

Speech by County Councillor Mrs Agneta Granström, Norrbotten, Sweden at CPMR energy meeting in Pamplona, 5-6 October 2006.

Sustainable energy as a tool against rural desirtification

The world's energy needs will constantly grow as countries, above all China and India, as well as developing countries, begin to expand their economies and welfare. In the coming decades, energy demand is expected to rise by 60 per cent.

Today, energy consumption in a global perspective is extremely one-sided. The rich, more highly industrialised countries, with 20 per cent of the world's population, consume 80 per cent of the world's resources. Only a little over 13 per cent of the consumption is based on renewable energy resources and over 80 per cent on fossil fuels such as oil, coal and gas, while the remainder, about 7 per cent, comes from nuclear power.

Supply and demand are out of phase. The struggle for energy resources will intensify. There is also a risk that energy will become a more distinct political weapon. The gas conflict between Russia and the Ukraine is a clear example of this.

We in Sweden, we in Europe, and we in what is called the developed world, must realise that the world order of tomorrow demands a fairer distribution of the important growth motor that energy is. We must be able to give tomorrow's citizens in Jokkmokk, Sweden, in Split, Croatia and in Windhoek, Namibia, a vision to inspire their future generations. It is a matter of solidarity, but also one of world stability.

The conclusion is that Norrbotten County's, Sweden's and the EU's energy strategies must be given a dimension of international solidarity, where important ingredients include exchanges and support linked to know-how and research, energy-saving, and a purposeful drive to achieve sustainable and renewable energy sources.

Many of the serious global problems today are connected to energy use. The most evident and discussed is of course climate change, through the greenhouse effect, which most people consider to be due to combustion, above all of coal, oil and gas. If we do not manage to curb emissions, it will lead to dramatic changes in life conditions – ours, but above all, those of generations to come.

However, to completely do away with fossil fuels today is not a solution, neither at European level nor global level. The transport sector will be dependent on fossil fuels for a long time to come. Even though alternative fuels and types of motor are being developed, it still will take a long time to re-align this enormous sector.

Above all in the developing countries, fossil energy forms are prerequisite to everyday life and growth. Many countries are totally dependent on coal as an energy source, and will remain so for a long time. It is therefore a question of finding technological and economic solutions to the problem of emissions arising from the combustion of fossil fuels.

Energy issues are a high priority area all over the world. Everywhere, there is a search for new solutions to improve and replace old combustion technology for producing electricity and heat. The negative effects of energy production through fossil fuels have led to growing interest in sustainable and renewable energy sources on nature's own terms, and have also led to more and more investments in research and development in this field.

The field of energy is already an important base industry, with one foot in the “old” industrial society and the other in the knowledge-based society.

We sell energy in the form of electrical power, but above all we produce new knowledge, we develop new combustion technologies and run a number of energy experiments, both large scale and small, which with a determined and coherent energy strategy can generate further growth.

The international market, both for the export of know-how and for the manufacture of energy technology products, is under powerful growth. In the knowledge-based society, it is necessary to understand how to make a livelihood by selling knowledge and finding ways to reach the client base.

In this process it is important to remember that all energy is in principle generated from political resolve. That was the situation in Sweden and in most other industrialised countries when the major energy systems were constructed. As we now go forward in refining our energy assets, it is equally important that politics, research and business work hand in hand. The role of the political sphere is to create the infrastructural conditions and to link the players. This provides a welfare factor that adds value also to the public sector (healthcare, elderly care etc.) alongside companies' income statements and the world of research.

This pre-supposes understanding among political representatives that new production of energy requires a full infrastructure. This does not seem to be a problem as regards constructing nuclear power, but becomes distinctly problematic when developing the biofuel sector. Developing windpower is often linked to problems in transmitting any surplus energy, when in fact it is a question of the community and business putting the necessary infrastructure in place.

We in politics must realise that the approaching restructuring process with regard to renewable energy requires that necessary infrastructure decisions are made in such a way that they do not counteract the process.

