

# Interview

Edited by Sergio La Motta



with **Hermann E. Ott**,  
*Wuppertal Institute for Climate, Environment and Energy*

**We are here with Dr. Hermann E. Ott, Senior Advisor for Global Sustainability and Welfare Strategies at the Wuppertal Institute. Fighting climate change is the main mission of Mr. Ott, and he is also active in politics and civil society. The Wuppertal Institute is going to celebrate its 25th anniversary and will also organize the 8th annual meeting of the Low-Carbon Society Research Network, to which also ENEA will contribute. This interview is particularly focused on the COP21 Paris Agreement. I know that you and your team have recently published a very good report centered on the post-COP21 dynamics and in fact we will share the link to this report on our website together with this interview. Do you want to tell us something on this before we start and go to the content of this interview?**

“Well, I think you captured a lot. I’ve been working on climate policy since 1994 when I joined the Wuppertal Institute and I have also been in politics for four years as a member of the German Parliament, as a green parliamentarian working on Climate Policy and issues of growth and prosperity: how to decouple resource use from economic activity. I have also been active in civil society work, for example, as a member of the Board of Greenpeace Germany for many years, supervising the CEO of Greenpeace.”

**First of all let us thank you for this opportunity and I will start with the interview right now. My first question is strictly related to the positive elements of the Paris Agreement. In fact, the Paris Agreement has been considered as a decisive turning point in climate policies and in fact, despite all shortcomings it can be considered a suc-**

**cess. What are, in your opinion, the positive elements contained in the accord?**

“Well, I would also call it an overall success, because it has concluded a treaty that is at the upper end of what could have been expected. One of the positive remarks is of course that multilateral environmental diplomacy has delivered - it’s actually possible to cooperate on a global level on important environmental issues; that was especially important after the terrorist attacks in Paris some days before, and both President Holland as well as Laurent Fabius, the President of the Conference, highlighted in their speeches that it was especially important to get to an agreement here in the face of the daunting tasks of the international community. So that was a good result. A good result also is that we have an international treaty, something that was not expected because the United States, due to its constitutional legal provisions, have problems in ratifying international treaties: each treaty needs a 2/3 majority in the Senate and the US Senate is very much influenced by local interests, especially coal interests, and Republicans have the majority. So it was not expected that any treaty would pass the Senate. Anyway the US found a way around that because the Paris Agreement that was adopted on 12th December does not contain any substantive commitments but only procedural obligations. The substance has been delegated to a decision which was also adopted and which accompanies the treaty. So actually President Obama will be able to ratify the Paris Agreement without asking the Senate. So it is possible that the United States are part of the treaty and to avoid the fate of the Kyoto Protocol.

The third positive sign is of course that we have more than 180 nationally-determined contributions

on climate change. So that means that basically all States have acknowledged that the fight against climate change is a daunting task and that they have to be part of that.

A fourth positive signal is that the 'firewall' between industrialized and developing countries has been abolished. The firewall is this distinction laid down in Annex I of the Framework Convention on Climate Change, which on the one hand lists the industrialized countries that have a special responsibility to protect the climate and all other countries. This may have been valid in the '90s, when China, India, Brazil, and others still had negligible emissions of Green House Gases - but it is not any longer. So it was very important to tear down this wall and that actually is one of the most positive signs of Paris Agreement. Climate Change is an issue that must be addressed by everybody, by every country on this Planet and the Paris Agreement acknowledges that."

**We will come back to this concept of the evolution of the common but differentiated responsibilities. You just mentioned some shortcomings of the Paris Agreement, which in fact is the focus of the second question. That is: as it happens during COPs, most decisions on tricky issues are postponed to following COPs. The Paris Agreement in fact has postponed to following COPs, starting from COP22 in Marrakesh, next year, important decisions to better define action on finance, mitigation, effort to ramp up a differentiation. So, this question is more focused to have your opinion on the major shortcomings of the Paris accord that need to be tackled in the future.**

"Yes, there's quite a lot of shortcomings. The Paris Agreement was adopted at the expense of binding decisions on mitigation and on financing. Already in August last year, the rules on the nationally determined contributions were put into the decision and taken out of the treaty; so the nationally-determined contributions are non-binding. They're also non-binding because the language in which they are formulated is non-binding. The achievement of a global agreement has the price that it is very much bottom-up, as it is said, as opposed to the so-called top-down approach of the Kyoto Protocol - that is top-down in the sense that it legally obligates countries to fulfill their commitments and their obligations. Now we have the oppo-

site in the Paris Agreement. In the '90s the Americans advocated this approach under the name of pledge-and-review, so a party makes a proposal of what it is prepared to do in terms of climate change and submits this proposal and then these are being collected by the Secretariat and somebody is checking whether a country is actually performing according to what it has promised. This is the approach that has now been taken by the Paris Agreement. So this is one negative aspect: the commitments are not legally binding.

