

AFRICA-EU PARTNERSHIP ON ENERGY: A PERSPECTIVE FROM AFRICAN CIVIL SOCIETY

I – Possibilities for the Africa-EU Partnership

Africa and the EU have set up a partnership on energy, which is a long-term framework for political dialogue and strategic cooperation in the field of energy. The aim of the partnership is to ensure access and energy security for both parties and to face the challenges posed by energy questions in the 21st century. The partnership is part of a larger framework that is the Africa-EU Partnership, particularly in the area of infrastructure.

More specifically, Europe will not only have to reduce its vulnerability to energy market shocks, but it will also need access to a greater amount of clean energy. Africa, on the other hand, will have to improve its citizens' access to energy services and dispose of more energy for its industrial development. The EU also needs to work towards mobilising financing at different levels for the necessary infrastructure and the development of energy sources, focusing on renewable power such as biomass, solar, wind, hydroelectric and thermal. Let us look at the potential of each type of energy to contribute to the development of Africa.

II – Different types of energy and their possible contribution to the development of Africa

Solar power

The potential of solar power in Africa is immense. Major projects involving the export of solar power produced in Africa to Europe are anticipated. This will go some way towards enabling Europe to ensure its energy security. For Africa, this will provide access to quality infrastructure and allow for the development of a new source of income.

Depending on the availability of financing and access conditions, private local initiatives could come into being and form part of this initiative. Even peasant farmers could switch to supplying electricity, and the value of large areas of the Sahel or the Sahara could rise. An increase in European investment in solar materials would allow producers to quickly recoup their investments, to reduce production costs and, in turn, to reduce market prices, resulting in increased affordability henceforth for Africans.

Biomass

The EU has decided to replace by 2020 up to 20 percent of fossil fuel used in transport with clean energy, particularly by using biofuels and, for the most part, biodiesel. Once more, Sub-Saharan Africa is being looked upon as a resource base for raw materials. Biodiesel programmes are springing up all over Africa, occupying large areas that could have otherwise been used for local needs. Critics increasingly question this policy, establishing a direct link between the development of biofuels and the food crisis. If at first glance this position can be considered well founded, it also has some limitations: African peasant farmers need a source of income to survive.

For several decades now the fall in the price of raw materials on the international market has resulted in land intended for cash crops falling into a state of neglect. A small proportion of these areas have been converted for the production of subsistence crops, but mostly they remain neglected even though they could be used to produce biofuels as cash crops. In reality, biofuel production is a godsend for

poor people in rural areas living under the poverty line, as well as for Africa. In this way, and unlike coffee, which was produced for export and not for local consumption, Africa could use its green fuel to ensure its energy security, even if South American or Asian production floods the market. This argument is also supported by the fact that first generation biofuels have been held up as little more than a red-herring since they will be quickly overtaken by technological progress and replaced by second generation biofuels.

If nothing is done so that African peasant farmers can reap the benefits, the multinationals, who are already descending on Africa to acquire land and dispossess the rightful owners, will move in and exploit these farmers and even children under labour conditions verging on slavery. This is a challenge for civil society, who has a duty to thoroughly analyse the situation for fear of contributing to such injustices.

Biogas, on the other hand, which is produced through the anaerobic digestion of waste, can be used to light whole villages and for cooking without having to chop wood, although it does depend on technology transfer and the availability of financing.

Hydroelectric power

The financing opportunities created by this partnership are going to enable countries to put in place solid infrastructure such as hydroelectric plants and expanded supply networks, as well as promoting cross-border energy cooperation. There is also potential for the development of micro and small power plants for remote communities which are not really profitable for traditional suppliers, for whom their lack of financial viability fails to make them a worthwhile investment. And these are the kinds of projects that are currently being realised through cooperation between EU and African civil society, providing access to basic energy services for women in rural areas, schools and health centres.

This partnership must also take into account the meso level that would provide access to energy at a fair price for small local industrial units if small power plants of a few megawatts were constructed specifically with the perspective of promoting local industry.

The EU-Africa partnership must therefore take into account broader aspects of investment policies, financing mechanisms for the local energy sector and technology transfer, and, why not, also look into contributing to various carbon funds such as the CDM.

The production of hydrogen could also be tied in with the installation of micro power plants, which would enable Africa – with the transfer of the appropriate technology and means – to become a major producer and exporter of hydrogen to be used in transport.

III – A fairer partnership for Africa

The EU comes out of this game very much the winner. Although the NEPAD has enabled Africa to define a certain number of its priorities and give consideration to the establishment of a regional infrastructure network, it is still far from being a match for the European multinational superpowers. It is for this reason that we ask the EU to define appropriate mechanisms for access to funds and clean technology for Africa. We also ask the EU to support African countries in putting in place national policies and strategies on energy, in improving energy governance and in realizing policies for economic development and diversification of exports, as well as incentives that promote the national energy sector.