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A European narrative?

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The Current Column

of 25 May 2016

A European narrative?

Bonn, 25 May 2016. In September 2015, the EU heads of state and government joined their colleagues from around the world at the United Nations to adopt the transformational project of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The EU played a major role in drafting this universal agenda with its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Serving as an action plan for people and planet, prosperity and peace, the agenda reflects key European values and interests. It is designed to promote development within the EU, outside of Europe and for humankind as a whole.

The focus is now on putting it into practice. At global level, the UN's new High-level Political Forum will start examining implementation in July 2016. Four EU member states (Germany, Estonia, Finland and France) have already volunteered to have their national implementation processes reviewed then, as has China, which currently holds the G20 Presidency. But what is the EU doing?

EU summits have had other priorities since September 2015, including the refugee crisis, a potential Brexit and the recurring issue of the Euro crisis. Within the Union, social tensions and economic disparities are on the rise. Euroscepticism and populism abound. When it comes to implementing the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, the EU is failing to live up to its ambitious rhetoric. As for firm commitments to implementing the 2030 Agenda, Brussels has largely been silent to date. Has the project been put on hold? Is it mired in institutional deadlock? Or is the Union taking a constructive pause for thought?

There is certainly some movement behind the scenes. Juncker's Hors Classe Senior Advisor for Sustainable Development is due to submit recommendations by mid-2016 on how the SDGs can be implemented within the EU and globally with the EU. A gap analysis is being conducted at the Commission to align European policies and realities with the SDGs. Interestingly, almost no mention is made of the EU Sustainable Development Strategy, last updated in 2009. Rather, the focus is on two other major projects, namely the revision of Europe's growth strategy (leading to a 'New Approach beyond 2020') and the drafting of an EU Global Strategy on Foreign and Security Policy. But where does Europe's implementation of the 2030 Agenda come in? Does it make sense to address the agenda in a separate process when the Global Strategy and the New Approach will just have been adopted?

First and foremost, the EU heads of state and government and the Commission, Council and Parliament Presidents need to issue a joint statement establishing the 2030 Agenda as a central reference point for all the EU's internal and external policies. In this way, they would be acknowledging the universal nature and

integrity of the agenda with its social, economic, environmental and political dimensions and setting an ambitious framework that provides clear guidance as well as policy space for the initiatives both within EU institutions and in member states.

Following the 2030 Agenda, European policy on sustainable development can no longer be a side show or niche activity. Rather, it must take centre stage and be furnished with effective implementation and review instruments. As a transformational project, the 2030 Agenda cannot be implemented within the conceptual and institutional patterns of the pre-2015 world. These patterns are neither made for nor suited to this. Isn't it time for the EU to align its New Approach beyond 2020 and its regular coordination processes ambitiously and equitably with all dimensions of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and to abandon the outdated primary focus on economic and financial policies? And is it still appropriate for the EU Global Strategy to continue being designed primarily from a traditional foreign and security policy perspective and for global sustainable development to be outsourced as an issue of cooperation with developing countries?

The EU has had a major hand in writing the new global agenda for sustainable development. It should now seize the opportunity to turn it into a positive new European narrative that resonates with Europe's citizens and is viewed as constructive and credible by Europe's partners around the world. Without a compelling European narrative of this kind, the new global narrative of sustainable development could soon fade away into a matter for diplomats and bureaucrats only. The 2030 Agenda addresses key issues of Europe's internal development, including youth unemployment and social disparities, growth and infrastructure, and sustainable agriculture and biodiversity. Many global goals of the Agenda require substantial transformations within the EU itself, from climate change mitigation and the promotion of sustainable consumption and production patterns to conserving the oceans. At the same time, Europe cannot preserve its own interests, goals and values without committed and solidary responses to the challenges of sustainable development in its own neighbourhood as well as globally, challenges such as poverty and vulnerability, crises and conflict, and migration and displacement. From this perspective, the 2030 Agenda does indeed have much in common with the issues of the EU's regular crisis summits and could provide longer-term orientation for European politics.

This contribution is the short and translated version of a of: Kloke-Lesch, Adolf (2016): Eine Europäische Erzählung?, in: Forum Wirtschaftsethik, Jahresschrift des Deutschen Netzwerks Wirtschaftsethik, 23. Jahrgang (2015), Berlin 2016, S. 52-54 (in press).