

Post-growth perspectives for the Lausitz lignite mining region? - Opportunities and challenges

An interview with Carel Carlowitz Mohn, conducted by Mai Anh Ha, Meret Batke and Bastian Lange

The civil society group 'Lausitz Perspectives' ('Lausitzer Perspektiven') is committed to positively shaping structural change in the Lausitz region and actively influencing the transition to a post-fossil economy. It views itself as a platform for exchange and understanding of what the future of the region could look like. Citizens should not be passive spectators but should act to shape and manage structural change.

www.lausitzer-perspektiven.de

Carel Mohn is a qualified journalist and holds a degree in political sciences. He became involved in the founding and work of 'Lausitz Perspectives' because he is convinced that it is possible to combine decent employment opportunities, industry and environmentally sustainable economic activity.

How long has the initiative been active?

Carel Mohn: It was in 2011/2012 that we began to look at the future prospects of the Lausitz. Over time this work led to the establishment of our organisation as a registered NGO, which works very closely with a group of initiatives called 'Lausitz Citizen Region' ('Bürgerregion Lausitz').

What was the idea behind the initiative?

Carel Mohn: In the early days, there was no sign of the coal phase-out but it was clear that sooner or later the Lausitz and the other lignite-mining regions would have to get out of coal because of the huge greenhouse gas emissions associated with lignite. The aim was to start a conversation in society and

the region about what development opportunities there are beyond coal. This conversation was then actually set in motion.

Is this aim still relevant?

Carel Mohn: In the recent past, political developments have accelerated enormously. There's no longer a need to talk about the future in order to allay people's fears about the coal phase-out, because the decision about the coal phase-out has been made. Nevertheless, the development of the region should still be monitored. There are two points in particular that are central: first, the extent to which truly far-reaching decarbonisation is a guiding principle for this structural development and, second, how citizens and civil society organisations can participate and contribute to this process.

What are the processes that develop in a coal-mining region and what has changed since the coal phase-out was decided?

Carel Mohn: Coal regions have traditionally had one very dominant economic sector. This shapes the region, so that other industries, economic sectors and social spheres can hardly get past this giant – although the perceived importance of coal has actually always been much greater than its real economic weight. You could quickly get the impression that these regions define themselves only through coal. In the Lausitz, this led to the emergence of a kind of 'establishment' based on coal. This establishment included the mining operators themselves but also regional politicians, trade unions, chambers of commerce and business associations. For a long time, they protected coal and used scenarios of fear, even while the coal phase-out was still being negotiated. However, once there was the prospect of government funds to buffer the phase-out process, there was a very quick U-turn and a great deal of thought about what could be done with all that money. That's basically understandable and quite legitimate. However, you have to ask whether the people who for years and decades vehemently fought for a policy of carrying on and on with coal are or should be the best people to develop new perspectives.

The term 'establishment' implies that there are others who were left out...

Carel Mohn: The problem is that the people who proposed development alternatives for the region very early on aren't yet part of the circle of full-time, mostly paid officials involved in implementing new development perspectives today. This means that they also don't have access to the funding. But these are the people who years and years ago developed ideas about what could happen in the Lausitz, ideas that also involve civil society commitment. The question is whether these people should have a chance to be heard. What resources can they use to be able to play a role?

What other challenges have emerged in the region?

Carel Mohn: This is a region that has been traumatised by the experience of the post-reunification period and the collapse of 90 % of the coal industry and the heavy industry associated with it. Quite understandably, there's therefore been a lot of clinging to the remnants of this industrial complex. This includes all the sectors associated with coal as well as the energy-intensive industries grouped around it. However even 15 or 20 years ago, it was clear that this industry couldn't flourish forever, because there was the climate problem even then. My impression is that this saga of coal as the only anchor of stability has really blocked the region from developing alternatives for too long.

What are the impacts of these challenges for the local residents?

Carel Mohn: On the one hand, the traumatisation of the collapse of GDR structures hasn't been dealt with sufficiently; on the other hand, in the run-up to the national coal phase-out consensus adopted in early 2019, the state governments in Saxony and Brandenburg failed to show political leadership by preparing the population in the region for the phasing-out of coal at an early stage. Instead, they competed with one another in pledges of allegiance and commitment to Lausitz lignite. This combination continues to create a tense atmosphere to this day. In addition, many people from the Lausitz felt that the urbanites and climate protectors were badmouthing the Lausitz and jobs in coal – which actually offered very good working conditions. In conversation you can often hear the frustration about this. These negative experiences first have to be overcome, and of course many from the Lausitz struggle with the fact that the coal industry is coming to an end,

because at least mentally this is also associated with a certain devaluation of the region.

What are alternative perspectives in the future?

Carel Mohn: At the political level, it's now clearer that something new needs to be developed in the Lausitz. The question is, however, whether attracting companies like Tesla (which is planning its largest European factory in Grünheide, some 50 kilometres to the north of the Lausitz), to use a current example, is really a good option in the long term. Or whether this isn't just people being intoxicated by the apparent success of an industrialisation model. It may work again to a certain extent, this attracting of large external investors, which creates many thousands of jobs in one go. What gets forgotten, however, is that this approach to economic and regional development is actually a course that hasn't really worked in the last 20 years.

