

A call for climate justice for everyone



Current environmental policies in the country are far from satisfactory. Belgium will face major challenges related to climate change in the immediate future, including rising temperatures and severe disruptions in the annual distribution of rainfall. However it is not putting into practice the commitments made by the international community. The dialogue among the different regions of the country, the industrial sector and civil society has become paralysed, and this can only be overcome through massive campaigns raising public awareness of the urgent problems threatening the environment and endangering the welfare of society.

CNCD-11.11.11
Nicolas Van Nuffel

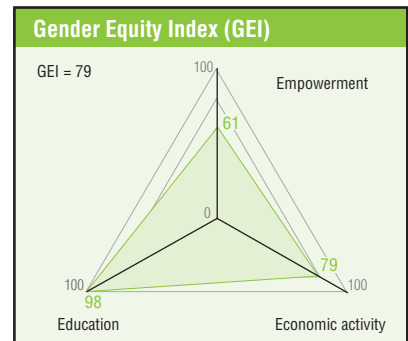
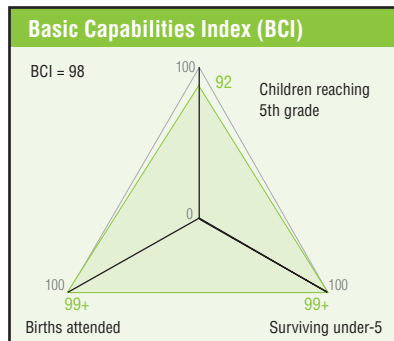
Between 1993 and 1997 Belgium established a Federal Council for Sustainable Development. This is made up of representatives of employers, unions, various NGOs and the scientific community, while all the federal ministers and the various regional governments are represented as observers.¹ In the context of a strong tradition of social dialogue, however, Belgium is missing the step between institutional mechanisms and effective implementation of a proactive policy towards sustainable development.

A clear example of this is the challenge posed by climate change, which brings social and economic repercussions of significant environmental importance. While one could argue that the impact of global warming will affect Belgium to a lesser extent than developing countries or countries with weaker economies, it is undeniable that the consequences will be far from insignificant. These will, in fact, depend on the extent and orientation of measures to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases and combat the effects of ongoing changes and the speed with which they are implemented.

Heat, rain and social inequality

According to a report co-directed by Professor van Ypersele, Vice-President of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), and Philippe Marbaix, temperatures in Belgium could increase by up to 4.9°C in winter and 6.6°C in summer during the twenty-first century.² This will have important consequences for the environment, including a significant loss of biodiversity.³ In terms of the impact on water resources, “projections of the evolution of precipitation, by the end of the century, show an increase between 6 and 23% for winter and a (decrease) for summer (...) that would reach 50%.”⁴

These disrupted rainfall patterns, and the resulting rise in more extreme phenomena such as



floods and droughts, could have serious effects on the country's economy. Furthermore, the negative impact of rising temperatures will have profound impacts on the health of the population, with heat waves likely to lead to increased mortality and morbidity.⁵

Belgium has the necessary means to address these negative consequences, especially since other effects of a positive nature could in part compensate for the magnitude of the damage. For example, an increase in agricultural productivity is expected – especially for some crops (including wheat) – provided that temperatures do not rise by more than 3°C.⁶ However not everyone has the same ability to deal with these changes: “The real impact of climate change on the health of a population depends largely on its vulnerability, which in turn depends strongly on the level of life, access to health and the ability of that population to adapt to new climatic conditions.”⁷

Moreover global warming is not the only environmental challenge that Belgium will face in the near future. Since domestic energy resources are limited to nuclear energy and the small (though growing) sector of renewable energy, the country has become extremely dependent on imported fossil fuels such as natural gas from the Netherlands, Norway and Algeria.⁸ For this reason, the impact of depletion of these resources may make energy prices soar and become unaffordable for less affluent populations.

The obstacle of institutional complexity

Sustainable development cannot be analysed outside an international context. The 1992 Rio Summit on Climate Change established the principle of shared but differentiated responsibilities between the most industrialized and contaminating countries and the less developed countries. Belgium, which is on the list of countries that must reduce their emissions of greenhouse gases, has not stopped producing alarming amounts of these gases nor has it instituted programmes to reduce emissions. In fact, in the European debate on reducing emissions of greenhouse gases after 2012, Belgium seems to be paralysed by the challenge. While a number of countries in the EU voted to move unilaterally to a 30% reduction of greenhouse gases, Belgium has not yet made any clear decision.

In this respect the institutional complexity of Belgium is not a positive factor. Since the environment is a theme shared between the federal State and the regions (Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels), these four entities must reach agreement in order to take a position in international discussions. However, in terms of the specific problem of reducing emissions, a lack of agreement results in the implementation of de facto vetoes exercised against the proposals needed to at least advance in the debate and take on commitments seriously.

