Böll Lunch Debate: "Fukushima: Four Years Later"[1]

Event Report

On 11 March 2011, one of the most powerful earthquakes on record hit the north-east of Japan. The resulting tsunami struck the nuclear power plant Fukushima Daiichi and heavily damaged the plant. Massive amounts of radioactive material were released into the environment. Since Chernobyl in 1986 this has been the largest nuclear disaster with far-reaching consequences.

Four years after the disaster it's time to take stock: with Tetsunari Iida, executive director of the Institute for Sustainable Energy Policies in Japan. He exposed to the audience a first-hand insight into the current situation in Fukushima and on how the disaster impacted life in Japan: as a society and in terms of its economic and energy policy - especially, in the light of the recent controversial debate on returning to nuclear power.

The Fukushima disaster and its impacts still today are also of significance from an EU perspective, as Jan Vande Putte, energy expert at Greenpeace Belgium/Japan, elaborated. The current discussions on an internal energy market and proposals for an Energy Union as well as the growing chorus of support for nuclear as an allegedly "climate-friendly" indigenous energy source underlines this fact.

The panelists based their discussion on the following key questions:

- How is the current situation in Japan? Is there progress with regard to the decontamination work and a possible return of citizens to their hometowns?
- Is it realistic that the Japanese government will restart its nuclear power plants? What would be the reasons to do so and in which time?
- What is the Japanese public opinion about nuclear energy?
- Are there societal and/or political movements against nuclear energy?

[1] This Böll Lunch Debate took place on the 4th March 2015 in the representation of North Rhine-Westphalia. Guest speakers were: **Tetsunari Iida**, Executive Director of the Institute for Sustainable Energy Policies and advisor on renewable energy to the Japanese Government; **Jan Vande Putte**, Energy campaigner at Greenpeace Belgium/Japan. Moderation and co-host was **Rebecca Harms**, Co-president of the Greens/EFA group in the European Parliament; **Rainer Steffens**, Director of the Representation of the State of North Rhine-Westphalia to the EU, gave a brief introduction and welcome and **Kathrin Glastra**, Liaison Energy Transition Western Europe, Deputy Director Climate and Energy Programme, Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung European Union, concluded the session.

The Current Situation in Fukushima

Four years after the catastrophe, the situation remains worrying. Until today, more than 120.000 people have not been allowed to move back into their homes, and are not likely to ever return to the zone. The Japanese President, Shinzo Abe claims repeatedly that the situation is "under control". But the actual situation on the ground looks different: the foundations of the reactors have become permeable and contaminated water is spilling out into the ocean. The decontamination efforts have aimed at limiting this outflow by pumping contaminated water into storage tanks. But this is not a sustainable solution, why it is envisaged to build a wall between the reactors and the ocean.

Managing the huge amount of nuclear waste in the area is also a crucial issue that needs to be faced. Between 15 and 30 million m3 of contaminated soil and other nuclear waste have been stored next to the power plant. There is no possibility of reducing the radioactivity and no long-time solution for the storage. Furthermore, as 80% of particles were blown to the ocean, the maritime environment surrounding Fukushima also remains highly contaminated.

The example of Iitate and the government's response

The government reports are downplaying the degrees of radiation and thus the danger for the people. The media are also under pressure not to confront the government on those delicate matters. The presented example of the city of Iitate illustrates the inadequate reaction of the government. Even when it was known that Iitate had been highly exposed to radiation, the evacuation of the village occurred only over a month after the catastrophe because the government did not want to intervene. Officials might have thought that evacuating the area would make the situation look even worse than it really was. The town became a symbolic place and a lot of effort has been put into its decontamination. Jan Vande Putte expressed his conviction that the government wants to "normalize" [the situation in]

liitate before the Olympic Games in 2020. But this is practically impossible as the contamination level is too high to expect any good results in a reasonable amount of time and money.

