

“Never give up”

Acceptance speech by former Federal President Prof. Horst Köhler

on being awarded the Dag Hammarskjöld Medal of Honour

by the United Nations Association of Germany

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I.

I well remember the last time I spoke to you as a guest of the United Nations Association of Germany back in October 2015 to mark the 70th anniversary of the United Nations. Today, nearly five years later, and thus in the United Nations 75th year, I am equally as pleased to be with you even though so much has changed. By that I not only mean the occasion. I am delighted with this honour and thank you for it. And I would also like to express my sincere thanks to you, Sigmar Gabriel, for your gracious and encouraging words. What is different today is the disheartening global situation marked by radical changes and the gradual erosion of multilateral cooperation.

However, anyone who has taken even a little time to learn more about Dag Hammarskjöld knows that he would not have lost heart. As Secretary-General of the United Nations, which was still a young organisation at that time, he set standards: his dedication, his political pragmatism, above all, however, his unwavering optimism, allowed him – despite many disappointments – to hold on to the vision of a global common good. I therefore do not see his often quoted dictum that the United Nations was not created to take mankind to heaven but to save humanity from hell as an appeal for understanding for the organisation’s weaknesses. Rather, it is a call not to give up, regardless of how great the gap appears to be between the world we would like to have and sobering reality. It is a call urging us not to give up believing in the United Nations idea and to work for it.

How we assess the state of the world is always partly down to our perspective. The philosopher Peter Sloterdijk stated a few years ago that one and the same state of the world can look completely different depending on whether you are looking up from the chaos or looking down from an ideal state of affairs. From the first perspective, any appearance of an order is a miracle, while from the second perspective the best possible reality seems like a scandal.

II.

From today’s perspective it appears like a miracle that – amidst the chaos of the Second World War – there was sufficient political strength to advance a global organisation for peace. We should not forget that we largely owe the foundation of the United Nations in October 75 years ago to the United States of America, in particular to Presidents Roosevelt and Truman.

And given the impasses in international cooperation today, the fact that the world's nations were able to agree on the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development five years ago seems like a miracle to us. I became keenly aware of this again while drafting these words of thanks. Even though, as with most miracles, it involved great effort. I am glad that we were able to accomplish this work five years ago, for today it would not have been possible in this way. And I am grateful that I could play my part. Let me tell you a little bit about the process that led to this compact for the future.

After I was appointed to the High Level Panel by Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon at the suggestion of Chancellor Merkel (in July 2012), we – 27 personalities from around the world – came together to discuss how the Millennium Development Goals, which were due to expire in 2015, could be further developed. The starting point for our work was the report submitted by a task team to the UN Secretary-General entitled “Realising the future we want for all.” And that was also the panel's aim: to develop a global vision for all people on earth. We met for consultations in New York, London, Monrovia and on the island of Bali in Indonesia. In Monrovia, the discussions chaired by the Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf mainly focused on the structural causes of poverty and the problems it created. The Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono showed us shocking images of the destruction of the mangrove forests – and drew our attention to the fact that the causes of human-induced climate change could mainly be traced back to the industrialised nations. The Jordanian Queen Rania was a passionate advocate of women, education and lifelong learning. The Chinese diplomat Yingfan Wang conceded – diplomatically – the need to also talk about good governance. The Minister of Planning and Finance of Timor-Leste, Emilia Pires, stated clearly that there could be no development without peace. And the Indian economist Abhijit Banerjee, who teaches at the MIT in the United States and was awarded the Nobel Prize for Economics last year, urged the panel to also consider the measurability and thus the monitoring of the agreed goals.

Everywhere, we spoke to individuals from civil society, from companies, from the world of politics and the academic community, as well as young people. We encountered a high level of competence and commitment. We experienced things that shocked us and others that encouraged us. Above all, however, we learned a lot about causal links and that it is therefore not enough to only set targets for developing countries. The panel agreed that the main objective is to enable everyone to live a life in dignity. It will require a paradigm change in global politics, one which takes into account the interdependence on our planet and which places national interests and politics in the context of a global common good. To this end, we chose the term “global partnership” – and by this we mean a new spirit of cooperation to our mutual benefit which ensures mutual accountability.

Our report “A new global partnership: Eradicate poverty and transform economies through sustainable development” created a basis for the subsequent negotiations among government representatives in the Open Working Group of the UN General Assembly. In September 2015, the Heads of State and Government of 193 member states of the United Nations signed the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at a ceremony. For me, this act – and perhaps

even more so the process that led to it – proves that there is indeed an international community.

III.

Does the international community still exist today? The President of the country without which the United Nations would not exist today, of all people, has led us to doubt that and is pursuing his national interests with brutal openness, showing no consideration for others. In January 2020, UN Secretary-General Guterres summed up the international situation before the General Assembly saying: “Geopolitical tensions, the climate crisis, global mistrust and the downsides of technologies can jeopardise every aspect of our shared future”. The COVID-19 pandemic is currently bringing home to us how closely our world is interconnected, how vulnerable that makes us and how little borders, walls or tariffs help to solve problems. It has presented us with challenges which no country in the world – no matter how big or powerful it may be – can tackle on its own.