Our world today is completely different. Contacts within our country are certainly still important, but the playing field, the conditions and the aims of cooperation have been radically altered through Sweden's membership in the EU. It has become more or less a condition of life for individual regions also to set up functional direct contacts with the EU's different bodies and committees. This is not however a matter of acquiring aid, but rather one of highlighting the region's potential as a basis for the continued development of prosperity.

This applies not only in politics and administration – it is just as evident in research and business, where success and development also require more extensive international exchanges and cooperation.

One important precondition for positive developments in the field of energy (and other fields too) in our regions is that we stand together in bringing about effective development groups that can spotlight and assert our regional advantages to the rest of Europe. Players need to be brought together throughout the value chain, from politics to administration, via research and development, to energy producers and manufacturers.

European cooperation is important to our common growth and solidarity with others. By combining networks in research, education, business, energy bodies and politics into a liaison station (Triple Helix), a meeting place is created for the exchange of thoughts and ideas in order to agree on goals and strategies and on who shall act, how and when. A broad approach of this type adds the necessary political dimension that makes the energy discussion something more universal than one of megawatt hours, voltage loss and other technology, as has often been the case both in Sweden and Europe.

A first step in forming such a cooperation body is to unite on a common energy strategy platform, with clear goals, activities and a timetable – and to take action! This platform will be an important declaration of intent from Norrbotten and other energy regions when the EU sets out its energy strategy for the future: a strategy that will also aim to strengthen the EU's competitiveness in the field of energy.

Today, Norrbotten County Council is already active on energy issues in the EU's regional cooperation. One example is the County Council's initiative within the AER (Assembly of European Regions) to form an international energy work group. The group has been given the name PEGASUS, The Porjus Energy Group for a Sustainable Society. The energy work group was formed in connection with an international energy conference in Porjus in Norrbotten, at which researchers and political representatives from twelve countries gathered to exchange experiences about renewable energy sources. The PEGASUS group can be an important meeting place for discussing energy issues and can be a major asset to our common growth ambitions in the field of energy.

A coastal location can bring certain advantages but also special difficulties. Therefore, 154 regions in 26 countries with over 170 million inhabitants have joined to form the CPMR (Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions of Europe). Norrbotten is taking part in the work on energy issues within this grouping.

We also collaborate in the Barents Region with north-western Russia, where energy issues are of strategic importance.

Norrbotten has more than just major untapped energy sources: in addition – perhaps above all – it has considerable know-how in matters related to technology, systems and equipment in the field of energy, primarily sustainable and renewable energy sources.

This is something which we must purposefully utilise to be able to contribute towards more long-term sustainable growth and balance in the development of prosperity in our county, in Sweden, in Europe, and not least, in the third world. Solidarity with other, less favoured regions, must be given more attention in different action plans.

My county, Norrbotten, has considerable untapped energy sources.

These include wood fuel, bio-energy crops, and wind power in mountain and coastal areas, vast areas making it simpler to use geothermal heating/cooling and waste heat flow from base industries.

Northern Sweden also has other advantages. These advantages include solid know-how in hydropower technology and energy research at Luleå University of Technology, which in many fields is at the global cutting edge, state-of-the-art technology for the combustion of biofuels, refined system solutions for linking energy sources in an optimal way, a large number of small scale innovators, skilled manufacturers of energy products, and not least – a population interested in environmental and energy issues. In Norrbotten, with 250,000 inhabitants, no less than 4,000 people earn their livelihood in the energy sector. This means that by tradition this sector is strong in Norrbotten. In a normal year, about 15 TWh (terawatt hours) is produced, which represents about 11 per cent of Sweden's total production of electrical power.

But Norrbotten has problem too. It is a peripheral region in northern Sweden, a region of long distances and a cold climate. In the energy restructuring that has now begun, major demands will be made that we should ensure that both the population and the business sector be given the possibility of continued prosperity and growth. This must be achieved through long term sustainable environmental thinking, which must completely permeate social development.

This restructuring process will make itself felt now that society, perhaps too late, has realised the necessity in all strategic decisions to include environmental considerations in order to achieve long term sustainable development.

Norrbotten is an energy region with potential, and I know that there are several others in Europe. Let us together make use of this and create the conditions needed to secure in the long term the welfare of the citizens of Europe and of the world.