

Africa's role in the world: Some thoughts on interdependence and responsibility

Dinner Speech by Former Federal President of Germany Horst Köhler

National Palace, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

14 April 2016

I. Interdependence

I would like to thank the Government of Ethiopia and the Munich Security Conference for convening this conference. It is more than timely to bring the global debate on security issues to Africa – not to talk *about* Africa, but to talk *with* Africa.

We are meeting at a time of uncertainty, and at a time of crises. In such times, it might be necessary to focus on the immediate task in front of us. But we must not succumb to the seduction of quick-fix-solutions. We need to take a broader and a deeper perspective, examining the fundamental illnesses that are underlying the big challenges of our present.

In my view, two of the most fundamental illnesses are *nationalism* – disrespecting others – and *short-termism* – disrespecting the future.

Looking around the world today, there is an endless list of problems where short-sightedness and reckless egotism have worked like a boomerang: take the Iraq invasion of 2003, which is one of the major causes of the gigantic mess in the Middle East; take the Libya bombing – some Europeans only now realize that Africa is only 14 kilometers away, and that chaos in Libya is threatening security not only in North Africa and the whole Sahel zone, but also in Europe. Take issues such as global warming, where unsustainable production and consumption patterns in industrialized and emerging economies are already endangering people and nature all over the world, effects that might haunt us for generations.

There is a simple truth that our politics is having a hard time to adapt to: we are all in one boat. We are dependent on each other. No country, as powerful or as rich as it may be, can gain and sustain its prosperity in the long run without respecting the perspectives of the other countries. This simple truth becomes evident when we look at the major challenges of our times, which are all connected globally. Be it terrorism or security, be it extreme poverty or migration, be it global warming or pandemics: there are no sustainable solutions that can be found by any one nation alone. Interdependence forces us into cooperation.

Understanding interdependence is not about diffusing responsibility to some ominous global forces. If we are dependent on each other, then we must also be *responsible* for each other and *accountable* to each other – in an interdependent world, taking responsibility for the *global* common good is a form of responsibility for one's *own* future.

What does that mean for the role of Africa in international politics, for the relationship between Africa and the world? I would like to offer two perspectives on this question – the first is the responsibility that Africa has for the world as a whole, and the second is the responsibility that the world has for Africa.

II. Africa's responsibility for the world

I hope that you do not call me a romantic if I say this: I believe there is something innately African about the concept of interdependence. The idea that “I am what I am only through others” is present in many African philosophical traditions. My hope is that Africans can help the world to develop this awareness not only on an individual, but also on a political level.

With the African Union, Africa is trying to push for cooperation beyond borders on the continent. I know that many Africans themselves are painfully aware of the weaknesses and shortcomings of the AU. But I deeply believe that its mission and the vision it presents with the Agenda 2063 is a cornerstone not only for a better future for Africans, but for the world as a whole. The AU is not only working to make a difference in Africa – I think that especially in the area of peace and security the organization has made real progress – but it is also allowing Africa to have a united voice in the world, despite all intra-African differences.

The increasing African unity and self-confidence on the world stage is getting more and more visible. I know that the successful adoption of the United Nation's Agenda 2030 on Sustainable Development would not have been possible without the leadership and diplomacy of Kenya's ambassador to the UN, who had chaired the Open Working Group preparing the final document. Likewise in Paris, the African states played a unified and constructive role that helped to eventually achieve an agreement which gives hope that the world will, at last, seriously tackle climate change.

Allow me a word on the controversy about the International Criminal Court. I do believe that the ICC is a crucial instrument for accountability and human rights, and while it has its flaws, not all criticism is fair, and blocking it would jeopardize a major achievement of humanity. But I recognize that the criticism of the ICC coming from some African governments is also a symbol for a discontent that goes much further: a discontent with the very architecture of the international system, which still marginalizes Africa both economically and politically.

We need Africa to stand up for a more just, more cooperative international system, to be an advocate for human dignity regardless of geographical location, for a fairer trade system, a fairer climate regime, a fairer international financial and monetary system. The world has a lot to learn from Africa – how to deal with diversity, how to reconcile, and, yes, how to live together peacefully and respectfully between different religions, an African reality which is often overlooked. And by the way: I think that the world can learn a lot especially from African women, who are the rock on which this continent stands. Listening to the African experience and to the African voice and learning from Africa is crucial in a world that will be multipolar, more diverse, and more African: in the year 2050, 20% of the world population will be African, only 5% European.

One word of caution, though: I firmly believe that a louder voice and a stronger presence of Africa on the world stage must not be confused with scapegoating others – say, the Western world – for home-made problems. African leaders must stop pointing their fingers to Western hypocrisy only to hide their own. I trust in an African renaissance which is not aggressive, but cooperative; which defines itself not by what it is *against*, but by what it is *for*.

