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The 2030 Agenda – A Copernican revolution in development cooperation?

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Bonn, New York City, 5 October 2015. Last week saw the world's heads of state and government adopt the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in New York. With its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the agenda represents a true paradigm shift in development cooperation. Development is no longer seen as a process that takes place only in poorer nations with frequent outside help. The emphasis is no longer solely on eradicating poverty, although this continues to be at the core of the SDGs. Focusing on people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnership, the SDGs are unparalleled in the way they integrate the environmental, social and economic aspects of sustainable development. The goals range from reducing inequality within and among countries to conserving the oceans and ensuring sustainable consumption and production patterns. Key cross-cutting issues such as migration, economic integration of the poor and disaster risk reduction are addressed in the 169 targets. The 2030 Agenda also deals with political topics such as good governance, access to justice and the promotion of peace and the rule of law.

At the heart of this 'redefinition' of sustainable development is the commitment to leave no one behind. This means that it is not only about the goals being achieved in general terms, but also and especially among vulnerable and marginalised population groups. The heads of state even underscored in their joint statement on 25 September 2015 that the poorest population groups need to be reached first. The 2030 Agenda also recognises that the SDGs are indivisible and universal. In all these aspects, the agenda differs from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that it succeeds.

Critics suggest that the 17 SDGs are far too numerous and complex compared with the MDGs and that it will take an exorbitant amount of money to implement them, money that will never be made available as aid.

In the first instance, this criticism fails to recognise that, if the fight against poverty is to be taken seriously in all its facets, then a complex agenda is needed. It will not suffice to focus solely on access to education, maternal health and economic growth when they are all fundamentally intertwined with issues such as peace, the finite nature of resources and the safeguarding of global public goods such as the climate.

Secondly, the agenda reflects the outcome of a

comprehensive global consultation process. This means it enjoys a tremendous amount of backing from numerous government representatives, UN organisations, civil-society actors and private actors that were involved in its negotiation. Their active support is now required for the agenda's implementation in these complex economic and political times.

Thirdly, the 2030 Agenda is a universal agenda for sustainable development: it is about fighting poverty and promoting peace and prosperity while respecting the environment, in both rich and poor countries. Development finance and development cooperation are important, especially in order to provide greater support to the poorest and most vulnerable population groups and ensure they are integrated to a greater extent in the process. However, we must not lose sight of the fact that, even in poorer countries, domestic resources and private sources of capital often play a more important role. There is also a great deal of potential to be exploited in preventing tax evasion and halting illicit financial flows. Indeed, aid will play no role for implementing the SDGs in wealthy countries and in some of the emerging economies. Yet it will still take a huge amount of finance to realise the SDGs. As a consequence, development funding will also need to be increased.

The 2030 Agenda and the measures agreed at the financing for development summit are now set to be implemented at national and global level. The UN system stands ready to assist any state with formulating its national strategies where required. It is now the turn of countries like Germany and Switzerland to lead by example in showing how the agenda can be implemented at the domestic level. To this end, they will also submit themselves to the global monitoring and review mechanisms.

If it is to generate momentum for its worldwide implementation, the 2030 Agenda needs to be more than simply an agreement between 193 states. It must be incorporated into the domestic policy agenda of each country and become a new social contract between duty-holders who govern and rights-bearers who are governed. This would bring about a Copernican revolution not only in development cooperation but also in the way we live together on this planet, creating a sustainable basis for peace, freedom and prosperity.