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2017: After the magic of beginnings

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2017: After the magic of beginnings

Bonn, 19 December 2016. At the end of 2016 the global political climate became gloomier. Nevertheless, **year one of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development** has also had some of the "magic of beginnings" (Meister Eckhart). Following the historic resolutions of 2015 regarding the 2030 Agenda with its 17 goals and the Paris Agreement on climate change, 2016 has seen a great deal of beginnings, both within states and internationally. 22 countries from all regions of the world have already presented their steps for national implementation of the 2030 Agenda to the United Nations for review. The Paris Agreement entered into force in good time. The G7 has committed itself to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, both domestically and internationally. The G20 has presented the Action Plan on the 2030 Agenda. At their summit the BRICS nations committed to lead by example in its implementation. EU and OECD have taken their first, albeit tentative, steps towards implementation. Worldwide, numerous actors from civil society, the corporate sector and academia have made the 17 goals and the climate agenda their own business. A remarkable momentum. At the same time, three observations give cause for concern.

Too much narcissism

It is only natural for actors to focus on themselves and their portfolio in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. However, the pattern that emerges is an unconvincing one. The G20 and the European Union largely assign activities already underway to the Agenda, with many national actors taking a similar approach. This is sure to aid positioning in the world of the 2030 Agenda. However, what is required is an additional step which has to begin with self-examination: where is the respective country or actor lagging most when it comes to achieving the goals? Where is the need to contribute to realising the global goals most acute? Why has it not proved possible to achieve goals set earlier? Only where answers to these questions have been found is it possible to make truly transformative contributions.

Trapped in path dependencies

The process of drafting the 2030 Agenda partly succeeded in breaking free from the typical diplomatic models of the United Nations and triggered an institutional innovation in the form of the High-Level-Political Forum on Sustainable Development. However, beyond this the implementation of the Agenda depends largely on the institutions of the pre-2015 world. This has two inherent risks: on the one hand, actors and institutions handle and interpret the Agenda in the scope of their traditional mandates, missions and memberships. On the other hand, in some areas of activity key to the success of the Agenda there is a lack of relevant actors or the willingness to contribute.

As a rule, within the states responsibility remains with the government offices already assigned with issues of sustainability, environment, and/or development, often far remote from areas such as finance, economic or foreign policy. Internationally, the implementation architecture is characterised above all by actors in the traditional field of development co-operation. However, international co-operation for sustainable development needs to free itself from the stereotypical North-South and South-South patterns and also encompass something such as North-North. There is a requirement for transformative co-operation in mutual solidarity, aimed at change for all those involved and not having resource transfers neither with regard to scope nor direction at its centre.

Scarcely any impulses for societal politics

One of the mantras of development and environment policy thinking is that change is necessary in richer countries in order to overcome poverty in poorer countries and to protect global public goods. The vanishing point of this reasoning has always lain outside of the observer's own country, with its effect correspondingly limited. The 2030 Agenda is now also addressing development worries of people in richer countries. Its motto "leave no one behind" has a specific relevance in Europe and North America. In spite of this, communication and reception of the Agenda in many of these countries still follows the old narrative all too often. But it is only when the domestic dimension of the Agenda is taken seriously that the acceptance of responsibility for other countries and the planet can grow. To achieve this, long standing as well as current societal discourses need to combine with the 2030 Agenda, new and unusual dialogues and alliances must arise. Conventional supporters of the Agenda in particular should leave their comfort zones.

Three transformative proposals

To keep the 2030 Agenda on a sure footing, we need a second magic of beginnings in 2017. Three proposals for transformative co-operation: (1.) In France, Italy and Germany the respective democratic parties commit themselves to make the 2030 Agenda a central reference point of their election platforms. (2.) North America and Europe establish a high-level dialogue and co-operation framework for the sustainable development of both continents. (3.) The G20 agree a common learning process for the fields of politics, business, trade unions and civil society to transform their coal-mining regions and rustbelts.

The implementation of the 2030 Agenda should not be allowed to lapse into obligatory bureaucratic-diplomatic exercises, otherwise *"we make it home, and apathy commences. But only he, who travels and takes chances, can break the habits' paralyzing stances."* (Hermann Hesse).