

Partnership Reloaded: How the post-2015 agenda could transform

Africa's relationship with the industrialized world

Keynote Speech of Former Federal President of Germany Horst Köhler

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I.

I would like you to take a short walk with me. To get to our destination, we have to leave this building and turn left, then walk westwards on the Französische Straße (the “French Street”) for around 900 meters. Then we take a left turn into the Wilhelmstraße. After 150 meters, we stop at number 92. This is the place where exactly 130 years ago the Berlin conference came to its end. Just about 1000 meters from where we are now, European colonial powers agreed on how to split up the African continent without getting too much into each other's way, laying the foundation for decades of unimaginable exploitation that still reverberates today. Could there be a better place for us to meet and to reflect on the relationship between Africa and the OECD, an organization that was founded by the very nations that met for the Berlin conference? I think that this is more than just an interesting twist of history. It is a reminder of our responsibility to be aware of our common, cruel past, and to be vigilant for colonial attitudes still persisting today. If we look at the current challenges that inextricably bind us together, be it terrorism or the refugee crisis, being aware of the history of our relationship does not always make things easier, but it is a perspective that is needed if we want to find lasting solutions. The past, after all, is our most important teacher when it comes to learning for the future.

II.

The future is what I would like to talk about. Two weeks from now, the General Assembly of the United Nations will adopt the “2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” (until now better known under the working title “Post-2015 Agenda”). It is a comprehensive action plan of 17 goals and 169 targets which member states pledge to reach until 2030.

As with any plan that is finalized after a long period of negotiation, the critics are already getting in position: “too ambitious” cry the realists, “not ambitious enough” cry the idealists, and most probably many critics don't care enough to cry anything, convinced that this is just another useless UN plan heading for the dustbin of history.

Now, of course the list of legitimate criticism about the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is long - I myself get a headache when I hear the number of 169 targets. But we must not lose out of sight that this is a compromise, that a compromise by definition is imperfect,

and that neither could it be anything else than a compromise – taking into account that 193 governments had to agree to this agenda, and thousands of stakeholders had been consulted in a process that took several years.

So rather than engaging in a detailed analysis of what I think is right and what is wrong about this new agenda, I am inviting you to look for the *consensus* that is hidden in this compromise. What do all the nations in the world *agree* on? Let me point out the two answers that are, in my view, the most important.

First, the nations of this world agree that we can eradicate extreme poverty in the lifetime of one generation. For the first time in the history of mankind, this is within our reach, for we have all the knowledge, all the technology and all the wealth that is needed to end extreme poverty once and for all. To all those who say that this is a vision too far-reaching, I say: we *know* how to eradicate poverty, we *can* eradicate poverty, and it would have been an act of political cowardice not to commit that we *will* eradicate poverty.

Second, the nations of this world agree that in order to eradicate poverty, we must not destroy our planet. This means that any agenda for people *and* planet must be for the whole world, must stipulate change everywhere, in the North and the South, the East and the West. This is probably the major difference of this new agenda compared to the now famous Millennium Development Goals: the MDGs were based on the premise that it is the *developing countries* that have a problem, and saw the role of industrialized countries in helping the poorer nations to overcome these problems. The SDGs are saying: as long as no country in the world has found a way to reconcile economic prosperity with ecological sustainability, we *all* have a problem. We are *all* developing countries. Therefore, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is a *universal* agenda. Many of its goals, from women's rights to energy efficiency, are relevant for rich and poor countries alike. I believe that this principle of universality could be a true catalyst for change in international relations.

III.

I know that in the process of developing the Sustainable Development Goals, there were oftentimes worries, especially on the part of Africans, that universality means less focus on poverty, that development efforts for those who are most in need would get diluted. “At a time when there are still 750 million people without access to safe drinking water”, those critics may have asked, “can the development community really afford to worry about the state of renewable energy in Germany?”

Of course I agree that we must never lose our focus on eradicating extreme poverty. Giving each and every individual on this earth the chance of living a life in dignity must never be anything else but priority number one.

And yet it is this very focus on poverty that makes the strongest case for a universal agenda: how could we effectively combat extreme poverty if we didn't finally and fundamentally address its *structural* causes? Can we really talk about land degradation or desertification without talking about the production and consumption patterns contributing to global warming? Can we really talk about food security without also talking about the existing

unfairness in our international trade system? Can we really talk about industrialization and job-creation in Africa without admitting that this can only be successful if it is supported by structural reforms in already industrialized countries? The links between sustainability and prosperity are, on a global scale, so strong and so manifold that it would be naive to ignore them. The SDGs, imperfect as they may be, are an expression of those links. Goals that require change everywhere are therefore not taking away from the fight against extreme poverty, but are the only sound foundation for that fight.

Furthermore: goals that require change everywhere are not only the right policy. They could also bring an important change of mindset to international relations, a sense of interdependence, of common interest, of mutual accountability. They could bring a new spirit of global partnership to world politics.

Perhaps nowhere else is such a spirit as sorely needed as in the relations of Africa with industrialized countries. Historically, there has been an underlying attitude of cultural superiority of the Western world towards Africa. Today, this sense of superiority is less fueled by racism, as it was at the time of the Berlin conference. It is rather the arrogance of a system which knows it has brought unprecedented prosperity to its people, an achievement that it is envied for. But for how long will the West be able to feel superior, given that this prosperity is based on a lifestyle that brings the planet to the brink of disaster? If everyone would consume the resources of this earth at the rate of the Europeans or Americans, we would need several planets in reserve. For how long will anyone be able to be proud of that?

In that sense, the universal ambition of the SDGs is also an exercise in humility: nobody has all the answers. We are all in search of solutions.

