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Germany-Senegal gas plans: New potential for modernisation

Critics of the two countries' gas cooperation fail to recognise that the revenues from the sales would be essential for the Senegalese population

In Senegal, over 70 per cent of the population still has no access to electricity. This is one of the reasons why the country wants to begin the exploitation of offshore oil and gas fields by the end of 2023. Following his visit to Senegal at the end of May 2022, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz announced that cooperation in the field of natural gas production would be conceivable. This announcement led to heated debates – in public reporting, among activists and among members of Germany's Green coalition partner. There is an urgent need to bring a different perspective to the debate. Senegal is my home country: I was born there in 1961 in Marsassoum, a small village in Casamance. It wasn't until I was in my mid-20s that I left the country to study in what was then the German Democratic Republic (GDR).

Today, Senegal is an exception among its neighbouring countries, some of which have been shaken by crises and wars for decades. While peace and democracy prevail, every year, thousands set out to find a better life in Europe. Those who leave do not do so out of boredom but out of existential need. This should not be ignored when discussing the promotion of gas projects in Senegal these days. In the last few decades, little has changed in the area of energy technology. Chic hotels, modern residential complexes and small villages still cook with firewood, charcoal or plant residues. In Senegal, 58 per cent of the urban population and 86 per cent of the rural population are still using this form of biomass for cooking and heating. The alternative is gas from gas cylinders, available on street corners. It is becoming clear that a transition to renewable energies is necessary – but not feasible for at least the next few years. The country's use of renewable energies is already over 20 per cent. However, the necessary infrastructure for expansion beyond this does not exist. Therefore, should Senegal forgo modernisation because we are telling the country that from now on it is allowed to have only renewable energies at its disposal?

A matter of social and economic justice

Senegal has good reasons to modernise. The government hopes to use the revenues from gas to invest in infrastructure, namely transport, electrification, health and education. Above all, the nationwide power supply is an economic policy priority of the government. This is a matter of social and economic justice in the country. In addition, the government's gas production project is particularly beneficial for women, because Senegal is still dominated by a traditional distribution of gender roles. Women take care of the cooking and procuring of firewood. However, heating and cooking with firewood represents an extreme health hazard and is also harmful to the environment. In terms of a feminist foreign and development policy, which Germany's government has committed itself to, the promotion of alternatives must be encouraged.

Senegal's youth could also benefit from the envisioned gas production. People under the age of 19 account for 50 per cent of the population – a fact that actually presents an enormous potential for the country. Without future opportunities, however, young people are a powder keg. The discontent of the people in rural areas and their lack of resources is a major instability factor for the country in the long run. From a geopolitical perspective, especially in view of Germany's engagement in Niger and Mali, it is of great importance that Senegal remain an anchor of stability for West Africa. If unrest were to break out there, this could result in dramatic spillover effects for the entire region.

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Many aspects of the planned energy cooperation between Germany and Senegal have been misunderstood. No, Germany is not using tax money to invest in gas exploration. The gas fields are already in place. Germany would only be one of the buyers. And given the global energy shortage, Senegal would be a more reliable partner than Qatar or Kazakhstan.

Critics from Germany and Europe refer in particular to the social and ecological risks of the project and the situation for local fishermen. From my discussions with climate activists, government representatives and the business community, I have learned that most of the critics from Senegal are not bringing forward any fundamental arguments against gas production. More to the point, they are urging that there be transparency in the marketing of gas sources and that the population should clearly benefit from it. This demand must be supported.

Finding a compromise

However, the critics clearly fail to recognise one thing: the revenues from the gas sales would be essential for the Senegalese population. One way or another, Senegal will end up seizing this opportunity and produce and sell its gas. Wouldn't Germany be a responsible buyer who could support the use of the income in a targeted way? Direct investments in the expansion of renewable energies for the future and the associated necessary infrastructure, in the sense of a Just Energy Transition Partnership, would be conceivable. On the other hand, Senegal would have a reliable partner at its side who – in contrast to other countries – does not see the country purely as an exporter of raw materials but backs the promotion of sustainable local jobs and added value.

Can we seriously dictate to countries of the Global South that Western prosperity remains a beautiful but unattainable dream?

Political work always consists of compromises. There are no simple answers. The situation in Senegal is too complex for that. In order to reach an agreement, compromises need to be made by both sides. Germany can only agree to a deal if the Senegalese side agrees to gas production as a bridging technology to promote renewable energies.

For their part, the critics must acknowledge that the desire and need for modernisation have reached the African continent as well. In Germany, there is constant talk of 'partnership at eye level'. However, this is completely absent from this debate. Partnership on an equal footing means that the concerns and needs of the people are taken seriously in Germany. We cannot dictate to countries what they can and cannot do. We live in an interconnected world: social media enables us to participate in the lives of other people. Consequently, all people aspire to the standard of living that has long prevailed in industrialised countries. In addition, the prosperity of many Western countries is based on imperialism and the exploitation of the African continent. Can we seriously dictate to countries of the Global South that Western prosperity remains a beautiful but unattainable dream?



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