

‘MOBILISING PEOPLE’ AND ‘NOT BEING A NUISANCE’: WHERE DOES THIS LEAD, AND WHAT IS THE OUTCOME?

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Recently, the spokesperson for **Psychologists for Future** posed the following question to those present at a conference we were attending: ‘*What emotion do you associate with climate change?*’ Fear, but also anger, were the main responses. These emotions were most frequently cited as the initial reaction, the psychologist noted. But on closer inspection, another emotion emerges: **grief**. Grief that we, as humans, have failed to prevent this development – which we felt particularly keenly this summer – and that we have reached this point. A grief, as if someone had died, in the face of what seems irretrievably lost, which will never return and which we can no longer pass on to our children. Glaciers, countless magnificent plant and animal species, more than half of the coral reefs, carefree summers and pleasant temperatures... But also the fear of what lies ahead.

This environmental psychologist’s analysis moved me deeply. It made me fully realise that I had felt exactly the same way this summer. Yes, alongside coping with this unbearable heat and this perhaps somewhat naïve concern for the fate of certain animals during this drought, there were questions about what would become of the trees in our forests, how vulnerable people and newborns were faring in overheated clinics... and as for what the situation will be like in 10, 20 years or more, I also had the following thought: many people – scientists, civil society... – have been campaigning for years, Meco for over 50 years, for the protection of the climate and biodiversity. Often pushing beyond our human limits. **And yet, we have failed to prevent the situation from developing in a way that has become particularly evident this summer.** The fires in the Hautes Fagnes, where most of us have probably been for a walk or a cycle at least once, the air there as dark and acrid as smog... that was yet another heavy blow.

Climate protection always has to wait: ‘acquisitions’ take precedence over everything else!

Then there was **the disaster in Nepal** – those massive floods that left thousands of people homeless, or even cost them their lives. A disaster that has now, once again, disappeared from the media. Who amongst us knows how these people are faring today? Probably very few of us. It was just one news item amongst many during the summer lull. Have we become accustomed to this? Do we simply accept that, through our behaviour, people in the Global South are losing their livelihoods, their homes and their lives? That there are already tens of thousands, perhaps even hundreds of thousands, of climate refugees, and that this number is inevitably set to rise dramatically? Have we become accustomed to this? As a member of an international alliance of environmental NGOs, we have received numerous messages from colleagues in Asia and the Pacific... in which they have very clearly expressed their anger. Anger, above all, because we in the rich

countries know exactly what a debt we are incurring by failing to tackle the climate crisis and the biodiversity crisis seriously and swiftly enough. We are content merely to try to prevent them in a 'pragmatic' way, as long as it does not affect us directly, as long as all we need to do is switch from a petrol or diesel car to an electric one (and even then, because if you go on holiday, you might have to queue for the at the petrol station...). ... whilst being fully aware of the price that people in the Global South have to pay for our pragmatism.

Our colleagues from the South have, in a way, also criticised us – as an NGO from the North – for not stating loud and clear enough, consistently enough and perhaps radically enough, that this cannot go on. And in reality, I think they are right! But in a way, we in the North have settled into our bubble of prosperity – and we still have far too much of it, despite enormous social injustices – and we continue to commit to climate protection and biodiversity as long as it does not require **any real change** on the part of any of us – as individuals and as a society. - A little dig on this subject: the Ministry of Agriculture, for example, only requires organic bananas for the 'A Piece of Fruit at School' scheme, but when it comes to our apples, they can quite happily be treated with pesticides. In the Global South, we're expected to figure out how to produce differently and organically, but we're not expected to do so ourselves... we're not even capable of it...

