

How the Common Will Inspires Unlikely Victories over Special Interest Groups

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Something interesting is happening in Central Europe. I just returned from Berlin where I attended a global gathering on Banking for a Better World. The meeting was sponsored by the [Global Alliance for Banking on Values](#), which comprises 22 banks operating with social and ecological responsible banking principles in everything they do. It's a small group of innovative banks, including GLS, Triodos, and BRAC Banks. Their combined total assets are minuscule in comparison with those of the "too big to fail" Wall Street banks. But then, all profound innovations start very small.

Why do socially responsible banks matter? Because we need to fund the movement that all of us care so deeply about. We need to redirect speculation-driven money back into the heart of the real economy, back into the sources of social, ecological, and cultural renewal.

One of these strategic areas of investment is what in Germany is called the Energiewende — the currently ongoing transformation of the energy system from fossil and nuclear to renewable sources of energy. It's the biggest infrastructure project in Germany since World War II, moving the country into what Jeremy Rifkin has termed the third industrial revolution.

How did that happen? How is it possible that in a world in which governments tend to be firmly in the grip of special interest groups (example: Washington, where health, energy, and financial reforms have not touched any of the powerful vested interests to date) that the tide is turning from organized irresponsibility (that is, our current 1.5 planet footprint) to pioneering the way toward a more

sustainable economy?

What explains such a medium-sized miracle in Germany?

Briefly: It began in the late 1970s and early '80s with a massive 30-plus-year-old grassroots movement that staged a series of enormous demonstrations against nuclear power construction sites all over Germany and elsewhere in Europe. The movement discussed all of the ideas and concepts (including the concept of *Energiewende*) that 33 years later a conservative German government adopted as government policy. It began by bringing the ideas raised by the grassroots activists into civil society conversations. It also created a vehicle for launching those ideas into the world of politics: the Green Party. The German Green Party was founded in 1980 and first elected to the national parliament in 1983. From 1998 to 2005 it was a coalition partner in the German government. During that period, the ideas of the *Energiewende* moved into the mainstream of politics and policymaking.

But in 2010/11, the German chancellor, Angela Merkel, influenced by the powerful energy industry, decided to undo the phasing out of nuclear power that the earlier Red-Green German government had set in motion. Then, in 2011, the disaster at Fukushima happened, and the political landscape shifted again. The experience of the nuclear meltdown combined with the strong grassroots reaction in Germany (where the majority of the population supports the exit from nuclear energy) prompted Chancellor Merkel to put the *Energiewende* back into action — despite strong objections from the traditional energy sector. Today, most Germans still support the *Energiewende* although it has resulted in higher energy prices for them.

So what's the pattern here? A well-established grassroots movement that starts with ideas and civic circles, moves to spontaneous actions and grassroots mobilizing, and results in political decision-making and large-scale refocusing of entrepreneurial action. As a consequence, we see an emerging movement of civic, people-owned energy co-operatives that are trying to take over from the big public utilities and big energy companies. The shift from fossil and nuclear to renewable sources of energy is also fueling a shift toward more distributed, more local forms of shared ownership. In Germany alone there now exist 500 locally owned co-operatives focusing on renewable, local energy production.

Where have we seen a similar pattern recently, where a grassroots-based common will wins out over the multi-million-dollar campaign of the vested interests?

Switzerland. On March 3 the Swiss people decided to force public companies to give shareholders a binding vote on executive compensation, effectively ending a period of obscene bonus payments that business executives gave to each other without effective shareholder oversight. In spite of a massive public campaign by the entire political and business establishment of the country, 68 per cent of voters approved the proposal, one of the largest majorities in a referendum ever.

Another example from Germany is the Bavarian citizen initiated referendum in 2010 of a total ban on smoking in all public places, in spite of a massive campaign by the tobacco industry.

So what can we learn about how these grassroots movements express, facilitate, and embody a common will that prevails, against all odds and against the massive firepower of organized special interest groups, in order to make their communities better places? One thing we learn is that elements of direct democracy, like the use of a referendum, can (if linked with quality spaces for public conversation) be a very effective vehicle to weaken the dependency of politicians from special interest groups and to move a country forward.

Where else have you seen examples of this kind of action? And what key learning can we take from their stories?

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