

The Algerian way: Climate Change beyond eco-citizenship

by Sarah Rueffler

Abstract

Algeria is still caught in its past. The author invites us to come along on her trip from Algiers to Oran, meeting main actors dealing with the impacts of climate change – from government officials and scientists to imams and young people involved in environmental protection.

Her travel story shows the difficulties to apply western concepts such as eco-citizenship in a country where, as a heritage of French colonisation, people are still feeling excluded from common goods and therefore don't feel obliged to protect them.

This includes - in a less visible way - climate change as a crosscutting issue; limiting access to natural resources such as water, which is already becoming scarce in some parts of the country. Instead of taking part in the shared responsibility of reducing carbon footprint, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and contribute to a healthier environment for future generations, Algerians defer the origin of climate change and its negative impact, as many other problems, to its former colonizer – France - and other industrialised countries.

In Algeria, the dilemma of eco-citizenship - feeling excluded and thus not responsible - is exacerbated by several factors: a general mistrust between public institutions and the population, a lack of cross-linking of individually motivated persons and a lack of "savoir faire" as the country is still way more isolated than its neighbours.

Yet, there is hope for change. Algeria's youth are starting to discover the possibilities of intercultural exchange, thanks to environmental associations among others which have not been traditionally considered to be a political threat. These NGOs attract more and more young people, which form the great majority of the Algerian population with more than three quarters being younger than 30 years.

One thing is for sure: Any change will come along the "Algerian way," carried by the people with their unique passion and solidarity.

About the author

Sarah Rueffler had worked on climate change in Algeria for four years when she founded the Berlin based consulting enterprise Climate of Change, specialized in climate change and environmental awareness raising. She travels frequently in the region for research and consulting missions in the three Maghreb countries Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia.

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I came to Algeria nearly four years ago, in autumn 2012, as a climate change consultant for German development cooperation. Two years before, in December 2010, the so-called Arab spring had thrown over the ruler of the neighbouring country Tunisia. Algeria had stayed calm except for a few demonstrations that were quickly held down by the Algerian police and the president Bouteflika's promise to change the constitution. Back then, I was somewhat curious to live in a region where youth risked their lives for the sake of justice and better living conditions. There was a growing number of young Algerians immolating themselves. According to an article I once read on the issue, these young men did not seek to become another Mohamed Bouazizi (whose self-immolation is said to have sparked the Tunisian revolution) but rather to act out of self-determination at least by choosing the way to die.

What a different set of pictures I have in mind, coming back to Algeria on this chilly April morning, one year after I have gone back to Berlin. While I am pulling my luggage out of the airplane along the corridors of Algiers' airport, I see the rubbish bins down there on the airfield and I smile. "They are separating rubbish!" was my very first post on Facebook. Many similar posts followed describing how I discovered, little by little, the beauty of Algeria with its capital built on the hillside next to the sea, its untouched beaches in the west and – most of all - its warm, welcoming and a bit special people, who have always treated me like "okhty," their sister.

If international news on Algeria is scarce, articles on climate change in Algeria are even scarcer. This is why I decided to go back for two weeks of research to get some first-hand information on what is done in the country to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions and adapt to climate change. I planned to travel to Algiers, Oran and Mostaganem, the pilot region, where I started my work on the first local climate plan of Algeria four years ago. I was wondering whether work was continued there after I left; how the imam who had helped to organize an exchange between religion and science was doing. I was wondering whether four years later, the government validated the national climate strategy; and how civil society was involved in Algeria's climate politics today.

Sofiane, the son of one of my favourite taxi drivers, is waiting for me at the exit of the airport. As usual, most of the women are wearing long-sleeve Djellabas and Hijabs. We take the road into the city and soon the construction site of the future third biggest mosque of the world appears, a symbol of "grandeur" - not only when taking into account that this mammoth project with its 267 meters high minaret towers is kept going in the midst of a fierce economic crisis. Algeria got struck by a sharp fall in oil prices (by two thirds in two years) as the economy is strongly dependent on its revenues from oil and gas: they contribute to 27% of GDP, 62% of government revenues and 98% of foreign exchange revenue. According to experts, the Algerian government will be short of devises in three or four years at the latest. Already a year ago, I had heard about several infrastructure projects being on hold, such as the construction of tramways in several cities on the 100km profound coastal line, where 68% of the population are living on one fifth of the country's territory, increasing the pressure on the already vulnerable ecosystems.

"Of course the economic situation has an effect on the government's activities to combat climate change," confirms Moussa Yalaoui, deputy director at the Ministry of Water Resources and Environment MREE, who I visit on the way to Algiers Centre. He looks over the beautifully glimmering bay of Algiers. His office is built like a ship,

offering a splendid view onto the sea from both sides. “I could observe it during the last meeting of the Climate Council that was created just after you left last summer: If you have a choice to build 100.000 houses with high eco-efficiency, or 200.000 with a standard one – it is clear that the cheaper option is preferred. It’s about serving the maximum number of people.”

