



Energy Transition in a Changing Arab World?

Discussing Human Development Requirements for Future Large-Scale Renewable Energy projects in the MENA region

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Background and Idea of the Workshop

The Desertec vision is in continuous discussion between multiple stakeholders. Despite some initiatives in different North African countries (e.g. by MASEN in Morocco), the main voices on the question of how to develop and deploy large-scale renewable energies in the MENA region so far have been established by people and institutions from powerful countries of the North. However, for a broad implementation of renewable energies in the MENA region it is of key importance to achieve alignment by all involved parties on the vision, challenges and opportunities of the North African “Energiewende”.

Furthermore, in order to achieve social acceptance for the energy transition in MENA countries and identify potential barriers for its successful realization, it is mandatory to develop it along the needs and interest of the local stakeholders who have, so far, only gained little traction in the debate.

To maintain a broad and public dialogue with all stakeholders, including scientific experts, NGOs, industry representatives, and foremost local actors as well as other civil society representatives from the MENA region, a key part of the Desertec Discussion Group – organized by Germanwatch, Federation of German Scientists VDW, Desertec Foundation and Bread for the World – is to set up regular workshops involving a broad participant base. Since 2011, numerous workshops have been organized in Germany, discussing the Desertec concept in general and sustainability requirements for large-scale renewable energies in specific.

Based on the insights gained during these workshops, it was a broad consensus of the participants, that the next workshop shall take place in the MENA region to involve relevant civil society actors from the Southern Mediterranean.

In this regard, the World Social Forum in Tunis 2013 – 26.-30.03.2013 – was identified as a good location for a first workshop in the MENA region to set up a dialogue with civil society actors from EU and MENA countries to raise awareness and mutually discuss the potential benefits and challenges of renewable energy deployment in the MENA region.

Goals

The overall goal of this workshop was to intensify the exchange with the civil society in the MENA region in order to ensure that the voices of those directly affected are to be heard so that first and foremost the people in MENA countries will be those that benefit from the energy transition taking place in their region.

In doing so, the workshop intended to:

- a) Provide information about the Desertec concept to a broad local public in the MENA region;
- b) Discuss the Desertec fundamentals/vision with MENA stakeholders;
- c) Get input and a clear view on local needs and interests through active involvement of local stakeholders;
- d) Initiate a dialogue with civil society actors from EU and MENA countries to raise awareness and mutually discuss the potential opportunities and challenges of the renewable energy transition for the MENA region.
- e) Establish an informal civil society network to further discuss human development requirements for future large-scale renewable energy projects in the MENA region;

Target Groups

The envisioned target groups were all working on development and environmental issues and lobbying for sustainable development in either the MENA region or at a global level.

They included:

- Active civil society of the region (all Maghreb countries, local participants);
- Different regional and global NGOs;
- Local scientists, university representatives;
- People interested in either the MENA region and/or renewable energies.

The Workshop

Instead of a series of presentations, this workshop focused on open debate of all participants. Only two brief presentations were given. The rest of the workshop featured an open discussion about the challenges and opportunities of renewable energies in the region and gave the floor to the participants to express their opinion.

Results

About 25 people from different countries (e.g. Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria, Egypt, Ghana, India, Brazil, Norway, France, Germany) with very different backgrounds (NGOs, NGO networks, Trade Unions, Universities, Ministries, Media, Industry) attended the workshop. Translations were given in Arabic and French.

After two brief presentations by Franziska Dormann and Boris Schinke, the Workshop participants dove into a very lively and diverse debate about the Desertec concept and its implications for North Africa (due to its venue, the workshop focused on Desertec in North Africa).

The guiding questions of the debate were framed by Boris Schinke as follows:

- What developments/changes do you wish to see in your country/the MENA region?
- How do you think the Desertec concept could fit into this vision?
 - o *What are your concerns with regards to Desertec?*
 - o *What are your hopes with regards to Desertec?*
- Where could be challenges/opportunities to realize the Desertec concept in the MENA region?
- Which issues should be addressed by Desertec at what levels (international, national, local) to make it a success?
- Who would be willing to become part of a dialogue with civil society actors from both MENA region and EU?

While all of the participants shared the opinion that renewable energies should be promoted in North Africa due to the regions' energy needs and potential socio-economic benefits arising from these technologies, many participants raised fundamental concerns and doubts about Desertec, its intentions and its potential implications for North African countries.

