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“Transforming our world!”: Courage for restructuring the United Nations development system

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Courage for restructuring the United Nations development system

Bonn, 25 April 2016. "Transforming our world" – this is the guiding principle for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by the United Nations (UN) member states in September 2015. To make an effective and efficient contribution to implementing this universal agenda, member states now also need to reposition the UN development system. But how? This is the subject of current deliberations under the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) that will conclude in June. An Independent Team of Advisers has been set up to support Member States in drafting reform options. These efforts must not be limited to invigorating the reform processes that have been dragging on for a long time now. Rather, the new universal definition of development should be used as a basis for re-visiting the underlying principles, tasks and global role of the UN development system.

The UN development system comprises a multitude of organisations and entities which are coordinated by ECOSOC, in theory at least. In practice, this system, or, as German Federal President Horst Köhler put it in his speech on the UN's 70th anniversary, this "entanglement of systems", has become virtually impossible to manage. Many consider it to be inefficient, ineffective and operating too often incoherently. Its focus on operational development work, the continued dominance of conventional donors and the emergence of new platforms and institutions (such as the Global Fund and new development banks) also threaten to leave it politically marginalised.

What changes does the 2030 Agenda bring? Unlike other UN pillars (peace and security, human rights, and humanitarian action), the UN development system has to date operated on the idea of a world divided into the aid-providing "North" and aid-receiving "South". The 2030 Agenda revokes this outdated, two-tiered view of the world with its new principle of universality. All countries, richer and poorer alike, must realign their development pathways and efforts. Transformational cooperation for sustainable development needs to be viewed not so much as aid, but rather increasingly as a means of mutual learning and change among countries from all income groups.

The 2030 Agenda also expresses a new and unprecedented need for international cooperation. It is becoming progressively more difficult for individual states and bilateral partnerships to address challenges in areas such as migration, the environment, global health care and peace-building. While need and solidarity remain key factors in international cooperation, these times of increasing nationalism and the related decline in moral

resources make it especially necessary to supplement them with a new rationale of investing in the collective interests of security, prosperity and the protection of our planetary ecosystem.

As a transformational project, the 2030 Agenda cannot be implemented within the thematic and institutional models of a pre-2015 world. The UN development system is not designed for or well suited to this purpose either. UN member states should utilize the new mandate of the 2030 Agenda to reposition the development system and give it a universal focus. They could start with a mission statement that makes the agenda's universal and holistic nature the basis for the normative and operational activities of the new "UN 2030 System". The statement should reference the following key elements:

- (1) strengthening the norm- and standard-setting processes and conceptual work in order to maintain a political leadership role in global cooperation for sustainable development;
- (2) expansion of reporting, monitoring and advisory activities for implementing the 2030 Agenda in all member states, including industrialised nations;
- (3) focusing operational project work on poorer, more fragile and conflict-hit states in which other development actors have so far been unable to work;
- (4) assisting member states in tackling cross-border and global issues, including at regional level;
- (5) appointment of a high commissioner for sustainable development responsible for strategically steering and managing the "UN 2030 System";
- (6) a shift from earmarked contributions to reliable core funding practices, based on multilaterally agreed agendas and strategic plans.

These proposals are not limited solely to the "UN 2030 System" itself, but also contain an appeal to member states. For example, at present, "donor countries" frequently see the UN merely as a service provider for their own short-term initiatives. For their part, "recipient countries" have often found it convenient to assume the recipient role. Both are insisting on their absolute sovereignty. As such, they are undermining the value added by the UN as a multilateral organisation. It is now time to invest in a new, universal "UN 2030 System" (by providing resources, being willing to compromise and giving it a vote of confidence) in order to reap the longer-term benefits of the shared security and prosperity within planetary boundaries that the 2030 Agenda seeks to achieve.