EUROPE 27.09.2019 | Kai Niebert

The climate crisis cannot be solved by capitalism

To fulfil the Paris Agreement, Germany's climate policies need to look beyond market-based strategies

Read this article in German.

It's time to get tough – that's how Chancellor Angela Merkel set the tone for Germany's climate policies in 2019. But the question remains: will the federal government manage to reduce emissions in line with its international obligations andhelp to end the climate crisis?

Warnings from government figures are coming thick and fast: Merkel calls the climate crisis a 'challenge to humanity', Vice-chancellor Olaf Scholz calls for 'forceful steps', and the Bavarian MP and environmental convert Markus Söder describes inadequate climate protection as 'a sin'. The grand coalition's rhetoric says: we've seen the light. Yet Germany risks ending up with small steps rather than *powerful* climate politics: the measures discussed so far are nowhere near enough to get a grip on the climate crisis, let alone meet our obligations under the Paris Agreement.

The problem is that the climate never forgets. Past failings eventually have consequences. Those who think the climate-change clock says five to midnight are wrong. Five to midnight was around 20 years ago. Today, man-made climate change is a harsh reality: temperatures have already risen by more than one degree, and record-breaking heatwaves are commonplace.

A business plan for climate protection

To have any chance at all of making real headway with the climate crisis, the government must ensure this autumn that it reaches the climate protection target set for 2020 as quickly as possible by cutting CO2 emissions by 40 per cent compared with 1990. Postponing this by several years, as looks likely to happen, is unacceptable and will not wash with the public. Fridays for Future was not the only group that took to the streets in their hundreds of thousands on 20 September; Scientists,

Parents, Entrepreneurs, Educators, Artists, Lawyers etc. for Future joined in.

But what will it take for the German federal government to stop losing its credibility among the public?

Firstly: if the government were the Management Board of Germany Inc, it would have lost a vote of confidence long ago. Any company that needs new credit must present a business plan and annual financial statements. It must say where it wants to go and how it intends to get there. There is no doubt where the German federal government wants to go: the climate targets for 2030 are set in stone, even though they are not enough for Paris.

What is needed now is a business plan for climate protection, a secure road map through to 2030, that ensures we can reach the climate targets and clearly assigns responsibilities to the relevant sectors. For structural change in particular, the work of the so-called 'Coal Commission' has shown how important planning capability is to people in the country, to companies and to the regions. Without a business plan for climate protection, there is a huge risk that chaotic activity will lead to a structural meltdown. That is why employers, companies and regions need a climate protection act with strict sector and annual targets. This is the only way to ensure reliability and planning capability.

100 per cent renewables

Secondly: how CO2 is reduced makes no difference to the climate or the people in the country. Disincentives clearly need to be rectified immediately: it is absurd for high taxes to be imposed on the future's greenest energy source – electricity – while CO2 emissions remain free of charge, at least in buildings and in the transport sector. So it has to be clear: in 2030, CO2 must be subject to a price that covers the damage it causes today – €180 per tonne. Yet it is also clear that the way there must be reliable and foreseeable so that everyone knows now what surcharges they will have to pay on petrol or heating oil in 2020, 2025 and 2030. The German Coal Commission has clearly pointed out that we should not abandon climate protection to capitalism. Those who aim to manage climate protection through CO2 pricing alone and force people to become green by hitting them in the wallet are putting social cohesion at risk.

What we need is effective measures, right now.

Thirdly: the papers published so far by the core bodies of the German conservatives paint a clear picture. Climate protection should not hurt

Political gestures have had their day.

anyone. Incentive programmes should provide handouts, for instance to promote electric mobility and install new heating systems. That's fine. – Well, almost. Because incentives are pointless unless they put paid to technologies that harm the environment. The German Renewable Energy Sources Act (EEG) recently showed this. Although incentive programmes have seen renewable energies flourish, emissions have not fallen accordingly, as no-one has pulled the plug on fossil-fuel power stations. Consequently, an effective climate protection act must set clear guiding principles: a mix of incentive programmes to build up the infrastructure of tomorrow along with effective regulations for dismantling the fossil-fuel infrastructure. History shows that incentive programmes have not restored blue skies over the Ruhr or shrunk the hole in the ozone layer. Results have always been achieved when politicians have set guiding principles.

Fourthly: the transition towards 100 per cent renewable energy must finally be put back on track. Only then can Germany become a green industrial nation and reconcile good jobs with unspoilt nature. Therefore, an effective climate protection act must significantly accelerate and prescribe the environmentally sound expansion of renewables and grids: the cap on expansion of wind and solar power, compulsory tendering for onshore wind and the utterly excessive blanket distance regulations for wind farms must be abolished and grid expansion accelerated. By the time Ursula von der Leyen delivers on her announcement and raises the EU climate targets, Germany must commit to sourcing at least 75 per cent of its energy from renewables by 2030.

Action now!

After all, climate protection doesn't come for free. In its study 'Klimapfade für Deutschland', the Federation of German Industries (BDI) points out that full decarbonisation costs around €30bn. Per year. If that sounds high, well, it is. But the money is there. We just need to redirect it. The German federal government spends a total of €57bn each year on environmentally harmful subsidies that maintain the fossil world and damage the environment and climate. The three most environmentally harmful subsidies in Germany are the diesel discount, the tax exemption for kerosene and the commuter allowance. At the

same time, bridges are increasingly falling into disrepair, track and trains are coming off the rails and cyclists are dodging potholes. That is why an effective climate protection act modifies environmentally harmful subsidies and makes them green instead of abolishing them.

The state has a duty to protect its citizens. The statistics are clear: ten of the twelve records for unusually hot months were set in the past 30 years. There have been no cold-weather records for over 60 years – the last one stems from February 1956. It is the state's duty to do everything in its power to reduce the dangers to its citizens. The measures put forward so far are not enough to stop warming at 1.5 degrees or to achieve the much less ambitious climate protection target of the German federal government. Shifting the whole burden of climate protection to a legally uncertain emissions trading system that will be ineffective in the next few years is cynical as it will only bear fruit – if at all – when none of the current members of the government are in power.

What we need is effective measures, right now. Political gestures have had their day. All we can do now is appeal to the coalition: start to get real about climate protection. Have the guts to govern!



Kai Niebert
Zurich

Prof Dr Kai Niebert is a researcher on sustainability at the University of Zurich and President of the German Nature Conservation Union, the umbrella organisation of the German nature, environment and animal welfare associations.