Our pragmatism – with dramatic consequences for people in the Global South

But another recent example is particularly telling: the Government has decided to subsidise part of the rise in the price of diesel and petrol, as well as domestic heating oil. And this, even though even the most moderate economists agree that it is absurd and a serious mistake. There is undoubtedly a consensus that we must help those in financial difficulty. But no, the government is now helping everyone, even very well-off households... Because there is always the index and the loss of purchasing power that everyone talks about so much. And we just can't seem to resolve this pesky problem; the government, employers and trade unions simply cannot agree on a solution... **Climate protection will therefore simply have to be put on hold, and to achieve this, we will also have to squander hundreds of millions of pounds of taxpayers' money on subsidising fossil fuels for everyone... There was supposedly no other way out; we were simply going through a rough patch...** Thus, clinging to old ways of doing things prevents a socially just transition, to the detriment of the most vulnerable, of nature and of our children.

Another example: we need land-based **agriculture** – meat consumption must be reduced at all costs. But we are not redirecting subsidies (is this a law of nature?), and besides, do we not have the right to eat meat every day? Shouldn't that be a matter of our freedom? So we simply carry on importing soya and other products from the Global South. Various multinationals then use pesticides in the Global South whose harmful effects are so obvious that they are not authorised here: but why should we ban our companies from producing these products here? That would be going too far; after all, they contribute to our growth; they are the foundation of our so-called model of prosperity. Cheap clothes and tech gadgets from online retailers such as Temu and Shein, which consume enormous amounts of resources and are sometimes manufactured in inhumane conditions: well, what can you do about it? We need growth... And once we've got it, well... we'll see. What an irresponsible attitude! Why do we tolerate this? What hypocrisy.

And for your information: our Nepalese colleagues within our international alliance have also pointed out that eight years ago – yes, exactly eight years ago – they were promised international aid to prevent a disaster such as the one that struck this summer. But this aid was delayed. Apparently, once again, there were 'more urgent' matters, supposedly more pressing short-term crises on our side...

We waited! We waited, just like the **young people from Klike and the Movement's youth section**, who, during an event combining theatre and a demonstration outside the National Assembly, perfectly illustrated what they want to do in the face of the climate crisis. A presenter waited for politicians to appear on her talk show to say what they really intend to do about the climate crisis. And she waited, and waited... and the programme ended before we even realised it, without a single politician turning up. The presenter's final words: 'Well, I

suppose we'll just have to wait a bit longer, then.' What a brilliant idea! What a spot-on portrayal! And thank you to the younger generation for this action and your commitment!

One could almost say: temperatures are currently rising faster than the genuine will to change anything.

Those of you who are more familiar with our movement **know** that our commitment is **based on defending ideals, building a positive future, and the fundamental belief that commitment bears fruit and that it is possible to bring about change. Yes, we are and remain optimistic.** And let us not forget: for years, it was primarily us – together with a relatively small number of trade unionists and politicians – who stood up to the mainstream and defended the tramway. It was groups such as the Museldal citizens' initiative and courageous politicians, together with our organisation, who prevented the construction of the Remerschen nuclear power station (which would probably be in the cooling-down phase this summer...), who ensured that there are now nature reserves in the country... and much more besides. It was also the initiative of a movement that ultimately led to the creation of nature conservation organisations. **Getting involved pays off. And yes, we have achieved something despite everything! And yes, we will carry on.**

But I believe there are also pivotal moments in history when we must say: we are now in one of the most decisive phases in the development of humanity. Individual actions are no longer enough. We are deciding today whether to prioritise the preservation of our vital systems – for ourselves and for future generations – or short-term growth, by clinging to old solutions! We cannot have it all! Yes, we now need a genuine socio-ecological transition, and we must pursue it more radically.

But for the time being, the political and societal response remains 'stagnation', procrastination, turning a blind eye to the disasters striking the Global South and, in reality, a total lack of compassion towards those affected, as well as towards our own children. And let us not delude ourselves: the scandalous global injustices are a veritable powder keg.

And young people have every right to be angry with us – and indeed they should be – because our attachment to our daily routines and the privileges we enjoy takes precedence over their future!

Concrete measures for a socially just transition – that is what is currently lacking in Luxembourg!

