to take more responsibility in developing sustainable solutions for decoupling economic growth from resource depletion. Also, it is increasingly becoming clear that industrialized countries will be challenged by the emerging economies, economically, ecologically and politically as well. We need to reconsider our research efforts and cooperation approaches with respect to emerging economies. This might turn out as an enormous benefit for both our economy and our culture.

With this, I thank you for your attention.