

Economist SD Debate – Prof Dr Annette Schavan

<http://www.economist.com/debate/days/view/346>

July 2009

One thing that modern science and modern politics have in common is the fact that their actions are measured by their sustainability. However, it tends to be all too easy today to ignore issues that will only become relevant in the distant future. After all, the concerns of the present exert such a dominant influence over our public debates that it is often difficult to fulfil our responsibility towards the future.

As early as 1979, Hans Jonas, in his book "The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age", wrote: "No previous ethics had to consider the global condition of human life and the far-off future, even existence, of the race."

It is our responsibility to give this far-off future a voice. In other words, we need to give a voice to the sense of responsibility that forms the basis for achieving sustainability. Science has a special responsibility towards the future, especially when there is the chance that the future may be neglected in favour of the pressure of present concerns. Science and research need to find their place as part of the intellectual culture of a society that values the future. This is most likely to succeed if science does not merely promote acceptance of the new, but actually articulates a sense of responsibility.

Mr Jonas turned this principle of responsibility into a moral imperative: "Act so that the effects of your action are compatible with the permanence of genuine human life", and "In your present choices, include the future wholeness of Man among the objects of your will."

I firmly believe that the current economic situation, in which we have learned how problematic it is to focus exclusively on short-term results, offers an excellent opportunity to reconsider the value of a more long-term perspective. The time of science has come. It needs to make it clear that the ethics of science demands responsibility towards the far-off future and towards the global condition of human life.

All our political decisions, scientific work and economic activities need to be based on the principle of sustainability. Our guiding principle should not be short-term profits, but sustainable prosperity, the long-term availability of resources and the creation of global conditions that give as many people as possible an opportunity to participate in society.

At the 1992 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro, the United Nations passed a global action programme, thus committing itself to the principle of sustainable development. Each of the more than 170 signatory states of "Agenda 21" agreed to implement this principle at a national level in all areas of politics, with the participation of society and industry. Germany was one of the signatories. In 2002, it presented the strategy "Perspectives for Germany". The current government under Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel has continuously developed the National Strategy for Sustainable Development. This strategy is our guideline for comprehensive future-oriented policies. Our aim is to take on general responsibility for achieving economically, ecologically and socially sustainable development for all generations, everywhere in the world.

Based on its leading role in sustainability research, Germany has a special responsibility to develop and implement technologically sophisticated and ecologically acceptable future perspectives in cooperation with rapidly developing regions in Asia, Latin America and Africa. The loss of biodiversity, energy supply problems, the shortage of resources and climate change as well as the social consequences of these developments are challenges that are very closely linked to each other, both at a local and a global level. That is why we need an integrated conceptual research approach that takes economic, ecological and social aspects into account in equal measure to ensure that one problem is not solved at the expense of another. Any such approach needs to be guided by the principle of sustainability.

As an innovative research country, Germany wants to take on responsibility for meeting the challenges of global sustainability.

The Federal Ministry for Education and Research's first "Research for Sustainability" Framework Programme was launched in 2004 for a duration of five years. In the last five years, we have funded more than a thousand projects on the subject of sustainability. We have been spending approximately 160m euros on sustainability research every year.

After five years of "Research for Sustainability", Germany is now the world leader in this area and holds the pole position in the global race for the best ideas. We have consistently pursued the aim of addressing politically relevant questions by means of challenging inter- and cross-disciplinary projects. The "Research for Sustainability" Framework Programme has become a model across Europe. In 2006, the European Commission picked up on Germany's request to focus on inter- and cross-disciplinary research, not least in its renewed strategy for sustainable development. This has reaffirmed our belief that we are on the right track.

We plan to continue in our pioneering role with the new framework programme which we are about to launch. Based on our experience with previous programmes, we have decided to pursue four basic approaches: We will focus on the subjects of climate, energy and resources. We will combine basic research and applied research. We will continue to look into social and cultural developments with the help of cross- and interdisciplinary research concepts. And finally, we will strengthen international networking in research and increase our cooperation with developing and emerging economies in particular.

International research alliances have to be geared towards the needs of these countries, to strengthening local competences and improving local infrastructures. This is certainly not a one-way street. There are a large number of highly qualified scientists in these countries who have their own ideas and views about sustainable development. An action that appears sustainable (or irresponsible) to the average European can be viewed completely differently by a citizen of the developing world. An exchange of views can turn such differences into new ideas and approaches and open up new markets for innovations. That is why we have been working together with countries such as China, India and Brazil for many years now. We want to intensify these positive experiences and transfer them to partnerships with other countries in the southern hemisphere.

We will profit from this ourselves. After all, sustainability enables growth. The high value placed on environmental friendliness in Germany has turned out to be an effective driver of innovation. In Germany, approximately 1.8m people are employed in the area of environmental protection, which is an aspect of sustainability. Since 2004, we have been the global leader in the export of environmental protection goods. The areas of environmentally-friendly energy generation, renewable energy and energy efficiency have experienced particularly strong growth in recent years.

The innovation potential of sustainability pays off: Companies that use more efficient processes and consume fewer resources can not just pride themselves on their sustainability, but can also offer their products at lower prices on the global market.

Sustainability provides guidance and solutions to help meet urgent challenges, it encourages creativity and innovative strength, it opens up new markets, it helps cross boundaries between nations, disciplines and generations, and it offers long-term incentives and visions for political and entrepreneurial action. There is simply no alternative to sustainability.