



The whole world is watching Germany

Former German Environment Minister Klaus Töpfer in interview with KAS.de

contact:

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung

Japan Office

Project Coordinator

Thomas Yoshimura

Tel +81 3 6426 5045

Fax +81 3 6426 5047

KAS-Tokyo@kas.de

www.kas.de/japan/en

www.facebook.com/KAS.Japan

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Die ganze Welt blickt
auf Deutschland

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He has served both as German Environment Minister and Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), and he is now the Founding Director of the Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies (IASS) in Potsdam. Today Prof. Klaus Töpfer turns 75. When I called him for a phone interview, he looked back at his life in politics, discussed worldwide climate targets, and expressed his views on Germany's switch to renewable energy sources.

Prof. Töpfer, you're 75 years old, but you don't seem to have lost any of your vigour. You always have a packed schedule. What motivates you to keep up all your hard work on environmental issues?

You have to tell yourself again and again that it's not just the vanity of old age that makes you continue to believe that something can still be done. No, I believe that it is very, very important that Germany advances the development of how to provide energy for a world of nine billion people and use this energy as a basis for economic stability and wealth creation. This issue needs to be placed centre stage. We now have a wonderful opportunity to contribute all that's been learnt at international level within the United Nations to the work currently being done here in Germany – work that's taking blood, sweat and tears, I believe, but also having a great deal of success.

For decades, you played a substantial role yourself in shaping the debate on environmental policy within the Christian Democratic Union. How much importance is the topic given in politics today?

Everyone today should be able to see that no concern could be more conservative than protecting creation. That's what we're talking about here. We don't need to ask what we are getting out of a certain animal or plant species or another – we need to view respect for creation as a basic tenet of conservatism and Christianity. This is what brought me to the CDU. This is why, to this day, I believe we urgently need to pass on the message to young people that it's not all about generating material wealth, it's also – and most importantly – about keeping the world habitable for nine billion people. And I believe that it would be fatal for a party like the CDU, a party that is conservative in the best sense of the word and sees itself as particularly committed to Christian values, not to concern itself with protecting creation.

In 2011, Germany – an industrial nation – made the decision to phase out nuclear power and gradually make the switch to renewable energy sources. What would you say are currently the greatest challenges facing the switch to renewables in Germany?

The challenges relate to the fact that there are always going to be difficulties in shifting from one large-scale technology to another. Persistence with the old technologies, whose proponents give convincing justifications, jostles uncomfortably next to the new opportunities, which we need for the sake of humanity and the world as a whole. That's why it is crucial that we now see to the sensible further development of the Renewable Energy Act and that we continue to drive forward what this law and its predecessor, the Electricity Feed-in Act, have achieved over the past years and decades. And I am proud that this first act was formed while I was Environment Minister. We need to make it clear that there is a new dimension to the renewables debate. The technologies have overcome all the obstacles and now have a determining influence on the electricity market. Now we must ensure we do not rest on our laurels. We urgently need to amend the Renewable Energy Act and bring in more elements of competition. We also need to keep asking ourselves which deserving technologies we should continue to subsidise, directly or indirectly. What is the current state



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of offshore wind power, and of solar power in the quantities we are now producing? There is still a lot that needs to be implemented, but one thing is clear: the technology for harvesting solar and wind energy is all there. We now harvest almost 30 gigawatts of solar energy on sunny days – so much that we sometimes have to export great quantities at low prices. So, technologically, we're there. And many new technologies are being developed, for example for energy storage and transportation, such as power-to-gas systems that allow electricity to be transformed into gas and then transported more easily. The benefits of decentralisation have become clear, and many ordinary people are taking advantage of them – the 700 energy cooperatives that exist are a testament to this. All of this is in place; now we need to send the political signal that we are using our past success as a yardstick and a basis for shaping the future. The switch to renewables represents a great political challenge, and we have to make sure that it is implemented successfully because the whole world is watching what Germany does with great interest and looking to see if there's anything we don't manage.