But more and more people believe that things cannot go on like this and see an alternative social and economic model as a tremendous opportunity and a source of great hope. We say it time and again: social solidarity and cooperation rather than the logic of competition and consumption. But what are the necessary preconditions for this transition?

Stephan Grünewald, a psychologist and researcher in social sciences and market economics, has stated – and on this point he is largely in agreement with many other social scientists – that six elements are essential for moving our society forward:

- **The first key point would be an honest description of the problems!**

Yet we stumble right from the start, as the following examples show:

* Minister Serge Wilmes never tires of pointing out, with joy and pride, that Luxembourg is reducing its CO₂ emissions by 3 per cent more than required by the Climate Act, and that we are well on top of our climate targets. Yes, on the whole, that is true. But she knows full well that this is due solely to reductions in CO₂ emissions in the transport sector, and more specifically to 'fuel tourism'. And she knows full well that emissions in the residential and construction sectors are in fact rising, and significantly so. The same applies to industry. So not only are we failing to reduce emissions in these sectors as required, but the exact opposite is happening. **The role of the Environment Minister is, based on clear facts, to identify the challenges that remain, the obstacles and the prerequisites for**

overcoming them. Merely justifying and praising one's own policies is unworthy of the office of Environment Minister.

Furthermore, the longer we persist in the wrong direction, the more difficult the situation will become for these sectors, and the more drastic measures will be required. For the construction sector, for example, this also means that , the public will be exposed to high gas prices for far too long!

* The Minister goes on to claim that the new **Nature Conservation Bill** will lead to more green spaces in our urban areas, as, for example, 10 per cent of new developments must now be set aside for green spaces and every local authority should have at least 20 per cent of certain green infrastructure. But he fails to mention that this is accepted, that vegetation can then be destroyed elsewhere without being replaced – and that it is therefore no longer necessary to compensate for it (with all the drawbacks that this entails for the residents of those areas) – and that a great many local authorities already meet this 20 per cent target! So does this really mean more green spaces? No! Not at all. Perhaps with a little less pesticide. Especially after this summer! If we genuinely want more green spaces, there are far better solutions, such as a mandatory green plan for every municipality. But we hear nothing of the sort.

* Third example: **pesticides in agriculture**. Analyses show that apples grown using conventional farming methods in Luxembourg are contaminated with up to eight pesticides. Yet there are no limits for these 'cocktails' of pesticides. And as there are no limits for these mixtures – only for each pesticide taken individually – according to our Minister for Agriculture, everything is fine as long as the limit for each pesticide is not exceeded. As one colleague put it: 'It's as if a drunkard were to say to the breathalyser: "I'm not drunk if you consider beer, wine and fruit brandy separately." What an absurd situation! In France, illnesses caused by the use of pesticides – even among the children of those affected, who may, for example, have been exposed during pregnancy – are recognised by the social security system as occupational diseases. On 14 October, at our invitation, three affected individuals – who have clearly developed cancer or Parkinson's disease as a result of exposure to pesticides – along with the director of our country's health insurance fund, will be visiting us for a public event. We hope that their testimonies and suggestions on how to improve the situation will help ensure that this issue is taken more seriously here, both at a political level and within the sectors concerned. Unfortunately, none of the ministers – Mr Hansen, Mr Deprez and Ms Wilmes – were able to make themselves available to attend this event. But at Mecor, we are convinced that the courageous testimonies of those affected will nevertheless make a difference, perhaps even with the Minister for Health.

Conclusion: rather than glossing over the reality and the Luxembourg approach – as our ministers in the fields of the environment and agriculture, in particular, tend to do – we need to lay the facts on the table and present them plainly. We must identify the obstacles and shortcomings in terms of sustainability and outline how to overcome them. In doing so, the political class would demonstrate its stature and prove that it is up to the task and has a long-term vision.