By now, decontamination efforts have not yet been sufficient. The level of radiation is still too high for people to move back to their houses in the evacuated zone. However, the government wants to "convince" the residents to move back by stopping to grant compensation to the victims after one year in order to re-establish some kind of (pretended) normality.

The Possibility of "Nuclear Come-Back" in Japan

In 2012 there was a strong will to quit nuclear energy amongst the Japanese. But the election of Shinzo Abe in 2012 has marked a return of pro-nuclear opinions. The government still sticks to the "nuclear fuel cycle" myth and aims to restart the nuclear power plants. One of the reactors that the government plans to restart shortly is the reactor in Sendai, located at the Western coast of Japan. This is a sensitive issue as Sendai is a volcanic area. The seismic activities threaten the proper functioning and the safety of power plants, as for instance volcanic eruptions with lava flows and ash rains may cause damage to the cooling system. Due to safety issues, restarting the nuclear power plant will be a long process anyway, even though the government is pushing the subject on the agenda. The government indeed has strong economic motivations: since the catastrophe, electricity costs in Japan have increased by 30%. This is an immediate consequence of costs caused by the Fukushima accident, as Japan needed to import a large share of its energy from one day to the next, whilst at the same time denomination efforts were eating up the government's budget. It now hopes that restarting nuclear power plants will contribute to the reduction of electricity costs.

On the other hand, mentalities in Japan are changing. In the month following the Fukushima event, there was a clear loss in trust in nuclear energy expressed in the public opinion, reinforced by the handling of the situation by nuclear operator Tepco and the government.

Another fact shows that change also reaches the judicial system: while usually supportive of the nuclear industry, recent legal cases brought forward against Tepco show that things are changing.

The Development of Alternative Energy Sources and Political Tendencies

Nowadays, the Japanese society is reconsidering its use of energy as well as its energy sources. Before the catastrophe, public opinion was mostly in favour of nuclear energy as it was seen as an alternative to oil and as possibility to provide cheap electricity, which benefited both economy and national security. Due to the Fukushima accident, people are getting aware of the real risks of nuclear energy.

While the discussion in Japanese civil society had at first only been a debate about the limits of nuclear energy, new local movements have emerged and started debates on renewable energies, energy efficiency, and energy cooperatives.

Although the conservative government of Shinzo Abe clearly favors nuclear energy, quite a few conservative actors on a local level oppose those politics and are engaged in those debates. Small anti-nuclear parties are emerging, but it is very difficult for those new parties to gain a place in the national political game due to the electoral system. Some of those local parties have even scored victories in local elections. However, the political anti-nuclear movements are divided and have not yet unified on a national level due to their regional orientations.

Citizens and local politicians see renewables cooperatives as a chance to gain control over their own electricity production and consumption. Together with the need to substitute nuclear energy (all nuclear power plants are shut down since 2013), this interest in renewables has enabled a massive development of those energies in the last past years. Moreover, Japan has a very well interconnected energy grid which will be of strategic advantage to the development of a new electricity system based on renewable energies.

Conclusion

The challenges Japan is facing are far from being met. The decontamination works will have to continue for many years, and in such a difficult situation, it is absolutely worrying that the Japanese government considers restarting the country's nuclear power plants. On this issue, the EU could play a much stronger role by sharing knowledge and expertise and offering a closer cooperation with Japan. Unfortunately, due to a lack of coherence between member-states' nuclear policies, the EU is cannot speak united and its influence on Japan's nuclear reorientation may remain limited. Also, some perceive a "wall" blocking information flows and possibilities to exchange on the issue. When it comes to EU-Japan relations it is regrettable that nuclear energy is only barely discussed on summit meetings.

From a Green perspective, a stronger movement against nuclear power in Japan is necessary. It is crucial to raise awareness for the risks of nuclear energy and its external costs related to nuclear waste management and the avoidance of catastrophes like Fukushima. The current discussion on the Energy Union framework might provide ample opportunity for an intensified campaign against nuclear and fossil energies.