Unfortunately Belgian civil society is not unanimous in demanding the acceptance of the EU recommendations. Thus the Federation of Enterprises in Belgium (FEB) is mounting a strong lobby against any unilateral attempt to bring about an increase in Europe's commitments and therefore those of Belgium. In a notice published shortly before the Cancun climate change conference in 2010, the FEB considered that

1 See : <www.belspo.be/fr/doc/fdd/FR/conseil.html>

2 P. Marbaix and J.-P. van Ypersele, *Impact des changements climatiques en Belgique*, (Brussels : Greenpeace, 2004), <www.astr.ucl.ac.be/users/marbaix/impacts/docs/GP-rep04-Sum_2-EN.pdf>.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 European Commission, *Belgium Energy Mix Fact Sheet*, <ec.europa.eu/energy/energy_policy/doc/factsheets/mix/mix_be_en.pdf>.

“Europe is alone with its unilateral commitments to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases. Obviously this has a negative impact on competitiveness. (...) At this point, the Belgian business world does not favour continuing the reduction target of -30% because the conditions defined by the EU are not yet in place.”⁹

But is it true that these conditions do not exist? A study by Climate Action Network-Europe published in February 2011 shows that Belgium could lose significant sums if Europe refuses to move to a 30% reduction in emissions: USD 2,800 million in revenues from the auction of emission rights, as well as USD 1,260 million in savings in health care could be lost.¹⁰

Furthermore, investing in the transformation of the Belgian economic and energy model would also have a long-term positive impact on the country's economy. It is clear that this transformation would require adjustments to some sectors that emit a great deal of greenhouse gases, such as the steel and auto industries, and that such adjustments should be accompanied by strong social measures, particularly in terms of job losses.

Resistance to change

While climate changes and measures to address them are good indicators of Belgium's commitment to the path of sustainable development, they are by no means the only ones. Measures to help improve access to housing and the redevelopment of public transport are also badly needed. Suggestions have been made by both the social and environmental movements, but the political decision-makers are slow to come forward with answers. These measures would also contribute to the collective welfare of humanity by reducing pollutant emissions, especially greenhouse gases, and would help combat inequality by reducing costs for low-income users and developing quality alternative transport other than cars.

LESSONS FROM FUKUSHIMA

The nuclear disaster at Fukushima in Japan caused by the earthquake and tsunami on 11 March 2011, was the most serious accident since Chernobyl and caused some governments around the world to re-think their nuclear power policies. Following in the steps of Germany, which decided to phase out its nuclear power stations between 2011 and 2020, the Belgian Government announced that it would significantly reduce its own nuclear programme by 2015.

This policy includes closing two reactors in the city of Doel and a third at the Tihange nuclear station. These are three of the oldest reactors still in operation in the country. The other reactors will be progressively shut down over the next ten years and the nuclear energy programme will cease completely in 2025.

However, the current administration has said these closure dates are “flexible”, and in the interim the Government will consider the nuclear programme as a “provisional” source of power. It also reaffirmed its commitment to make every effort to develop alternative energy sources and put them to work. It has also been suggested that nuclear power could be taxed more heavily as a way of bolstering research into alternative energy technologies.¹

¹ Jonathan Benson, “First Germany, now Belgium: nuclear energy to be phased out by 2015”, *Natural News*, (November 4, 2011), <www.naturalnews.com/034059_nuclear_energy_Belgium.html>.

Proposals are not what is missing on the desks of those responsible for decision-making, and Belgium is the site for many collaborations between North-South movements, environmental NGOs, peasant movements and trade unions that could develop alternatives to the current model. However it should be noted that resistance to change is still strong in many sectors of society. This is why it is not enough to question those responsible for decision-making but it is also necessary to launch campaigns targeting the general public. These should raise people's awareness of the social and environmental impact of their behaviour and show them that an alternative model of development is possible.

Conclusion

Belgium's attitude in international and European discussions on the reductions of greenhouse gas emissions contributes to keeping the whole of Europe below the commitments recommended by the scientific community. While the alternative model of development is still to be defined, it is clear that it should be more respectful of the rights of the population as well as of those of the populations of the least well-off countries. For this reason a campaign that brings together NGOs and trade unions to reinforce this awareness in all sectors of society will be launched in 2011 under the slogan “climate justice for all!” ■

⁹ Federation of Enterprises in Belgium, *European and international climate policy: state of the art and current challenges*, (Brussels: 21 October 2010), <vbo-feb.be/media/uploads/public/_custom/NoteClimatCA_21102010.pdf>.

¹⁰ Climate Action Network Europe, *30%. Why Europe Should Strengthen its 2020 Climate Action*, (Brussels: February 2011).