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Climate Change Policies in the Arab Middle East *

Conference on Challenges for Decision Makers and Activists

Keynote Speech: "Climate Change: A Global Challenge"

By [Barbara Unmüßig](#)



Barbara Unmüßig has been co-president of the Heinrich Böll Foundation since May 2002. In December 2006 she was re-elected for a second term. She is responsible for the development of programmes and strategies in Latin America, Africa, Asia and the Middle East. She holds also the strategic and programmatic responsibility for the "Gunder-Werner-Institute for feminism and gender democracy". The primary focus of her work is on globalisation and international climate policies, national and international gender policies as well as promotion of democracy and conflict prevention.

* Experts, scientists and politicians from the region and abroad gathered in Amman on 21-22 October 2008 to discuss the impact of climate change for the Middle East. The Heinrich Boell Stiftung - AMEO organized this first regional conference on climate change in the Middle East under the title "Climate Change Policies in the Middle East – Challenges for Decision makers and Activists".

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very honoured to address a keynote on climate change on the occasion of the regional conference “Climate Change Policies in the Arab Middle East – Challenges for Decision makers and Activists”.

As the title already indicates, it is a complex but fundamental issue we will be talking about today and tomorrow. I am glad to be here with you in Amman, Jordan. This beautiful country will unfortunately be one of the countries of the world, which will feel the impact and effects of the global climate change the most.

As we have all heard in different research studies, the concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere is higher than it has been for the last 650,000 years and it will rise even more. The concentration is expected to reach 560ppm between 2040 and 2065 – that is twice the amount of pre-industrial concentrations!

These figures sound very technocratic and abstract, but: climate science tells, that if we want to keep global temperature rise below 2 degrees Celsius, we have to stabilize the concentrations of all greenhouse gases by 450ppm, better below 400ppm. Within the next 10 to 5 years, we have to bend the curve of steadily rising global emissions and then drive it down as far as we can.

Even if we could keep greenhouse gas emissions constant at 2000 levels, a warming of approximately 0.1°C per decade would still be expected.

Climate change is nothing that might happen some time in the future, climate change is a jeopardy that is already existing and threatening millions of people.

The latest Assessment of the IPCC – the so called UN-Climate Council – gave a lot of new data and examples how the Middle East is and will be affected by current and future climate change. The impact on this region appears to be greater than that on the world as a whole.

Although few countries have studied the impacts of climate change in this region, there is no doubt that climate change is likely to act as a “threat multiplier”. Despite the climate change-conflict nexus, what are the impacts of climate change that are highly predictable for the Middle East? What do the people and the policymakers have to expect?

- Scientists are certain, that higher evaporation is expected due to temperature raise. And the temperature will rise. For the Eastern Mediterranean, the mean temperatures might increase between 3 and 5 degrees C until 2080.
- In combination with less rainfall, this means that the region will get even drier. And wind and rainfall will change: in some regions, rainfall will increase, in most regions; precipitation will decline by 20% by the end of the century, however.
- A significant sea level rise (Mediterranean Sea: 0.3-1m by end of century) will lead to spacious flooding of rural and urban areas and soil degradation due to salt water intrusion.
- In general, more severe weather events, such as droughts and floods, must to be expected.

I would like to point out three major threats the region might have to deal with:

1. The loss of water availability
2. The impacts on agriculture and thus economy
3. The threat of political instability and compulsive migration

1. The population in the Middle East is growing rapidly. Water resources are limited, however, and will decrease even further with climate change. A simple mathematic equation tells us, that the region will suffer of water shortage. Since drinking water is often supplied by shared, cross-border groundwater resources, conflicts might inflame or get worse. Some water-sharing agreements already exist, the abundance of these is not guaranteed, however. Water has played an important role in all conflicts and peace talks between the various parties ever since.

2. In many countries, crop agriculture is highly dependent on irrigation (Bewässerung), because rainfall is low and highly variable. 3 million ha of

land are becoming desertified every year and it may increase even faster by climate change. With an increasing water shortage, about 170,000 square kilometres of viable rain-fed agricultural land would be lost – and thus people’s livelihood is in danger. Nutritional and hygiene issues will become more and more problematic, which will force people to move to urban centres.

3. With an increasing urbanization, problems of urban poverty, access to clean water and sanitation, food security, and air pollution will not decline, but rather rise. Some countries are vulnerable to reductions in the runoff of rivers because they rely heavily on hydropower production. Their energy supply is likely to be affected. As a result, the distress of political tensions remains high in parts of the region. There are evident connections between climate change and security problems: the potential increase of competition for resources due to diminishing access to water and land, which could in turn cause people move or even flee. Of course, these environmental refugees could have a destabilizing impact on the adapting state and society. And the Middle East region is one of those regions where the links between climate change and security could become very clear and obvious. But: climate change is only one factor in a complexity of factors that are shaping and causing a conflict. “Environmental stress can form an important backdrop to future violence, reduce opportunities and avenues for conflict resolution and fuel long-term patterns of instability. But it is rarely sufficient in itself to explain large scale violence” (Evans 2008).

