

Osman Benchikh

'The age of renewables has now begun'

With global oil consumption expected to rise by 2.5 million barrels a day this year, largely due to China's growing needs, and with oil production struggling to keep up with demand, last June's conference on renewable energies in Bonn could not have come at a better time.

In his opening remarks, German Federal Minister for the Environment Jürgen Trittin declared that 'the age of renewables has now begun'. Germany has been the undisputed world leader in wind energy since the early 1990s, solar energy being dominated by Japan. In Bonn, Germany reaffirmed its determination to help countries of the South adopt clean forms of energy by pledging to add a further US\$500 million per year for five years in interest-free loans to the US\$1 billion announced two years earlier at the World Summit on Sustainable Development – almost as much as the World Bank. This spectacular initiative is one of many commitments to renewable energy made in Bonn by individual countries, including the Philippines and China, evoked below.

But should we rejoice at a declaration adopted by 154 governments which contents itself with noting the targets individual countries have set themselves rather than fixing any financial targets of its own? Responsible for renewable energy at UNESCO, Osman Benchikh has his own views on the subject.

Neither the escalating price of oil⁸, nor the problems linked to its geostrategic importance seems to have caused an 'electroshock' in the international community in Bonn. Does that make the conference only a semi-success?

Bonn may yet prove to have been a milestone in the history of renewable energy. Representatives of 154 countries, including 120 Ministers and several Heads of State, sat down in Bonn to discuss renewable energy issues. In that sense, the conference did meet its objectives by raising public awareness. Bonn has shown that the international community is now seriously considering renewable energy as a rational and credible alternative. This growing awareness has led the international community, and the developed countries in particular, to make a firm commitment to renewable energy

in recent years. In Europe, wind power grew by more than 35% annually between 1996 and 2003; last year, the photovoltaic sector grew by 33%. Today, the European renewable energy industry has a turnover of 10 billion euros and employs 200 000 people.



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It is true that the final outcome of the Bonn Conference – the political declaration – is weak. Concrete commitments are still missing and it sets no targets. I do believe, though, that the history of humanity is a fairly long process and that some countries are simply not yet ready to make a more ambitious commitment.

If I may go back for a moment to the World Summit on Sustainable Development, in order to set targets, the Summit identified five key areas for sustainable development: water, energy, health, agriculture and biodiversity. Two years on, what are we saying? That energy is a key component of development and that, if countries are serious about sustainable development, be they developing or developed, they have no choice but to consider renewable energy as an essential element of sustainable development. The very act of organizing this conference, which has drawn a massive participation by government representatives, makes it a success in my eyes.

Could some of those countries which are not yet ready to commit be thinking of nuclear power as an alternative to oil?

I don't think so. In any case, as much as 56% of oil is absorbed by transportation and you can't propel a plane with nuclear power – at least for the time being. Even if electric buses and cars do exist, they remain a rare sight because they can only operate over short distances.

Don't forget that the technology and use of nuclear energy call for know-how and capital that remain accessible to only a small number of industrialized countries.

8. The price of oil had already climbed to over US\$40 a barrel by the time the Bonn conference took place. By 20 August, it was nudging towards US\$50, a 50% increase since the beginning of the year

Would you say that it was largely the developing countries which set an example in Bonn? I am thinking of China, which committed in Bonn to using renewable energy for 10% of its needs by 2010. China has of course also ratified the Kyoto Protocol.

With a galloping economy, China needs to consume a lot of energy. It is indeed very significant that China should have committed to using renewable energy for 10% of its needs. After all, one in five human beings is Chinese.

In my opinion, we shouldn't link the development of renewable energy systematically to the Kyoto Protocol, even if it is true that mastering energy is the first step towards protecting the environment. If, for the developed countries, renewable energy represents an option for the future which will enable them to diversify their sources of energy, protect the environment and possibly avoid conflicts and tensions linked to the quest for energy, it remains only one of several options.

For the developing countries, on the other hand, it is their only option. That is a big difference. It is their only option at this time if they are to access a minimum of comfort and modernity. Thus, there is a 'converging antagonism' here, with North and South sharing complementary interests.

For the countries of the South, the environmental issue is important but I must stress that there are other priorities for these countries which are equally urgent, if not more so. Nothing is more urgent than giving a minimum of energy to those who have none at all and who unfortunately represent more than one-third of the world population.

If renewable energy is so important for the South, why does the World Bank finance renewable energy 20 times less than gas, oil and coal?

The World Bank is first and foremost a bank and a bank acts in its own interests. When making an investment, a bank will endeavour to ensure a return on that investment.

I don't think we should be guided by a purely economic approach. That eclipses any form of solidarity. I am pleased to see that the European Investment Bank has decided that half of the loans it issues between now and 2010 will go to renewable energy.

I should stress that the World Bank is increasingly financing renewable energy projects, further proof, if such were necessary, of the economic viability of renewable energy.

For you, what is the 'ideal' threshold which rich and poor countries should target in terms of renewable energy use?

I don't think there can be an identical threshold for all countries. Even if we confine ourselves to the developing countries, we have to distinguish between those which enjoy fairly good electrification and those which do not. For countries with a large population not connected to the electricity grid, renewable energy represents the most valid option today. African countries are a case in point. In Africa,

circa 72% of the population lacks access to electricity. This proportion can only increase, given that the continent's population is growing faster than the grid's outreach. As I said, for those countries with a large population deprived of the grid, 40% electrification using renewable energy would be an appropriate threshold in my view.

In this connection, I should like to cite the example of the Government of the Philippines, if I may. The government has set itself the goal of raising the share of renewable energies in the total energy capacity by 100%, to 4 700 MW, or around 40% of national energy consumption, by 2013.

As for Europe, the target fixed in 2002 of doubling the share of renewable energies in the European Union energy sector to 12% by 2010 strikes me as a realistic objective. Towards 2050, I think renewable energies should represent a share of around 40% of the energy sector in the industrialized countries.

It could be useful to establish viable scenarios for the medium and long term for the optimum use of renewable energy. An independent group could reflect on the question, in order to define and propose the best energy future possible for our children and their children.

Are you suggesting creating a panel on energy, in much the same way the UNDP and WMO set up the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change in 1998?

UNESCO tabled just such a proposal in Bonn. The Organization joined the German Minister of Education and Research in organizing a Science Panel, which consisted of an entire day devoted to science, research, development and human resources. The proposal to create an expert panel to advise and orient States on energy figured among the day's conclusions.

The same Ministry has committed to financing a second UNESCO proposal for the setting-up of an 'open university' on renewable energy. This virtual university would function via existing centres in the North and South. As lead agency, UNESCO will be launching the initiative next year, hopefully with other partners.

I am convinced that these twin initiatives will garner the support they need to get off the ground. During the current wave of consultations of the National Commissions for UNESCO conducted by the Director-General, the regions consulted thus far, namely Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Asia and the Pacific, have all proposed that renewable energy be one of the priorities for the Organization's next Programme and Budget covering 2006–2007.

This leaning towards renewable energy is nothing new. Since its inception, UNESCO has been a pioneer in promoting and developing renewable energy. As far back as the 1950s, UNESCO advocated developing arid zones within a programme by the same name, through the use of renewable energy in general and wind and solar energy in particular.

Interview by Susan Schneegans

For details of the Bonn conference: www.renewables2004.de