

“Not just research *on* Africa, but research *with* Africa”

Video Statement by former Federal President Professor Horst Köhler

for the opening of the Africa Centre for Transregional Research

4 May 2020 at the University of Freiburg

I am delighted to have the opportunity, via this channel at least, to wish the new Africa Centre for Transregional Research a successful start. The coronavirus pandemic is currently revealing in a most brutal manner the extent to which human existences on our planet are bound together. Transregional research is desperately required. We need more knowledge and more awareness of the global interdependencies that affect the lives of all of us. The new Africa Centre in Freiburg is designed to play a role in making ties visible and eradicating asymmetries in global knowledge. And it intends to conduct research not only *on* Africa, but *with* Africa. I am certain that this will enable us to obtain new and important insights.

We still know, hear and understand far too little about Africa – and thereby miss out on a great deal. No other continent will play a more crucial role for the future of Europe than Africa. With no other continent are more asymmetries becoming apparent, and more potential *within* those asymmetries – both for good and for ill. Here, our ageing societies with their need for security and stability – there, the largest young population in the history of humankind, more mobile than ever before, eager for change and participation, for education and jobs. Here, our largely saturated, resource-consuming lifestyle – there, in many places the blatant need to establish basic living conditions. Here, a considerable savings volume which now bears hardly any fruit – there, a vast need for investment in the real economy. Here, hardly any analysis of our historical interference in Africa and generally little interest in the transformations that the continent is experiencing – there, Europe remaining an important point of reference and a counterpart; ever-present in the national languages and borders, in political institutions and development blueprints.

The increasingly urgent calls of Africa’s young people for prospects for the future in particular constitute an appeal to the whole world. The responses to this will be a determining factor in war and peace in the 21st century. Should we not want to know much more about the motives and intentions of young Africans looking for a future elsewhere? The economist John Kenneth Galbraith stated over four decades ago: “Migration ... is the oldest action against poverty”. Should we not be looking much more actively for common ground, for mutually beneficial solutions? And should academia not be the first discipline to be called upon to formulate a differentiated growth model for the global economy which could serve as a basis for the implementation of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development? Would that not also provide an opportunity to reflect on the definition of progress and on what really fosters well-being and gives meaning to life?

Answers to these questions can only be found in dialogue with self-confident African partners who have their own understanding of their future. And things are moving in Africa in this area. In Dakar, for example, for some years now, intellectuals from a wide range of disciplines have been coming together for the “Ateliers de la Pensée”. In the contributions in

their forum, the continent is depicted as “one of the great laboratories, from which new forms of social, economic, political, cultural and artistic life will come into being”. Co-founder Felwine Sarr writes with a certain pride: “L’Afrique n’a personne à rattraper” (Africa has no one it has to catch up with). The call for an African approach also dominates the content and tone of a current open letter on Covid-19 from more than 100 African intellectuals addressed to their political leaders: “(...) it is essential to remember that Africa has sufficient material and human resources to build a shared prosperity on an egalitarian basis and in respect of the dignity of each and everyone. The dearth of political will and the extractive practices of external actors can no longer be used as an excuse for inaction. We no longer have a choice: we need a radical change in direction.” Does the global North take note of such voices? Perhaps we are overwhelmed by the simultaneity of suffering and reform, of persistence and innovation that currently prevails on the African continent. But that is precisely why it is as urgent as it is rewarding to bridge the gulfs between our old views of Africa and the new diversity of developments.

Allow me to close by expressing three wishes.

Firstly, help to make the complex African realities more visible in Germany and Europe. Learn about the debates within Africa of which we here often have no inkling, for example by studying Afrobarometer surveys or in taking note of the discussions at the Governance Weekend of the Mo Ibrahim Foundation. Be open to all those who have recognised that our neighbouring continent needs not only financial but also *political* investment. That also involves examining the role we ourselves play in fostering global asymmetries, for instance in questions regarding international taxation (the unfairness of base erosion and profit shifting), in the fight against corruption and illegal capital flight from Africa and in the protection of infant industries. Put a spanner in the works of public debate! Be bold in raising issues! And last but not least, awaken interest in Africa!

My second wish is this: don’t hold fast to traditional claims to the narrative. We are still used to structuring debates from our own perspective and at best permitting a few African responses also to be voiced. Yet academic freedom means being able to pose your *own* questions and not just having to answer the questions of *others*. This freedom is also an important part of the process of self-discovery that is currently under way in Africa. And transregional research seems to me to be predestined to take seriously the world view of others, recognising their own rationality. This approach and the forms of cooperation that are planned here in Freiburg could also be instrumental in encouraging Africa and its people to be perceived no longer as mere *objects* but finally as *subjects*. We, too, will reap the benefits when we cease to define the continent primarily by what it lacks in comparison with Europe and instead begin to ask ourselves what we ought to respect and what we can ultimately learn. In this way, we Europeans could acquire a new stance beyond arrogant hubris or premature self-condemnation. If we allow doubt to be cast on our own responses, we come across not as patronising know-it-alls but as common learners.

And in this context, and this is my third wish, we should regard the *process* of cooperation as being as important as the answers themselves. In the case of stolen cultural property, for example, each side has its own questions: here, the important thing is for us to embrace our

responsibility for our long-buried colonial history – there, it is to rebuild a connection with objects that had long been lost and to regain cultural identity. By talking together about our pasts and our future, we will be able to nurture the trust and intimacy that we so urgently need. We have to invest in relationships. But I also want to say this: when African voices are absent here, it is often not due to a lack of willingness or arrogance, but simply down to practical reasons, such as rejected visas. In such cases we jointly need to raise the alarm. For academia cannot thrive without interaction and exchange.

Ladies and gentlemen, more interaction, more knowledge, more humility: the new Africa Centre in Freiburg can help make this a reality. My hope is that it will be a lively and productive place for dialogue. We urgently need such places if we are to achieve a true partnership with Africa.