Ladies and gentlemen, what I have just described is not the screenplay of a horror film, but rather our future.

The crisis is dangerous because it is interwoven and self-perpetuating: water shortages lead to food shortages which can lead to conflict over remaining resources. These can drive human migration, which can create new food shortages in other regions.

To counteract this scenario and to keep consequences low, we need to react now. And I

said “we” intentionally: I mean all of us and everyone that is not here in this room with us, as well.

A global problem like climate change requires global cooperation and coordination.

First of all, we have to speak about responsibilities:

- The per capita carbon foot print gives us a clear picture of global inequalities: Rich countries – mainly countries in the north - dominate the overall emissions account clearly. They are responsible for about 7 out of every 10 tonnes of CO₂ that have been emitted since the start of the industrial era.
- But developing countries account a rising share of global emissions. China, for example, may be about to overtake the USA as the world’s largest emitter.
- Also the Arab world shares a major responsibility to the problem due to its oil producing countries – these countries have been hindering climate negotiations as well.

Having in mind the urgency to reduce CO₂ emissions to hold the 2 degrees threshold, we also have to address the issue of equity:

- those who have contributed the least to cause climate change, are the ones that will be hit worst
- Impacts of climate change so far will exacerbate poverty through effects on health, income and the livelihoods of millions of people
- There is simply not enough “environmental space” for the still poor to develop the same way the rich did

Therefore, in terms of action, a lot needs to be done:

The North has to act first – and decisive! We must use energy more efficiently, save energy and switch to renewable energies. All in all, industrialized countries must cut global greenhouse gas emissions by at least 80%. It is time for the U.S. to join the rest of the world in addressing this problem.

Europe must follow through on the taken emission reductions commitments. But also the major industrializing nations, such as China, India, and Brazil, should recognize their role and responsibility in addressing global climate change

by agreeing to concrete commitments for the post-2012 timeframe.

The least developed countries should be out of any obligation to cut emission, but they should invest as well in efficiency and mainly in renewable energies – there is so much potential in solar and wind energy! If the world does not act now, the costs of inaction will overtake the costs of action!

It is absolutely not adequate to picture the challenging and threatening impacts of climate change as chance, because many people are at risk to die in conflict situations amplified through climate change, and are vulnerable to the risks of climate change by itself. But it is worthwhile to note the potential climate change may actually have for cooperation within and between societies. Water scarcity could lead to cooperation when it comes to the question of distribution between two states and this interstate dialogue could build trust and institutionalise cooperation on a broader range of cross-border issues.

Cutting emissions is not all we must do, however. We have to do both, to mitigate and adapt to climate change.

- Sustainable water agreements need to be arranged here in the region. The longer waited, the more difficult gets the possibility of achieving such treaties in the future
- We have to stabilize economic and political factors
- Bi-lateral and multi-lateral cooperation will be needed
- Adaptation also means that food and fiber production should be concentrated on more intensively managed lands.
- We need to switch to new fuels or more efficient production and conversion of biomass.
- The region is rich in natural resources like “sunshine” - solar energy could be exported to Europe and Africa!
- Alternate land use practices, such as eco-tourism, need to be created.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I am hopeful, that climate change will not end disastrous if we all work together. What gives me hope is the fact that 15 NGOs from 9 countries united in the “Arab Climate

Alliance” which will lobby for smart political decisions.

The Arab world combines a population of 325million people in 23 countries – that’s a voice that can heavily impact the global climate change debate and policies. Try your best! With Indyact, you have a strong and effective partner.

Let us campaign for a decisive word on climate protection at the summit on economic and developmental issues of the Arab League in January 2009.

I am sure: without fairness and equity, we won’t get a near global agreement on climate change.

Fairness in a climate regime is not only a moral issue. It is a matter of realism. The wealthy nations must not only cut their own emissions and change their life style deeply and soon, but also do whatever is necessary to support the south in a low emission economy and a high adaptation future.

We in the Heinrich Böll Stiftung try to do our best to contribute to fair and just solutions in a climate constrained world. Climate change for us is a cross-cutting issue!

Our prerequisite that is definitely awareness raising and the creation of political will.

We want to empower and strengthen civil society organisations in their capacities and capabilities to fight for fair, just and environmentally sound societies.

And this is why I am so extremely happy to participate in today’s and tomorrow’s conference. I am glad to see you all here and hope that we will have vivid and conducive discussions.