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Low Resource lifestyles and economies

Vision and measures in core fields of action

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Office:
German Environment Agency
Section I 1.1 (Dr. Alexandra Lindenthal)
PO 14 06
06844 Dessau-Roßlau
Phone: +49 340-2103-0
Email: ressourcenkommission@uba.de
Internet: www.umweltbundesamt.de

www.facebook.com/umweltbundesamt.de
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Low Resource lifestyles and economies – Vision and measures in core fields of action

It is the aim of the Resources Commission at the German Environment Agency (KRU) to advise the German Environment Agency on its resource policy strategy. As a first step, the Commission undertook a review which was published in June 2014. This review represents the starting point for the work going forward as well as an outlook on the thematic areas to be addressed.

The wide-ranging debate on resource policy led to the key question as to the primary objective to be pursued. From this, the Commission concluded that the task is to jointly develop a vision of a low resource society ('the vision'). The vision is to render more tangible the different future scenarios, both within the KRU itself and for society and the policy arena.

The overall questions for vision development were as follows:

- What does a low resource society look like?
- What does this mean for daily life, for economic activity, and in terms of the required structures?

These questions were addressed intensively during a two-day 'future workshop' (*Zukunftswerkstatt*) in March 2015. The following short text summarises the main results for the following areas

- Ethical framework
- Research and Development (R&D)
- Role of the state
- Economy and finance.

For each area, a focused vision for the status of a successful low resource society is set out, and measures are listed that would safeguard this status or that could potentially bring about this status.

A two-day future workshop and its results cannot claim to be exhaustive in nature. However, it gives an insight into what the members of the KRU deem to be of priority relevance to the design of a low resource society and focuses on significant elements of a required dynamic societal transition.

A vision with a horizon of thirty years or more may appear provocative. It does however clarify concrete ideas that the authors consider possible, favourable or desirable. These will now be presented for discussion.

1. Ethical framework

Vision
A multitude of successful resource-saving models for living and working are in place. Their power of innovation and creativity allow for compatibility of time patterns within and between the natural environment, society and the economy. Time sequences and time structures for exchange processes and regeneration within and between geological and ecological systems, the economy, civil society, education, politics etc. vary considerably. Their needs and requirements are observed and integrated. Sustainability communication has become professionalised to such a degree that it emotionally reaches different target groups and cultures of thinking. It motivates citizens to try out new resource-saving forms of living and working.

Tangible measures
The aim is to design a low resource society. A diversity of models for living and doing business that contribute to resource conservation is desired. Barriers, such as "lock-ins" in existing systems, or counterproductive subsidies and laws are removed by the public sector in compliance with fundamental societal values. Innovations with regard to the organisation of life and work will be supported, for example, by the following measures:

- Social security systems will be integrated and give citizens the opportunity of more flexible time management.
- Greater amounts of risk capital are available for innovations with regard to low resource living and working, e.g. through crowdfunding and support programmes.
- Centres offering innovation advisory services to citizens will be established at the regional level.
- Educational systems integrate knowledge on measures aimed at achieving a low resource society and convey useful competencies and experiences with regard to all age groups (with a focus on experiential learning).
- Communication measures in all media explain approaches of resource conservation in a transparent, target-specific and authentic manner that invite citizens to participate and co-design new concepts.

2. Research and development

Vision

Research and development (R&D) integrate topics and questions of societal and practical relevance and cooperate with relevant and affected actors while maintaining high scientific quality. Citizens as well as small and medium enterprises participate in R&D processes and co-design social and technical innovations. Through intelligent knowledge and information management, research contributes to raising resource productivity by orders of magnitude. Fundamental research continues to be carried out independently. Actors in research and development are being encouraged to take into consideration the conservation of resources and the common good.

Tangible measures

- For guidance, 'future radar' processes (vision, foresight, scenario processes) will be conducted in a disciplinary, interdisciplinary and/or transdisciplinary manner in a multilevel system, i.e. from the level of the municipality to the international level.
- Every publicly funded R&D project must provide evidence of the contribution it will make to resource conservation. In the area of fundamental research this is taken to mean a prospective contribution while in the area of applied research there is to be a goals and results orientation in this regard.
- Research and development activities in schools and urban quarters will be supported (citizen science, citizen design).

3. The role of the state[1]

Vision

Resource conservation as a component of the sustainable development strategy has constitutional status. Resources must be protected and ecosystem services must be safeguarded for the long-term.
Germany has contributed to a global stabilisation of resource consumption. Resource equity has been achieved.

Tangible measures

- The state assumes the role of a facilitator and catalyst for innovation in environmental policy and resource conservation:
  - Creation of innovation infrastructure, including experimental settings;
  - Adaptation of innovation policy in order to promote resource-conserving innovations;
  - Integration of resource efficiency into education policies and programmes.
- Resource policy sets out resource targets in accordance with the precautionary principle and, applying taxes on resources and other instruments, strives for the internalisation of external costs in accordance with the principle of origin and the polluter pays principle.
- Resource-political instruments are designed to be socially equitable.
- Resource conservation legislation has been established and contains the following elements:
  - Statements of principles of resource conservation;
  - Establishment of an independent institution for resource regulation:
    - The institution determines which resources are in need of regulation (monitoring) and regularly monitors these resources ("red list").
  - For red-listed resources, this institution independently controls the resource quantities used, based on long-term target values (central bank model). It also makes policy recommendations, e.g. on taxation or product responsibility. Subsidiarity is to be maintained under this model.

4. Economy and finance

Vision

There is a wide variety of public and private actions (business and finance) from the individual to the global community. Public and private action are complementary in the sense of a transparent (comprehensible) principle of subsidiarity. Individual, communal and entrepreneurial action that is sustainable in the sense of resource conservation and the common good pays off – and not only in monetary terms – from a micro-economic as well as a societal point of view.

Tangible measures

- In resource management, Germany advocates high, globally harmonised environmental, health and safety standards as well as preferential tariffs for compliance with such standards.
- In order to improve and guide product development and the circular economy, there is a legal requirement for users as well as other stakeholders as part of the life cycle stages to be represented in supervisory boards and similar committees in companies.
- It is mandatory for businesses and public institutions to provide access to their resource balance sheets.
- A licensing authority is being established that is charged with the assessment of the useful lifetime and service life of products and their subsequent integration in a circular economy.
- It is mandatory for financial market institutions to report in a transparent manner on the resource use associated with their products and its consequences and risks.
- Long-term impacts are integrated into the assessment of financial products.
- Incentives are being created for investments in long-term resource conserving projects.

Further steps

Based on both the review and the vision, the Resources Commission has agreed to conduct further work on the following topics

- Requirements of resource conservation legislation, with a focus on a resource conservation law;
- Production, processes, and services, with a focus on accreditation;
- Scenarios for a low resource society and economy;
- Transfer of R&D into economic practice.

This work will draw on results delivered by research projects as well as on the scientific expertise attached to the members of the Commission. Briefing papers are currently being prepared which deepen and discuss the topics in greater detail.

1 The section on the role of the state is still in the final consultation phase. Changes to the vision and measures may yet be made following the preparation of a more detailed briefing paper.

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