

Speech by:
Svenja Schulze
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Conservation and Nuclear Safety, Germany,
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in Berlin

Ladies and Gentlemen

First I would like to thank Maria Krautzberger and her team. This is the fourth time they have organised this important conference. They are thus giving resource efficiency the importance it deserves.

While for years climate change has quite rightly been the predominant environmental topic, any talk about climate action must also be about resource conservation. For our consumption of natural resources is – to a large extent – responsible for our excessive greenhouse gas emissions.

From raw material production and processing to their transport and storage – use of resources also means the consumption of energy. All these activities produce greenhouse gases. Germany is determined to make its contribution to the climate targets of the Paris Agreement. In my view, that means Germany has taken a fundamental decision in favour of resource efficiency.

The International Resource Panel anticipates that global resource use could double by 2050 unless we take major action to prevent it - from the current 90 billion tonnes to over 180 billion tonnes. If we convert that into greenhouse gas emissions, the magnitude of the problem becomes very clear. It would make combating climate change a great deal more difficult.

Germany is one of the most material-intensive industrialised countries. We are currently using ten times more raw materials per capita than low-income countries. While we have already done much, we have to admit we are still living well beyond our ecological means.

Moreover, our high demand for raw materials leads to economic imbalance. For many raw materials, our industry is almost completely reliant on imports.

While the lion's share of value added is created in Germany, the people in the resource countries of origin are disproportionately impacted by the environmental damage.

Our imports of raw materials should benefit not only our own economy, but also people in the export countries. That is why – in my opinion – raw materials extracted in a way that is socially or ecologically harmful should not be used in Germany.

That is our fundamental principle. To comply with it, we still have a lot of work to do, because it requires globally accepted environmental and social standards.

And: Even good standards can fail if their implementation is non-existent or deficient. That happens when state scrutiny is lacking and sanctions are not imposed, or when environmental standards are used as a bargaining chip. It takes a strong government to ensure that the applicable law is observed.

What do we need to do, ladies and gentlemen?

We want to enable as many people as possible to enjoy prosperity – but with lower resource consumption. A task of mammoth proportions, but one which can certainly be accomplished. The necessary strategies, instruments and technologies are already available. We need the determination and the strength to consistently use these tools.

With our national Resource Efficiency Programme ProgRess, we in Germany are on the right path towards careful management of natural resources. Work is now underway on the third programme, ProgRess III.

Our goal is to decouple prosperity and economic growth from resource use. And we firmly believe that this will make us not only more environmentally sound, but also economically stronger, more competitive and more innovative.

Examples of ProgRess include

- more efficiency consultations for SMEs
- support for environmental management systems

- a greater focus on resource-efficient products and services in public procurement
- better information for consumers, and
- more technology and knowledge transfer for developing countries and emerging economies.

ProgRess is not limited to activities within Germany. Our global responsibility is a central element of our national resource policy.

For me, the international dimension is crucial for another reason: The world cannot consist solely of a free exchange of goods. It urgently needs global answers to global questions - and they do exist: Climate action, conservation of biodiversity, combating marine litter.

That is reason enough for us to meet here for discussion. We can and we must learn from each other. That will make national environmental policies more effective.

That was one of our motivations for using our G7 Presidency in 2015 to promote resource efficiency. The G7 Alliance on Resource Efficiency which we launched has evolved into an excellent platform for exchange. Subsequent G7 Presidencies have developed it further. Canada is currently making resource efficiency a focus of its own G7 Presidency.

We the G7 environment ministers decided to launch an innovation challenge for more sustainable management of plastics, and to tackle marine plastic litter.

The concept of improving plastics management is also part of the EU plastics strategy. That is why I welcome the Commission's draft directive. It aims to restrict the negative impacts of some single-use products. For me it is important here that single-use plastic products are not simply replaced with disposable articles made of other ecologically detrimental materials. Wherever possible, we need reusable alternatives.

My ministry is currently very active in this area as well. Yesterday I presented the campaign "no to the throwaway society", which we will be promoting across Germany in the coming weeks.

Everybody here in this room knows that it is not plastics per se that cause environmental problems, but their non-sustainable management. So we are not trying to demonise plastics themselves. But we need to move towards more sustainable, low-waste consumption. That is why we are launching a range of measures to reduce packaging waste, ensure less plastic enters the environment and to step up recycling. Among the measures is a packaging round table, which we will establish with the retail sector. We will initiate a recycling initiative with the plastics industry and continue the dialogue with the cosmetics industry aimed at stopping the discharge of microplastics into water bodies. These measures will be complemented with a national poster campaign aimed at raising public awareness of plastic waste.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It was a particular success that, following the G7, we also put resource efficiency firmly on the agenda of the twenty major industrialised countries and emerging economies during our G20 Presidency.

In Hamburg, the G20 leaders agreed to establish a G20 dialogue on resource efficiency, which was launched in November 2017. This year, Argentina has continued the dialogue and Japan will take it further in 2019.

However, a quick reality check makes it clear that our work is still not finished. Neither in terms of the circular economy, nor with regard to resource efficiency.

We must therefore remain resolutely committed at European and international level. In that context, alongside promoting recycling, I would like to see priority given to the useful life of products. Durability and reparability are the keywords here.

It needs to be easier to repair products. That is better than throwing them away. Ensuring a longer product life is one of the most efficient approaches, and it has to

start with the design stage. Deficiencies in design can often only be compensated later at very high cost. That is why product design is so important for resource efficiency, climate action and environmental protection.

Often, cheap products are not only produced under socially unsatisfactory conditions, but they also have a significantly shorter lifetime. In the medium and long term, therefore, so-called cheap products often end up being more expensive - a real money trap. To protect consumers from this, products must carry information on their durability. Only that gives an indication of how much a product will actually end up costing.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We have ambitious strategies, programmes and goals. Now these have to be translated into concrete actions and measurable successes. For that, we need your support. We will only overcome this global challenge together.

In this spirit, I wish us all a successful and productive conference with interesting discussions and many new ideas.

Thank you very much.