Such a constructive African renaissance is also needed in the area of security policy, especially when it comes to terrorism. Today we have already discussed strategies to counter terrorism, so I just want to make one basic point: *only legitimate governments will succeed in defeating terrorism*. The cancer of terrorism must not be fought with the cancer of oppression and corruption. Only legitimate, responsive governments that care for the needs of the people will be able to refute the ideological narratives of terrorism credibly.

Ladies and gentlemen,

the world needs an African continent which is proudly accepting its responsibility for the planet as a whole. But of course, this is only half of the equation, which brings me to my second point:

III. The world's responsibility for Africa

Given the enormous geopolitical importance of the continent, I am often surprised how little understanding of Africa there is in the rest of the world. It is sad, but true: the colonial legacy of ignorance and arrogance towards the African continent is not yet overcome.

The world urgently needs to wake up to the fact that the additional 18 million jobs which, according to the IMF, need to be created every year until 2035 to absorb Africa's growing youth population is not an African challenge alone. It is a truly global challenge. And it is not a question of charity.

Allowing Africa to generate the kind of growth that provides jobs and perspectives to its surging youth population requires new thinking in the rich countries, and yes, it requires them to make room for economic diversification, growth and value addition in the South. In that context, I believe that abandoning the Doha round for a fair and – this is crucial – *development-friendly* global trade regime is a mistake of historic proportions. What does Europe think will happen if the biggest youth generation in the history of humankind will not be able to find a dignified perspective for their own lives?

I hope that some very basic lessons of interdependence are now being learned in the wake of the refugee crisis. Now, this is a complex subject for a whole separate speech, so let me just say this: the two conclusions that the world, but especially Europe, needs to draw from the crisis are, first: we cannot hide from the problems elsewhere in the world; they will eventually come to our doorstep. Secondly, more concretely: we need new migration policies which define ways of legal migration, including incentives for circular migration as an expression of normality in the 21st century. Whenever I talk to African youth, I hear the same wish – let us come to your country, to study, to learn, to grow, and then we will return and build our communities. Europe should be generous towards that wish, and the conclusion of the refugee

crisis should not be to build new walls, but to offer more internships and scholarships and exchange programs on all levels, so that more of Africa's youth can become global citizens who contribute with their creativity and their passion to the whole of humanity.

Finally, I believe that the rich world has a responsibility towards Africa to change its production and consumption patterns. If prosperity could only be attained on the basis of the old, ecologically unsustainable growth model of the industrialized world, if extreme poverty could only be eradicated at the expense of ruining the very natural environment which humans need to live, then there would be very little hope left for the human race. There has to be another way. Finding that way – that means reconciling prosperity with respect for the planetary boundaries – is something where especially the rich countries have to lead by example. This process of structural transformation towards sustainability is something that makes us all developing countries. Maybe that can also bring a new kind of humility into the dialogue with Africa.

IV. Is mutual responsibility feasible?

Ladies and gentlemen,

Our era of interdependence calls for a new culture of mutual responsibility and accountability in global politics. Business as usual will not only not help us, but it will drive us further into the mess we are in. What we need is a new paradigm of partnership in international politics. And I am glad that the United Nations and the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development have agreed on a framework for such a new paradigm – the SDGs will not save the world, but they point into the right direction. Nowhere is this new direction, this new paradigm needed more than in the relationship of Africa with the world.

And yet there are two big objections that can be made against such a global view.

The first objection: If everything is interdependent, and if we are all in one boat, doesn't that ignore the fact that interests may diverge? Yes, I do believe that the talk of partnership and global common good should not brush over the fact that there will always be differences, and that change in the world will produce new winners and losers. The task is to find constructive and honest ways to deal with these differences, and for everybody to put their interests on the table, not pretend they don't exist. It was Prime Minister Meles Zenawi who reminded me that dialogue and cooperation are necessary not *despite*, but *because* of existing asymmetries and divergences. Accepting our responsibility for each other does not mean we have to give up who we are.

The second objection: Do we really have energy for global awareness when local problems are so concrete? How can we care for our neighbors on other continents if our next-door neighbor needs our attention?

Indeed, we have to be careful that we do not overwhelm our citizens and our institutions with a scope of responsibility and empathy which is difficult to maintain. This is why our national policies have to find ways to reconcile their global impact with real results for the people. Regarding Africa, one of the most important contributions of African governments towards

the global common good is the respect for their own citizens; providing them with opportunities to care for themselves, to get educated, to be healthy, to build livelihoods, to have a say, to have a *purpose* in life.

I believe it is possible to forge policies which are both respectful of one's own citizens and of humanity as a whole.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am convinced that despite our differences, we all reach for the same: a dignified future for our children on a healthy planet. In order to achieve that, we all need to change.