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“The Stars are aligned”: Now
bring them down to Earth!

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“The Stars are aligned”: Now bring them down to Earth!

Bonn, 19 January 2015. Today, diplomats in New York kick off negotiations on a new universal agenda for sustainable development that is to be finalized in September this year. The envisaged set of new sustainable development goals (SDGs) for the post-2015 agenda will be at the heart of the foreseeable wrangling and haggling, and rightly so: it will shape the global development agenda for years to come. Indeed, the SDGs stand out as the most ambitious project of international development policy in 2015. The Open Working Group (OWG) of the UN General Assembly, which proposed a list of 17 SDGs in July 2014, has paved the ground for focused intergovernmental negotiations. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, in his comprehensive Synthesis Report of December 2014, has underscored the utility of the OWG proposal and its transformative potential. It is now up to governments to rise to the occasion and harness a consolidated set of SDGs for a comprehensive global agenda that can be considered ambitious as well as fair. The new agenda must be universal in scope, effective in its adaptability to different country circumstances and authoritative in holding all countries – rich and poor – as well as non-state actors accountable in their pursuit of the agenda's objectives.

If governments succeed in doing so they will achieve much more than yet another development agenda. First and foremost, they will reassure the world that, in spite of everything, 193 states are able to respond to complex global challenges as *united nations* and to jointly take responsibility for current and future generations. Second, they will reaffirm the validity of universal human rights and the principles of sustainable development as fundamental to the human civilization, and thereby also send a strong signal to those who seek to undermine the basics of equity and peace with fundamentalist ideologies and heinous acts of terrorism. Not least, they will reinforce an unprecedented process of international consultation and commitment that defies the swan songs to multilateral cooperation and international law.

In short, they will set the international community on course for “The Future We Want”. To facilitate this ambitious endeavour, the UN Secretary-General has done a formidable job in pointing the way to “The Road to Dignity by 2030”. In his eponymous report, he synthesizes the aforementioned OWG recommendations regarding prospective SDGs as well as the report of the intergovernmental committee of experts on sustainable development financing.

For a start, by proposing six overarching themes – dignity, prosperity, justice, partnership, planet, and people – he addresses the sweeping criticism whereby a list of 17 goals would be impossible to communicate, let alone to implement. While the clustering exercise in itself does not trim the unwieldy number of 17 goals and 169 targets, it pays respect to the hard-won intergovernmental consensus of the OWG and stresses that ultimately it is the substance of the goals that counts. Clearly, the current list of goals needs some technical clean-up and specifications regarding implementation in the upcoming negotiations. Hopefully, negotiators also dare to become more ambitious in some areas and restrain their urge to water down others. Yet, the quest for a profound transformative change in all countries towards a more sustainable, fair and rights-based order within the planet's ecological boundaries calls for a convincing vision and inspirational justification – which Ban Ki-moon's report sets out to deliver.

The report is also clear in stressing that ambitious goals do not suffice. Without specifying where the money should come from and which political measures need to be taken, the implementation of a non-binding agenda does not stand a ghost of a chance. Essentially, this is a key lesson from the much more narrow Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) agenda that only contained vague specifications in this regard. Again, the Secretary-General does not stretch his mandate to prejudge the exact means of implementation but refers to the comprehensive assessment of the group of experts. His report does break new ground, however, with regard to accountability and review mechanisms, another indispensable ingredient for a successful implementation of the prospective agenda, and showcases that the UN system is well positioned to provide the necessary services.

Critics inevitably deplored that the Secretary-General did not take a more radical stance, provided a more rigorous analysis, or offered stronger leadership on formulating more ambitious goals and targets. Yet, he rightly threw back the ball to governments. As of today they will meet monthly to overcome their remaining differences – which are considerable – and to finalize the new agenda. Indeed, as the Secretary-General writes, “The stars are aligned for the world to take historic action to transform lives and protect the planet”. Yet, the SDGs must not be pie in the sky! This is the time for governments to bring a universal agenda down to earth to translate lofty aspirations into feasible policies for the better of all of humanity and the planet it happens to inhabit.