You mention the eyes of the world being on Germany – the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung recently commissioned a study that revealed that the newly industrialised countries Brazil, China and South Africa see the German switch to renewables in a positive light, despite the high costs, and want to learn from Germany's experiences. What influence can Germany have on developing countries?

We can have a crucial influence on peaceful development in this world. If UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon wants to set a target to ensure a sustainable energy supply for everyone by 2030, then we must succeed. We will not reach this target by using fossil fuels such as coal, oil and gas, or with nuclear power. We can only achieve this by developing decentralised energy technologies that can be obtained economically all over the world. This is the duty of a technological leader like Germany. It is the duty of a country that has managed to weather the crisis and maintain stability thanks to clever politics and clever economic strategies. Technological leadership and economic stability are the conditions needed to foster the breakthrough of new technologies. This is our duty, this is what is expected of us abroad, and that's why I must approve it. I am often in China and Africa, and everywhere I go I am told "You must continue, you must persevere, you must help us get to a position where we can also use new energy technologies for the coming century." If we succeed in that, then we have really made a contribution towards keeping the peace on a planet of nine billion people.

When we think about a global population of nine billion, then surely we have to acknowledge that Germany, while it may be big for Europe, is at most a medium-sized power in comparison with big energy consumers like China and the United States. This raises the question of what role we can expect Germany to play in environmental and climate policy within the European Union and, in particular, globally.

You're absolutely right; this is a very important question. I have always been a gifted pub goer - I like sitting at the bar and chatting with the people there. I live in Höxter in North Rhine-Westphalia, where I initially came as a refugee and have now been made an honorary citizen. As you can imagine, this honour has meant more to me, emotionally, than any other. And when I'm at the pub my old friends say to me: "Hey Klaus, you're doing this here in Germany, a country with 900 hours of sunshine a year that contributes four percent of the world's total carbon dioxide emissions. Even if we eradicate all emissions, the Chinese will balance that out in half a year." And then I have to ask myself: Is that what this is about? No, it's not. While it is, of course, our duty to demonstrate at home in Germany that wealth and economic stability can be obtained with fewer carbon dioxide emissions, we also need to develop the technologies that other countries urgently need for their economic development. Poverty first and foremost means energy poverty. If we want to overcome poverty in this world, then we have to find solutions in the form of energy sources that allow other nations to make economic progress without destroying the stability of ecosystems and the world as a whole. That is my answer. Germany can and must lead in this. This is a fantastic opportunity – and incidentally something that we have already shown we are successful in doing time and time again. Back when we began to desulphurise coal power plants, everyone was saying the Germans were crazy. Today, desulphurisation technology is used globally as a matter of course. Without it, the negative impact of sulphur emissions would have already spiralled out of control in China. The same goes for nitrous gases and the treatment of particle emissions. We have the blue sky over the Ruhr to show for it – we have solved our air pollution problems and shown many other countries the technological solutions they urgently need in order to do the same. So a country like Germany has the great responsibility of demonstrating that a certain lifestyle and level of technological progress can be achieved that also allows other countries to acquire wealth and that does not come at the cost of global stability or of creation.

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You can look back at decades of working in environmental policy – perhaps we can finish by venturing a look into the future. In your opinion, how will Germany, Europe and perhaps even the world source its energy in the year 2050?

I think that the trend towards what we know as renewable energies is unstoppable. They are the future. The odd country may continue to use other technologies like fossil fuels or nuclear power for a while, but it is quite clear that development will continue in the direction of renewables. But it's not a closed area – we will live to see new renewable energies. Why should our children and grandchildren not be just as clever, if not cleverer, than us and find better ways than those currently available to make use of, for example, the energy from waves at sea? We can see that what we are doing in Germany, with the switch to renewables, is inspiring a cornucopia of new technologies. New storage technologies are being developed – right now there is talk in the media about using concrete spheres on the sea floor to store energy. Plus, there's the idea that we could transform electricity into gas – all thoughts that no one had previously had. So renewable energies will play a dominant role in our future, and they will be even more efficient, with better technologies for storage, transmission and end use. There are many, many things still to be invented, and there are also a lot of inventions that still need to actually be implemented in our daily lives.