There are two conclusions I draw from this: one is about the concept of development and development cooperation, and the other one is about our understanding of African modernity.

IV.

First: Could this humility perhaps give rise to a new concept of development, a concept based on the huge transformation that resource scarcity and climate change are imposing on us all, rich or poor? Such a concept of development as “transformation everywhere” could, for all the existing asymmetries in economic and political power, facilitate a partnership of imperfect equals, free of paternalism and condescension: the world as a community of learners. There is an African proverb that sums this up pretty well: ‘Beware of the naked man who offers you clothes.’ Shouldn’t the naked men of the North think more profoundly about the purpose of the economy, the definition of well-being and the limits of growth before offering their clothes to others?

This also means that we need to have a profound discussion about our system of international aid. One must be careful that we do not talk on Sundays about universal goals that make us all developing countries in need of transformation, and then on Mondays we continue an aid system that perpetuates the old power imbalances between donors and recipients. There is a fine line between solidarity and charity. Don’t get me wrong: I don’t believe that development cooperation has become superfluous, quite to the contrary. But we have to focus again on the

“cooperation” part. And: we have to overcome our obsession with money. This may sound strange from the mouth of a former head of the IMF, but we know from 40 years of development assistance that the problem is often not a lack of money, but a lack of political will – on all sides of the table. So let’s free our collective political creativity again! Let’s get past the decades-old rituals of negotiation, where sometimes one gets the impression that the positions are no more sophisticated than “I need more money” on the one side and “I am not paying for that” on the other side. Isn’t it time that we find an understanding of “common but differentiated responsibilities” that is fit for the realities of the 21st century? I cannot hide my disappointment that the Addis conference on Financing for Development in July has brought only little progress on this matter. And if the reports are true, then the OECD member states unfortunately did not play a very constructive role in trying to implement change, for example in the area of international tax policy...

V.

There is a second conclusion that I draw from the kind of humility that comes with realizing that change is needed everywhere, not just in the South: could this pave the way to an understanding of African modernity which is not just a copy of something else; a modernity defined not as the culmination of a linear development towards technology-based prosperity measured by GDP – the way in which most in the West understand prosperity – but as something pluralistic, evolving in multiple directions, a juxtaposition of the local and the global, of tradition and innovation – in short, an African modernity *sui generis*? In one chapter of the wonderful memoirs of your childhood and youth, Mr. President Mahama, you write about your two years of studies in the Soviet Union in the 1980s (I will skip the part where you tell the reader how you learned to drink Vodka Russian style). You write how your confrontation with the reality of socialism, with *perestroika* and *glasnost*, made you not to believe in absolutes anymore, made you realize that neither of the superpowers had the answers, and that Ghana and Africa would have to find their own way, would have “to grow and learn on [their] own terms”. A presidential colleague from Africa once said to me: “You have to let us make our own mistakes”, and I couldn’t agree more.

VI.

But: making mistakes is only helpful if one also draws the necessary conclusions. Fifty years of making mistakes and of learning have passed since the time African countries gained their formal independence. And yet, for all the positive developments in many African countries, the process of Africa finding its own voice, its inner independence, its own modernity is moving forward too slowly, and it is being hampered not only from outside Africa, but primarily from Africa within.

Too many African leaders are holding their own people hostage, too many African leaders are using self-victimization as an excuse for their own wrongdoings, too many African leaders are blaming Western hypocrisy only to hide their own. There is nothing African about corruption, and there is nothing un-African about the rule of law, and a leader who uses anti-colonialism as a smokescreen for his greed is insulting his own people. And why is it that some African governments seem oblivious to the fact that so many young people are risking their lives to

flee their countries? What is their big idea, their big effort, their new deal for offering perspectives for the youth?

I know that many Africans are working hard to hold their own leaders accountable, and that many African institutions are supporting governments in taking real responsibility for the fate of their nations, for example NEPAD and the African Peer Review Mechanism. My hope is that those positive forces of change grow stronger faster, because without Africa taking matters in its own hands and showing true leadership on the global stage, there is no way the vision of eradicating poverty until 2030 will get even close to being reached.

VII.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We live in uncertain times. One truth, however, is certain: what happens in one part of the world has its effects on other parts of the world. A stock market crash in China sends shockwaves to Frankfurt, London and New York. An Ebola outbreak in West Africa puts hospitals all over the world in high alert. A civil war in Syria turns a train station in Budapest into a refugee camp. The world is interconnected and interdependent as never before, and there is no turning back.

Allow me to make some closing remarks about the refugee crisis that is moving us in most parts of Europe these days. To begin with, let's remember that "crisis" is in the first place not the word for what is happening in Europe, but for what's happening in the Sahel zone, in North Africa, in the Middle East. That's where the real crisis is taking place, far away from the daily news headlines. Let's also remember that the crisis has been going on for a long time and that it was foreseeable. And so we have to ask ourselves: what else has to happen for Europe to realize that it needs a fundamentally different approach towards Africa and the Middle East? For some people here in Europe, the pictures of masses of refugees desperately trying to cross borders feel like an *outside world* suddenly creeping through the cracks of the walls we have built around our world of comfort and safety. But here's the deal: there is no "outside world", there never has been an "outside world". Europe has been and will always be part of this *one* world, with all its terrors and all its wonders. Therefore Europe (and everybody else) must finally go beyond the quick-fix solutions driven by media cycles, she must take a long-term view and must address the fundamental challenges that are threatening the future of our children in the South and the North. The United Nation's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is an historic opportunity for such a long-term effort. If the current crises concern you, then you should take this agenda seriously. Then you should view it as a *Declaration of Interdependence* for the 21st century. Its bottom line is: there is no outside world. We are all in one boat. We must all be accountable to each other. And 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.