Furthermore, different people pointed out, that there still exists a lack of transparency, information and participation of civil society members in the planning and development of Desertec ("Tunisians have never heard of Desertec", "The multinational corporations have all the information").

Also, some statements made at the workshop emphasized that North Africa has other important challenges to overcome, besides achieving energy security and fulfilling the right to energy ("The right to work, the right to education and alleviating poverty").

Participants were asking the following questions:

Stakeholders and interests:

- Who stands behind Desertec, who finances the Desertec Foundation?
- What is the exact difference between the Desertec Foundation and the Desertec Industrial Initiative (DII)?
- How much control will the North African countries have over the projects?
- Isn't Desertec some kind of neo-colonialistic approach?
- Are only large companies from the EU and multilateral banks involved?

Technology transfer:

- Is there a risk that North Africa substitutes its dependencies on fossil fuels with the dependence on foreign technology transfer, work force and expertise?

Environment:

- Will Desertec have negative impacts on water, land and electricity availability at the regional level?
- Doesn't the coverage of huge desert areas with mirrors affect the micro-climate and ecosystem to the worse?
- Can't we use the energy or desalinated cooling water to re-green the Sahara desert?

Socio-economics and livelihoods:

- How can Desertec achieve benefits at the local level in terms of regional value creation, high-quality jobs, environmental protection and livelihood provision?
- How could the development needs of poor countries be addressed through Desertec without destroying/blocking the traditional livelihoods of vulnerable people?
- How does Desertec contribute to education and skill development in the field of renewable energies?
- What makes Desertec different to other large-scale infrastructure projects which have been built for energy security interests but at the expense of the environment and the society?
- Is Desertec focused on exporting electricity to the EU and why, while North Africa is lacking electricity supply?
- Who will get the profits of Desertec (industry, governments, local communities)?
- How come Desertec is focused on the partnership between North Africa and the EU, whereas a possible partnership with Sub-Saharan Africa is hardly ever mentioned?

Civil society engagement:

- Why is it that Desertec hardly involves civil society actors from North Africa and no local communities, while big corporations and powerful governments are very present?

Even though the moderators of the workshop provided preliminary answers to most of these questions, a feeling of concern and worry persisted throughout the debate. From the moderators view, this feeling is understandable, given the fact that Desertec has yet been communicated in North Africa by almost only industry representatives and political stakeholders.

Notwithstanding the results of some promising approaches (such as the RE-Generation project in Egypt by the Desertec Foundation), civil society in these countries has gained only little attention in the debate.

Conclusions

While some might argue that the World Social Forum would not be the best place to discuss large-scale infrastructure projects, such as the Desertec concept, in a productive manner, its venue in Tunis made it exactly the right and suitable place to engage with North African civil society actors on this issue.

Although all workshop participants agreed on the need to promote renewable energies worldwide – not only in North Africa – many critical voices were questioning the realization of the Desertec concept.

Based on the questions that arose during the workshop it must be stated, that low levels of civil society participation, information and transparency within the realization and communication of Desertec are still causing many question marks, concerns and doubts among civil society in the Southern Mediterranean. The workshop discussion revealed that, in view of the high involvement of corporate interests, relevant civil society actors of the North African countries are suspicious about the concept's good intentions and promised implications. They are demanding their right to participate in the energy transition in their countries and do not want to be seen as just passive recipients of foreign technologies. They want their fair share and are claiming the transparent and equitable distribution of benefits to the best of society.

Thus, in order to achieve the required social acceptance for any kind of foreign investments in energy infrastructure projects (small and large-scale) in North Africa, transparent information and a fair and comprehensive dialogue with North African civil society and beyond is of utmost importance. Only through the active engagement of civil society actors it can be ensured that the voices of those directly affected are to be heard so that it will be first and foremost the people in the Southern riparian of the Mediterranean that benefit from the energy transition taking place in their region.

With all participants having agreed to be part of any future civil society dialogue on Desertec, thereby underlining the demand to establish an informal civil society network on the issue, the workshop at the World Social Forum in Tunis can be seen as a promising starting point. Now the process of building bridges between the civil societies in North Africa and the EU through both a South-South as well as a South-North exchange should be intensified (e.g. through a series of thematically focused workshops in different North African countries). However, it will be crucial for its success that any future dialogue among the regions does not intend to be a lobby platform for Desertec, but rather be a forum to discuss it from a neutral, still constructive perspective.

For citation:

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