Second, they are insufficient. There have been many checks already before the Paris Conference and we know that if actually all those contributions would be implemented it would amount to an increase in the global mean temperature of between 2.7 and 3.5 °C. And this is much, much more than the intention that has been laid down in the Paris Agreement to stay well below the 2 °C threshold. So the contributions are not binding and they're insufficient. And also the financial contributions of the industrialized countries are voluntary; there's no bindingness. Which means also that, as for the € 100 billion that have been promised, it is going to be very difficult to actually get that plan up and running and it will require a lot of pressure from developing countries and the civil society to actually get this going.

This is the main point of the Paris Agreement, I think: it provides a platform, it keeps open the possibility for the world and the world community to effectively fight climate change, but it's by no means a done deal. On the contrary. It requires a lot of work. So, as also other observers have remarked: the Paris Agreement is only the beginning, not the end of the process, and that's why it depends on everybody, all countries and civil society organizations, all business to make this work. We can maybe come back to that later, to what I think will be required to make the Paris Agreement effective."

**Thank you, Hermann, this is a very comprehensive analysis that you have done of the follow-up of the Paris Agreement and in fact I completely agree with you that, as almost all scientists and politicians that are on this side, that the Paris Agreement is not the end but rather the beginning of the process. In this context, what are in your opinion the main elements or elements that will keep alive the Paris momentum in order to implement the COP21 decisions and accord.**

"Well, there are several in-built mechanisms that actu-

ally keep up the process. At the diplomatic level that's of course the process of stocktaking and regular reporting that has been anchored in the agreement, which means that every 5 years the parties to the Paris Agreement will have to report on what they have done and what they are supposed or intend to do and there is also a formulation in there which prevents countries from going below what they have agreed before. This leaves, of course, the possibility that countries report anything slightly relevant and present it as if there was progress compared to what they have done before. So success will depend quite a lot on the pressure of civil society and the media, whether they accept what countries report or whether they point to the deficiencies.

According to some analyses after Paris the contributions will have to be strengthened very quickly, which means that already in 2018, before the Paris Agreement is supposed to enter into force, the major polluters must present stronger contributions than they

have done before Paris. This would open up a chance to stay well below the 2 °C threshold. However, what we see at the moment, and I can talk about Germany, is not very promising; the Government here is not taking up the challenge of Paris and is trying to limit the increase in renewable energy. You know that on 22nd April there is the ceremony of signing the Paris Agreement in New York. President Hollande will probably be there, the Canadian Prime Minister has already announced that he will be there. This is a good sign because it is important to keep the issue on the agenda against the pressing needs of the European financial and refugee crisis, Syria, and other problems. We must keep climate change up on the agenda, where it has been in Paris.

And that's maybe also one of the more positive signs: the conference in Paris with 150 Heads of State and Government took place just a couple of months after the U.N. Summit in September 2015, where Ban Ki-moon had received 120 of them. That is quite unusual to get these extremely busy people together twice



within a couple of months! So, pressure must be kept up, that's the task of civil society and there are some provisions in the Paris Agreement and decisions that actually provide for regular input of civil society of business and science into the Paris process."

**Thank you, Hermann, I strongly agree with you about the dynamics of the accord that strongly will involve the civil society, and in fact one of the questions that I prepared was about that. That is, what is the effective importance to link the decarbonization objective with the other sustainable development goals, which in fact will help in the process of involving a massive part of the population which is a pre-requisite to achieve the transition towards the low-carbon society. So the question is: what is the European link between deep decarbonization and sustainable development goals and, in particular, what is the role that can play rural and urban areas, and energy and resource efficiency in industry. Does the Paris Agreement tackle this issue correctly or is it something that we should build by ourselves, i.e. laterally to the accord.**

"Well, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are directed at all countries (that's the difference to the Millennium Development Goals, which were directed more to developing countries) and also the Paris Agreement is addressing all countries. If you take the threat of climate change seriously, it requires a total transformation of the way we produce and consume: transformation of our energy systems, of our transport systems, industrial systems, of the way we live because our houses will be constructed differently. So the sustainable development agenda and the Paris Agenda are very much linked to each other. The sustainable development goals, however, are broader than the Paris Agreement because they also take the social considerations into account and have social goals and values. For me, there is an indispensable connection between what we want to achieve on the ecological and economic level and on the social level. They are closely connected: without the social values, I'm sure, we will not achieve ecological and economic goals. You can't have a global transformation with people who are impoverished and frightened, we see at the moment the case of the refugee crisis, how easily people get frightened by something they think is overwhelming and getting out of control, and this is

really just the beginning of what we are going to see. There are far greater refugee challenges ahead of us partly brought about by climate change, so actually this would be a good occasion to prepare for that if we can master the current crisis. But as I said, without due attention to social justice we will not be able to fight climate change effectively.