Politics – especially international politics – is not a linear process. The end of the Cold War 30 years ago was celebrated by some as a triumph of liberal democracy and as the “end of history”. That was obviously an illusion. We are already in the midst of a new chapter in history and how things will progress or resolve is still not clear. At any rate, the old certainties of the transatlantic century are evaporating at a rapid pace. All around the world, authoritarianism and nationalism are emerging. The modern communication technologies have made it possible like never before to instrumentalise deceit and contrivance, indeed lies, for political purposes. And even in Europe, some are glorifying the illiberal democracy.

What has caused the sense of insecurity, indeed fear, that has befallen people everywhere? How can we explain the renaissance of identity politics? Can upbringing, education and regulations no longer keep pace with the world of social media? Has globalisation perhaps gone too far? The development economist Dani Rodrik, for example, has been speaking for some time of a fundamental, political trilemma: national self-determination, democracy and boundless economic globalization (“hyperglobalisation” he calls it) cannot be attained simultaneously by all three. Where democracy and national sovereignty are to be preserved, says Rodrik, a more moderate form of globalisation is needed. Some are already predicting a process of de-globalisation. Germany with its strongly export-based economy certainly has to think about this very soon.

IV.

We are therefore faced with a whole series of major political questions in the third decade of the 21st century. However, a return to nationalism and self-isolation would undoubtedly be the wrong answer, a misguided course. It would – I believe – ultimately have a dramatically detrimental impact on the lives of most people around the world. Therefore, what we need now – alongside alliances for multilateralism – is, above all, a stronger United Nations as well as the resolute implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Paris Climate Agreement. These decisions are the strategic alternatives to a world of national egoisms, confrontations between the major powers and global discord. And that also means that we have an alternative!

I am not pessimistic. I believe that the idea of a great transformation in all societies in this world has already taken root. The 2030 Agenda is not a central masterplan which presents the member states of the United Nations with a one size fits all blueprint. It allows room for adjustments in line with national, regional and local conditions. It is important that everyone in the spheres of politics, business and civil society plays their part. That is also the fundamental aim of the Decade of Action proclaimed by the Secretary-General. The United Nations has created a logo for it: the round sticker I am wearing. Its colours symbolise the 17 Goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. I am always happy to explain what this sticker means whenever I am asked. But yes, I find it frustrating that most people in Germany still do not know this symbol of solidarity.

I consider it indispensable and also morally justified that the industrialised countries recognise and assume their special leadership responsibility in the Decade of Action until 2030. By the way, I am not pessimistic about the USA either. There is more to that country than the current Administration's UN-hostile rhetoric and its denial of human-induced climate change. There are also other voices. For instance, an alliance of federal states and cities, the business community and civil society have taken a resolute "We are still in" stand against the withdrawal of the United States from the Paris Climate Agreement. The history of the United States of America, as well as the Americans I have got to know both in a political context and privately, ultimately give me confidence in the future rather than cause for concern. This great nation will not continue to pursue the current misguided policies for ever. However, it is also clear that Germany and Europe in particular have to re-assess their political situation and remain capable of taking action in order to safeguard their future.

V.

Ladies and gentlemen, the name "Dag Hammarskjöld" comes with an obligation. His appointment back then was a compromise reached between hostile major powers whose interests seemed to be irreconcilable. Thanks to his integrity, resolve and patient endeavour, he was able to breathe life into the United Nations as the guardian of the global common good. He showed us that we are not doomed to failure. Rather, we are called upon to act in a spirit of hope! We do not know whether we are doing everything right. However, we may have hope as long as we can muster the strength to act.

Despite all the shortcomings, inefficiency and the resulting need for reform – especially in the Security Council – we should beware of talking the United Nations as badly, as inefficiently and as powerlessly as it seems opportune to some. And despite all the necessary criticism, we should always make sure that the good work done by the United Nations is not overlooked. Its successes may sometimes appear to be minor or inconsequential and its workings may be arduous and frustrating. But in many cases they were achieved through hard work and despite many frustrations. The United Nations continues to set global standards, even though their implementation takes time and there are always setbacks. I am thinking here of the recent resolution on violence against women in conflicts. The United Nations continues to be the voice of those who would otherwise not be heard. It has proved to be a blessing for a large

part of humanity. Many, including the “United Nations Association of Germany”, have contributed to this. For that I would like to thank you.

Just like five years ago – and with even more reason today – I would like to conclude with the words of Dag Hammarskjöld: “When trying to change the world, we must take it as it is. Those are lost who dare not face the basic facts of international interdependence. Those are lost who permit defeats to scare them back to a starting point of narrow nationalism. Those are lost who are so scared by a defeat as to despair about the future. For all those, the dark prophecies may be justified. But not for those who do not permit themselves to be scared, not for the organisation which is the instrument at their disposal in the fight – an instrument which may be wrecked, but, if that happens, would have to be, and certainly would be, recreated again and again.” I thank you.