However, Algeria has announced for the first time internationally-binding objectives to limit its greenhouse gas emissions: energy consumption shall be reduced by 9% and the part of renewable energies increased to 27% by 2030 according to its “Intended Nationally Determined Contribution” (INDC), the country’s communication to the Paris climate summit in December 2015. Yalaoui, who was part of the Algerian delegation at the COP21, stresses the need for international finance in order to be able to achieve these goals: “If industrialised nations want us to contribute in the fight against global warming, after they have caused the problem in the first place, they need to deliver the finance and technological knowledge.”

Germany, among others, has already offered its support with signing the German-Algerian Energy partnership in March 2015 to enhance energy efficiency, diversify the energy mix and expand renewable energies. The German Development Cooperation (GIZ) is working on the most pressing issues regarding climate change to help adapt the country to the impacts of climate change, which are predicted to hit the country severely. According to previsions, climate change will aggravate the already scarce access to natural resources, putting at risk agricultural production with the rise of temperature, heavy rain and sea-level rise, and bring along a higher probability of extreme weather events such as floods. According to the World Resources Institute, a big part of the country is already at extreme risk of water scarcity.

To get an update on current activities, I have moved on for meetings with the Belgian Technical Cooperation CTB, the European Delegation, GIZ and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). For them, environmental issues have in fact become the most important sector in Algeria. Apart from working on sector strategies and environmental awareness raising, there is a clear trend to integrate sustainable development into local development planning, following a cross-sector approach.

The next day, I meet Kamel Djemouai in the fancy café of Hotel Sofitel. The expert on climate change draws a positive picture: “We are moving forward as the National Climate Plan is mentioned in the INDC and the staff of the National Climate Change Agency ANCC recruited,” he confirms, convinced that the ANCC will become a major actor, “a platform for public and private actors, science and civil society.” He also refers to the new organization chart of the ministry published only some days ago, and foresees for the first time an independent department of climate change.

Next door at the Sofitel, GIZ organized a workshop to establish the national vulnerability map of Algeria to prioritise future interventions. I am with Imène Bouchair, a 27 year-old woman, who is member of the Arab Youth Climate Movement (AYCM). She explains that the network covers 17 countries in the Middle East and North Africa and gives a unique possibility for young people to get first-hand experience, attending the COPs, and travelling abroad for trainings and conferences. Imène is excited; “I just got the invitation to represent Women’s Earth and Climate Action Network at the Mediterranean Youth Climate Forum, which will take place in

Tangier in July.” Imène also did some research on environmental associations showing that “only three associations in Algeria have integrated climate change in their work, often without mentioning it as such” - apart from AYCM of course, who however yet needs to get an official status in Algeria. Being sometimes the only way to get a visa and finance travelling abroad, the associative movements in Algeria attract more and more young people, mostly coming from wealthier parts of the urban society. In a country with three quarters of its population being 30 years or younger, this trend seems important for knowledge exchange and the opening of a society, which is otherwise still quite isolated.

When asked if she shared the optimistic view on climate change that I had just heard, Imène agrees without hesitation: “Of course I am optimistic. Algeria has always been a leader regarding climate change in Africa: the Algerian negotiators have been protecting the interest of the African countries, taking into account that we haven’t contributed to global warming like developed countries.” She is also convinced that Algeria has the right methods for adapting to climate change, at least regarding the water sector. She remembers how her family had to deal with water cuts at least once every two weeks. “Now, we have constructed dams and we have resolved the problem.”

Let’s check realities on the ground. I am in the train to Oran, where I just meet the musician Sadek Bouzinou. Talking about climate change, he shows me a recent post on Facebook showing people from Timmiaouin in Adrar in the South of Algeria. In the pictures, children and adults are holding empty water buckets demonstrating for water. He translates the comment from Arabic to French explaining that the Wali, the head of the region, was claiming that there wasn’t any water problem in the region. The people shouldn’t have demonstrated in the streets but should have just called him.

With his long dreadlocks and colourful clothes, Sadek looks more Jamaican than typical Algerian. While the train is slowly moving out of town with rubbish - mostly plastic bags - funnily decorating the trees next to the rails, he talks about pollution - the name of one of the songs of his band Democratoz. The success of his songs such as “Mazal” (not yet) shows that he is very close to the Algerian youth and their problems and has become something like a spokesperson for them. Looking at the rubbish outside, he says “normal” with a twinkle in his eye. Sadek uses to make his special instrument out of it. Half of a plastic bottle and a plastic bag are enough to make his “Koti”, a plastic trumpet, which “sounds just like a vintage one”.

We have already passed about half of the five hours train ride to Oran, when all of a sudden stones hit the train. Looking out of the window, I see kids in front of their modest homes. Some of them are playing soccer, others are throwing stones and some hit the train with threatening sounds. “I can understand them,” Sadek says. “It’s as if they were left behind, while the train keeps going. It’s a way of communication.” Another bang – and splash, one of the windows bursts. The young men sitting in front of us are moving nervously on their seats, wondering where it will happen next. A train driver once got killed, they say.

