#sustainabledevelopment #planetaryboundaries #humanrights

#JustTransition with #Renewables

‘Planet of the Humans’, documentary of Jeff Gibbs and Michael Moore

Who’s Afraid of Vandana Shiva ?

(Summary)

Bernard Mazijn
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Statement to the title of this text

There are two perspectives. Both relevant for the content of this text. On the one hand, it is a nod to the play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*? by Edward Albee from 1962, in which sense of reality and illusion are brought into balance. According to Christopher Bigsby, a British literary analyst and novelist, the play " "attacks the false optimism and myopic confidence of modern society." On the other hand, reference is made here to Vandana Shiva, a scientist and activist from India, who says during an interview in the documentary: "*So, we are talking of the old oil economy trying to maintain itself through another raw material, the green planet. . . . the big crisis of our times is that our minds have been manipulated to give power to illusions. We have shifted to measuring growth, not in terms of how life is enriched, but in terms of how life is destroyed.*"

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Summary

In brief

The main aim of the full text - after the sometimes pamphletary controversy over the documentary by Jeff Gibbs and Michael Moore - is to return to the essence of what the debate should be: put the issue of renewable energy in a broader context, observe with open mind what is going on, try to see the connections with other problems and then formulate - after analysis - proposals for solution(s).

It is for this reason that I agree with the "general message" of this documentary, actually symbolized by the interview with Vandana Shiva, even if criticisms can be made on certain points in the film. Also note that this medium (a documentary) is necessarily limited.

Nevertheless, I do not agree with many criticisms on the documentary concerning renewable energy: the cheap price, the huge potential, the 'green' electric car, the recycling of solar panels and wind turbines, the solution of CCS / U, the available land area, etc. These are 'hooray' messages that in fact fit perfectly within the framework of the current economic system focused on growth, global structural inequality and neoliberal capitalism whose ideology is only short term.

Remember that I am in favor of a just transition towards the sustainable development of our society, in which we control demand in terms of energy and make supply more sustainable (and until further notice without nuclear energy). Directions of solutions have been formulated for some time to deal with the problems in this regard. In fact, I would expect the critics of the documentary (sometimes even without seeing them) to take an activism to do what we stand for together and thus openly face any issues. Apparently, people prefer to stick their heads in the sand. I invite you to read this text in full.

Extensive summary

In no uncertain terms, the documentary "Planet of the Humans" was criticized. In the text below, I make counter-arguments to this criticism that has been formulated via the (social) media both internationally and domestically. Science is not value-free. My assessment framework are the values from radical enlightenment. For me, this means that I strive for the operationalization of sustainable development, which for me is a concept of solidarity in space and in time, i.e. solidarity with everyone on this planet ("in space") and with future generations ("in time"). In a first reaction to social media, I therefore closed my message about this with #sustainabledevelopment #planetaryboundaries #humanrights. Nor does this text mean that there are no mistakes in the documentary. However, it does reveal some important problems to enable such a transition and it is therefore important not to use an ostrich policy.

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After the introductive tone, in the following part of my text - with arguments - I draw attention to two points that are related to the criticism of the documentary:

- ***"production", "consumption" and "population": three factors of environmental pressure***
  in order to keep energy demand under control, urgent action will have to be taken on all three factors according to the principle of "common but differentiated responsibility"; in a North / South perspective, this means that each country has its responsibility, but that the OECD countries must bear an important part of the burden to find solutions;
- ***"scarcity of raw materials" and "effects in the Global South"***
  the exponential demand for raw materials, including for renewable energy, is leading to a worldwide war for resources and to an impact on the local communities and their environment that cannot be

reconciled with the operationalization of sustainable development, the concept of solidarity in space and in time.

To be clear, I am in favor of #JustTransition with #Renewables, a just transition with a focus on energy-efficiency and renewable energy. As argued in the annex to the text, nuclear energy has no place in our society until further notice.

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In the most extensive part, I address ten objections to the documentary. This list is not exhaustive, but I mainly select those criticisms that occur repeatedly and in which I think I can write something about the subject of criticism - in all modesty.

The cost of generating a kWh from sun or wind has fallen sharply in the past 10 years, at the expense of people and the environment. This is possible within the current economic system because of the relocation of industry and the shifting of ecological and social costs in the global supply chains.

The increase in the share of renewable energy worldwide cannot meet the increasing demand for energy. Renewable energy production has risen spectacularly in the Western world in the past 10 years, but worldwide this has been more than insufficient. In addition, now and in the future it will be accompanied by an increase in the demand for raw materials (biomass, metals, minerals).

Compared to fossil fuel cars, it is doubtful whether the electric car is "the greenest" because it usually only looks at greenhouse gas emissions and not at the other environmental impacts. The label 'sustainable' cannot be affixed to an electric car at all: this would mean that there are no social and socio-economic problems. Which is not the case. To give the impression that a replacement of one type (with a fuel engine) by another type (with an electric motor) is the solution is turning a wheel in front of the eyes. All actors must now invest in and invest in what is called in Dutch the STOP principle ("Step, Bike, Public Transport, Private Transport").

Solar panels and wind turbines may be 85-95% "recyclable", but are not yet "recycled" to that extent. As with other products, there is (currently) little reason to be optimistic because efforts to take action only started five years ago. First, a systematic and coherent approach within a circular economy is needed to make the desirable operational.

Carbon Capture and Storage "(CCS) and" Carbon Capture and Use "(CCU) is and remains a hype. Over the past 10-15 years, technological optimism about "Carbon Capture, Storage and Usage" has been billowing up and down. For the time being, there is little reason to believe that these technologies will solve much of "our problem" (i.e. greenhouse gas emissions, especially CO_2). Many preconditions must first be fulfilled. Here too, there is an increasing demand for raw materials.

The statement that less than 1% of all land area is needed for renewable energy from sun and wind is problematic. After all, referring to the planetary boundaries, the focus must be on the use of surface area of existing infrastructure, not on taking over (the remaining surface area for) habitat / ecosystems.

There must be absolute restraint in the (further) taking over of habitat / ecosystems in our and elsewhere in the world for biomass in function of renewable energy (and livestock). Although many protagonists of renewable energy have changed their point of view and reject biomass in the past ten years, there are still important (multinational) organizations that continue to build new plants.

Other points in my text deal very briefly with '***the conflict of interest between industry and NGOs***', '***the lack of upscaling of potential applications***' and '***the energy intensity of machines (bulldozers, cranes, etc.) in the construction of (large-scale) parks with wind turbines or solar panels***'.

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In the past period, I had hoped that more and more people would follow me in trying to understand the renewable energy issues in detail, accepting the challenge and - especially - addressing those issues to make progress towards #JustTransition with #renewables. So far without much result. I hope that this documentary and accompanying debate will improve things. After all, we have already formulated proposals for action in 2013 - and repeated / updated in 2018. There is no ranking among the proposed measures / initiatives, but if a problem like this is urgent then political responsibility must be taken. So appoint a Minister for Raw Materials, Energy and Space, who has an observatory that monitors the flows of raw materials to, within and from Belgium (including the effects on people and the environment).