How does this manifest itself?

Carel Mohn: The weakness of eastern Germany also has to do with the fact that there are too few small and medium-sized enterprises, too few research-based companies and too few corporate headquarters in the region. As a result, in the private sector generally there's a lack of research and innovation. Of course, building up this commercial landscape is extremely arduous and takes a long time but there are no real alternatives. Attracting a huge external corporation like Tesla fatally confirms the position of actors who have always hoped for large structures.

Are there examples of small-scale structures with small and medium-sized enterprises in the Lausitz?

Carel Mohn: Saxony and Brandenburg take different approaches here. In contrast to Brandenburg, the state of Saxony has focused more on promoting small and medium-sized enterprises in recent years. Of course, there are many examples of companies that are not active in the field of the coal industry. Some of these companies absolutely epitomise a pioneering spirit and entrepreneurship and also stand for very innovative approaches and concepts for the future. But you need many such enterprises and, importantly,

state investment in science and research in order to create a small-scale, vital economic structure.

Is the term 'post-growth' one that comes up in this debate about a future perspective?

Carel Mohn: I don't think that this is a very helpful category in the Lausitz. My suspicion is that the model that's associated with it creates more fear than inspiration among most of the people affected by the phase-out of coal. The term 'post-growth' communicates too little about what could concretely change and improve in people's everyday lives. The region has very concrete problems, like keeping well-educated young people in the region and unfavourable demographics, and problems in offering and maintaining adequate local infrastructure, for example health care in rural areas, public transport or public amenities as banal as local grocery stores. These are the issues that concern and interest people. It's not really helpful to use buzzwords like 'post-growth' because it divides rather than unites society. Post-growth is a view that's strongly associated with left-wing values. It is important that we have value-based debates over the future of the region. However, if you want to convey new confidence in the Lausitz as a region strongly characterised by engineering and industry, then I don't think that the term is tremendously helpful.

Is there an exchange between different political camps in the debate on regional development in the Lausitz, especially with regard to the AfD [Alternative für Deutschland – Alternative for Germany] and its definition of the terminology related to post-growth?

Carel Mohn: The AfD relies on picking up on people's moods and playing on their fears. This can be clearly seen in the Lausitz region at the moment. However, it shouldn't be forgotten that the ground was prepared for the AfD over decades – by actors who didn't exercise political leadership responsibly but rather spread fear among the public.

Where have political leaders specifically failed to take responsibility?

Carel Mohn: The state premiers and numerous other state politicians in Brandenburg and Saxony didn't see the need to change, but rather spread

fear about the coal phase-out. Instead of explaining to people that although there are well-paid jobs in the coal industry they unfortunately can't last forever. Instead of involving the public in ideas for the time after coal, thinking about how a soft exit could be made possible. Overall, there was an exorbitant lack of political leadership. This is what drove voters to the AfD. This is the historic failure of the SPD and CDU in this region.

What potential does the region have?

Carel Mohn: The region has immense potential because it's very centrally located between various metropolises in Europe and is also at the intersection of the three most dynamic economies in the EU, i.e. the Czech Republic, Germany and Poland. There are large areas of land, large open spaces available, and a population that can be described as open-minded. For example, there is a natural proximity to engineering and technology. The region also has a special cultural and industrial heritage, for example experience in textiles, glass and ceramics. These are valuable qualities and opportunities that other regions don't have. Agriculture has been completely marginalised by the coal industry to date, but it can also play an important role – Berlin, but also Leipzig and Dresden are huge markets right on the doorstep where regional, organic products are increasingly in demand. And when it comes to renewable raw materials, the bioeconomy and the circular economy, there's a natural link here to the technical expertise that has previously been in demand in the Lausitz region.

What suggestions or wishes do you have for the transformation to post-fossil regional development?

Carel Mohn: Above all, it's important to develop a concept about how the municipalities can be given more scope and greater autonomy. They would clearly have more options if they had more financial freedom. In addition, municipalities need the financial and political scope to promote initiatives, projects and local individuals who take on local responsibility. They also need to be able to apply for funding or to use their own resources. The whole issue of what municipalities could do if they had better resources and jurisdictions is neglected in the debate. The second point is that there are really many pioneers in the region who are involved in cultural projects, in asso-

ciations, in village renewal. We need to think about how to make it possible for these actors to actually implement their ideas. It's extremely difficult to get funding and support to implement this non-profit work or even to participate at all – not because there is no money but because it's so time-consuming, bureaucratic and arduous to apply for just transition funds. It's not just about the paid officials in the chamber of commerce and the union, there are also others involved. It is neither fair nor economically sensible if these pioneers have to privately develop their projects in their spare time. A small proportion of the billions should be directed towards foundations and NGOs to find ways to improve the involvement of civic engagement.