- **2 key points: Present a vision for the future that inspires people to get involved.**

For what is the pitfall for us? We need to rally people to our cause without annoying them. Everyone is in favour of citizen participation. But I still don't know where we're heading. Do the government, the trade unions, or we as a society have a vision of the future to guide us? Do we have any idea what tomorrow's society might look like – a society that takes the planet's natural limits into account? Do we have a vision of the future that doesn't merely accept what 'must' be done, but also inspires a sense of longing? A vision we look forward to with anticipation? A vision that is not limited to defending what we have already achieved, nor to piecemeal solutions, but which offers a positive

vision of the future?

If we are honest, the answer is no. The debate revolves far too much, for example, around preserving the acquired rights of certain (!) sections of the population; we are not working towards a shared vision of the future – one that would also give young people courage – and, yes, we are not even discussing it enough.

But if we want people to believe in the future, to avoid turning in on themselves and focusing solely on their own short-term interests, and to support change – whether for environmental or social reasons – then we need this vision of the future. And also so that we can take decisions that require effort on our part.

The message is therefore clear: politicians, trade unions, business leaders and civil society – together, we must open ourselves up to a frank debate on the kind of future we want for ourselves. How do we define a dignified life for all – including the most disadvantaged members of our society? We must, as Ivan Krastev puts it, manage to imagine a world different from the one we know today.

- **Third pillar: everyone must feel that they can make a contribution, and development must be collaborative, equitable and socially just:**

Indeed, studies show that when people know that decisions taken on environmental issues have a real impact and are fair and just, they generally enjoy broad support. Not everyone is in favour of them, and whilst there is some enthusiasm at the outset, this tends to wane, and there is often a much broader consensus on decisions than one might think. Incidentally, the spokesperson for 'Scientists for Future' also highlighted a long-established fact: when people are asked whether they are prepared to make an effort to preserve our vital systems, a large majority express this willingness. This figure often reaches 80 per cent. When these same people are asked whether they think others are also prepared to do so, the answer is different. They do not believe that others are prepared. Put simply: we are prepared to accept many changes, but we mistakenly believe that others would not be.

Equity, social justice and evidence of the measures' effectiveness are the key concepts crucial to the transition. Yet, in a sense, these stand in stark contrast to our government's approach, which amounts to saying: 'don't rock the boat' and 'take action'. This, amongst other things, places the burden of responsibility on the individual (and, what is more, not necessarily in a fair way). But solving major problems cannot be left to the individual. We must pull the levers that are essential to securing our future; **politics must therefore define a clear framework for everyone and shape it in a fair and just manner** in order to achieve **specific objectives**.

But 'getting the public on board' also presents a certain challenge when policy itself is anything but consistent. Unfortunately, the government is planning drastic rollbacks in climate protection – is this how it intends to get the public on board? Here are three examples:

- In theory, we want to protect the climate, but **air traffic** is set to increase massively: it is forecast to double by 2025, with a target of 10 million passengers and 1 billion (!) to be invested! And this, despite the fact that it is 100 per cent certain that we are light-years away from achieving climate neutrality in aviation. And yet, people are expected to make an effort and fly less! What a contradiction, what hypocrisy!

- **The Google data centre case:** we're all supposed to save energy, which is only right. But in Bissen, they're rolling out the red carpet for an American company. This week, we lodged a complaint with

the administrative court, because the government is allowing Google to get away with it by claiming that its energy management is a trade secret. Just imagine: Google is set to consume as much energy as all Luxembourg households combined, and yet the company gets away with it without having to provide a single piece of information. It doesn't even have to explain why it's using a technical standard that's lower than the one it applies globally! Our government is pandering to a company that is standing in the way of the energy transition, whilst completely ignoring issues of democracy, free access to information and even digital sovereignty in Europe!

- **Plug-in hybrids:** according to the government's plan, they are to be made more attractive again as company cars. This measure is accompanied by a frankly absurd statement that the aim is to win over those who are not yet convinced by electric cars. Yet in recent years, this technology has, quite rightly, not been promoted for private cars or for businesses; so why this U-turn now? Especially as electric cars have become even more efficient in the meantime... The government's message must be very clear and unambiguous: electric cars are better than ever; there is absolutely no reason to buy any other type of car (incidentally, this also applies to company cars, where it seems hybrid vehicles are once again being used more widely than under the previous government). To my knowledge, no legislative measure has ever been scrapped on the pretext that, on one occasion, a charging point could not be found for a minister. This issue is emblematic of the government's commitment to the climate. Withdraw this proposed amendment!