“They don’t feel part of it. The train, the streets - it just doesn’t seem to belong to them”, explains Abdelkader Lakjaa, a sociologist at Oran University. “It’s like the public places which are full of rubbish: there is no environmental engagement, no

awareness of public space. In the end, there is no citizenship, let alone eco-citizenship.” I am sitting in his office with books and papers piling up everywhere around me. Lakjaa is getting excited when talking about the notion of citizenship. “I have interviewed more than 500 young men and women about their preoccupations,” he says, “and guess which ones were on top? To find a place to work, religion and family.” He regrets that everyone was just looking after oneself instead of thinking about the society. “In the end, Algeria has always been a country of clans with their respective solidarities,” he pursues. “As a heritage of French colonisation, people are still feeling excluded from common goods and therefore don’t feel obliged to protect them.”

Lakjaar acknowledges that the word “citizenship” irritates in a country, where French colonisers had deprived its population of this status. During colonization, citizenship with its civic, political and social rights and duties was reserved for the French and, later on the Jews, in an attempt to recruit governors and expand their settlements. Algerians with their diverse backgrounds such as Arab, Berber etc., were subsumed under a “Muslim status,” and subjects not citizens on French territory until the Algerian independence in 1962.

I am still thinking about Lakjaar’s interpretation on the way to Ain Tedeles, a district of Mostaganem. Monsieur Hamiti from the Popular Assembly of the District APC has bought cakes. “I swear your call was a surprise. I had already lost hope.” He explains that work in our pilot district on how to integrate climate change in local development planning didn’t lead to any project so far. After cake with Coca Cola, he takes us once more to the beautiful public gardens of Ain Tedeles, a fresh and peaceful harbour in the middle of the sweet little town, which has kept its colonial charm with its two-storey-houses. I remember how the city turned into a hot hell during my last visit last summer during Ramadan when I came here for the first time and discovered the beautiful hidden gardens. I remember walking in the shadow of the trees with fresh air coming from the well in the middle. I remember realizing how funny it was to be the only visitor as they are closed for the public. “I don’t remember when they were open last time. They have always been closed out of fear that the people would destroy them,” Hamiti explains. That hot summer day we had the idea to open them and organize environmental awareness rising campaigns in the context of heat waves and the local climate strategy. Finally, the ministry stopped the local climate plan as the national strategy was not yet validated officially. “If it was up to me, I would open them each day for everyone,” Hamiti says, amazed once again by the beauty of the garden. Hamiti listens interestedly when I recall my last encounter with the American NGO R20MED in Oran, wondering if they could follow-up on the project. Their director, Rachid Bessaoud, believes that change must be bottom-up, coming from the districts. He has already accomplished some very concrete results of his projects. When I was visiting him, he proudly pulled his hand out of a sac, showing me the first earth he had produced with a compost project with the main market of Oran. “Finally, it’s all about bringing together the right people,” he explained.

We need these quick-wins to get beyond the general depression in Algeria when it comes to project development, I am thinking in the car back to Mostaganem. I am sitting in the back, discussing the impacts of climate change with Sadek’s father, an agronomist, who is selling seeds to farmers. No one else knows the problems of the farmers in Algeria better than he does – and it’s not an optimistic picture that he is

drawing. "This year, there wasn't enough rain. The farmers had to abandon their land. This year's harvest is already lost."

The next day back in Mostaganem, we meet Abdallah, the imam with whom I had worked a year ago, in his beautiful garden. Even though imams in Algeria have a rather non-progressive reputation, he is probably one of the most dynamic persons I meet in Algeria. Water is an important issue in the holy book of Qura'an and a resource not to be wasted. Hence, the exchange we had organised between the local university and about a dozen imams from the region resulted in several Friday Prayers linking the latest scientific knowledge on climate change to what is said about it in the Qura'an and Sunna. Abdallah now wants us to go to the next level, the Ministry of Religious Affairs in Algiers, and propose a Friday prayer on climate change for all the mosques of the country on the occasion of the Environmental Day on 5th June.

Back in Oran, I am listening to young musicians who are spontaneously making some music at the Dar d'Art in Oran, a place where they can exchange and express themselves. No one speaks about religion here, it's all about "peace and love." Several young men with dreadlocks show up, singing about romance, about how to afford a marriage, which is too expensive for many of them. There is also the dream of leaving the country and - climate change, as Norine Chouarfia is explaining to his friends his new project: He wants to be the carbon neutral ambassador of his home town Oran, which will host the Games of the Mediterranean in 2021, going by bike from Oran to Istanbul. Last time his musician friends had helped him to finance his tour to Tunis, this time he thinks about contacting the National Olympic Committee of Algeria. I am impressed once again by the Algerian people. No matter whether a musician with his recycled instrument, a carbon-neutral cyclist, an imam with a red car, or a pensioner producing earth - one thing is for sure: Any change will come along the "Algerian way," carried by the people with their unique passion and solidarity.