Then you asked for the connection with efficiency. Well, the contributions that countries have submitted to the Secretariat are of very different kind, that makes them not easily comparable. Some of them do actually include some efficiency goals, some have traditional reduction goals, some have goals towards increasing the share of renewable energy, and so on. Efficiency is definitely one of the major means of fighting climate change. In the Wuppertal Institute we have this triple approach of efficiency, consistency and sufficiency, where efficiency is the easiest part, making more with less, e.g., using less energy and resources to achieve a certain level of prosperity; consistency means doing it differently, to organize our economy in line with the natural cycles of our local and global ecosystems - renewable energy for example is more consistent with the natural and ecological systems than fossil fuels; and the last one is sufficiency, doing (or using) less, being satisfied and content with less material consumption. With this triple approach of efficiency, consistency and sufficiency we can actually make it and transform our economies.

**Thank you, Hermann, I would like to come back to the principle of 'common but differentiated responsibilities'. This principle generally has given rise to lots of conflicts in the international community. But something has changed in the Paris Agreement, it seems that this principle has been interpreted in a more dynamic way, time to move from the static division as you have already mentioned between annex-1 countries and non-annex-1 countries, but going in to a sort of greater collaboration among countries. Do you think that this principle could actually be interpreted as a principle of collaboration rather than a principle of conflict? And in this area, what do you think is the role of technology transfer in the north-south context or south-south context?**

"You are right, we've taken a great step forward with the Paris Agreement in getting away from this rigid division between the so-called industrialized and



developing countries. This step reflects the reality, because some of these so-called developing or former developing countries have now comparable per-capita emissions of greenhouse gases and actually higher absolute emissions. China has overtaken the US a couple of years ago as the biggest emitter and the climate problem cannot be solved without integrating these countries. This is actually one of the main achievements of the Paris Agreement. However, it would not be correct to put all developing countries into the same pot as China, India, Brazil, South Africa. The biggest part of developing countries still have very negligible greenhouse gas emissions. It is actually one of the firmest responsibilities to support these countries in some kind of leapfrogging the fossil stage and move them directly to the renewable energy path. The new formula is that of 'common but different responsibilities in the light of different circumstances' and this is actually a giant step towards a unification and global integration of global responsibilities and tasks. Yet, still there's a lot of differences between countries of the former western industrialized countries and the largest part of developing countries. This

is true especially in terms of financing, where there is a huge responsibility on part of the industrialized countries to provide the financing. However, there is also some development here: the possibility for voluntary contributions by the so-called developing countries and there are a number of developing countries that have actually already proposed that they would contribute to funds to help spur other developing countries. This is actually a very development in international affairs."

**Thank you, Hermann, just a few conclusive remarks about the next steps. What do you think will be the next two or three huge decisions that the international community has to take starting from the next COP and referring to the core issues, such as finance, mitigation, etc. So just a few last words about the next steps, the next agenda for the next one or two years.**

It will be important to start immediately. First with the ceremony at the end of April at the United Nations' headquarters when the Paris Agreement is signed. It

would be great if the Paris Agreement could enter into force in 2017 already, and that needs a great push. We need to develop some of the rules that are still lacking in terms of how to stocktake and how to calculate and that must be done very quickly. Also, as you said, the financial rules have to be elaborated and how to generate these 100 billion dollars annually that have been promised by industrialized countries. All that, I think, needs a very strong push and that is why I find it extremely important that the High Ambition Coalition is kept alive that was, to a large extent, responsible for the positive outcome of Paris.

You know that the climate regime, meaning the Convention, the Kyoto Protocol and also the Paris Agreement have one special feature that differentiates them from most environmental treaties: all decision making requires consensus. In all other environmental agreements you have the possibility of majority decisions (2/3 or 3/4 majority) whereas in the climate regime everything must be decided by consensus. That is so because already in 1994 the oil-producing countries prevented the setting of rules that would allow majority vote. This is probably what happens also in the Paris Agreement when it adopts its rules of procedure. It is very difficult to achieve a transformation on the global scale by consensus. I sometimes our situation with a group of 200 junkies that collectively decide that they want to get rid of the drug - but the condition is that each time they take a step towards getting rid of the drug is accepted by everybody, by

all 200 junkies. What makes things worse, some of those drug dependents are actually dealers, so they are earning a lot of money with selling the drug. You can imagine how difficult it is to get to decisive steps in such circumstances.

That is why this High Ambition Coalition was so important: the European Union and about 70 developing countries in this coalition were pushing for the best possible outcome in Paris, the United States aligned with it in Paris on the first day, when the high ambition coalition was actually made public, and when in the end Brazil joined the coalition, no one could stop it. Therefore it is very important now that the European Union actually keeps up this coalition. We have seen green coalitions like that in Berlin in 1995, we have seen it in Marrakech in 2001 and we have seen it in Bali 2007, but every time after the conference was over, the coalition fell apart! This must not happen again if we want to get the Paris Agreement up and running. That is why we need to keep this coalition alive, which can generate the necessary pressure for the next steps: to get the Paris Agreement enter into force, to strengthen the nationally determined contributions very early on, and to get the process going that will allow us to stay on the path to keep global temperature rise well-below 2 °C, as it has been established in Paris. We need an ambitious coalition of climate pioneers to turn the dynamics of Paris into a longer-term political force!"