This **double-speak**, this **'both this and that' approach**, this frankly 'hypocritical' **attitude** on the part of the government – it simply won't do! These U-turns are indefensible in every respect!! **And besides, we really shouldn't be talking about 'stringing people along' when the government's decisions are all over the place. We're all feeling dizzy and we're not making any progress, because there's no clear political choice to be made.**

But I would like to add one thing regarding 'participation for all'. Efforts and initial measures are under way to finally **include those with fewer financial resources in the transition**. We take note of this. But it is far from enough. Just one point: all the funds allocated so far to the 44 measures aimed at implementing the social climate plan are being channelled into a single measure – the social hire of electric cars – whilst the funds earmarked for the other 44 measures have not yet been approved. Further funds will certainly be invested. But we are still lacking a clear message. It lacks strength; it lacks determination. The social dimension of the transition must be given far greater prominence!

- **Setting out concrete steps and explaining what these measures mean for people's lives...** these, to be thorough, are the last two points raised by the social scientist: their importance is so obvious that I do not wish to dwell on them further in this context. Except perhaps to point out that at least our current Environment Minister likes to celebrate what are known as 'milestones'. He already regards it as a milestone that, after three years, he has once again overhauled a strategy drawn up by the previous government... not to mention its implementation.

I do not wish to criticise everything. That would be unfair. The government has introduced **a number of good measures**, which we welcome. But these isolated, one-off improvements do nothing to alter the overall picture! Neither in terms of successfully completing the transition, nor in terms of fulfilling our responsibilities, nor in terms of keeping the government's promises. We, as Mecos, will be publishing our 'Mecoskop' from now on and in the very near future, in which we assess the implementation of the government's promises regarding sustainable development. Unfortunately, the assessment of the government's actions is, for the time being, very negative: it is far from keeping its own promises sufficiently.

And we, as Mecos, must shoulder our responsibility and, in this situation more than ever, speak out clearly, stop sugar-coating the situation, and perhaps even become more radical in a certain sense.

Under no circumstances must we succumb to fatalism and be content – as has unfortunately all too often been the case in the media – to talk mainly about what we can do to adapt to climate change. Merely adapting would already be almost decadent. Unfortunately, I have not yet been presented with the concrete proposals that, for example, we as the Ecological Movement are putting forward to ensure the success of the transition – from heating planning to a public good premium in agriculture, via organic farming, right through to making our social system – as well as our pensions – less dependent on fragile growth. Nor has it been sufficiently recognised that we are living in an era of multiple crises.

But in this speech, the focus will deliberately be on the essentials. And Mr Frieden, even though this speech is highly critical, we appreciate your presence. It is also well known that, whilst politics has a responsibility to guide societal change, it also needs the support of all of us, as well as from stakeholders such as the trade unions.

I began this speech by referring to the spokesperson for ‘Psychologists for Future’ and the concept of mourning. Yes, we must – as individuals, as a society, as politicians, as activists, as citizens – recognise that the problems of our time often overwhelm and unsettle us, and that we do not always have an immediate solution. We must also be prepared to ‘debate’ constructively in order to find the right solutions. But we must champion a positive vision of the future with all the more determination: clear in our analysis, persuasive in our discourse, consistent in our implementation, and convinced of the strength of our people and our society – and do everything in our power to rise to this great challenge.

I would like to conclude with a quote from the author *Judith Zeh*, who says, in essence, the following: *‘We must all, together, put the future back at the centre of our concerns. We must not leave it at the mercy of the rich, of someone like Elon Musk, of the fossil fuel lobby, and of a ‘status quo’ approach which, in reality, uses the idea of a ‘better future’ merely to increase its own wealth.’*