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Engaging in Africa

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Engaging in Africa

Bonn, 11 February 2014. Is German foreign policy no longer a policy of peace? Defence Minister von der Leyen visits the troops in Mali, Foreign Minister Steinmeier wants to see more military involvement in Africa and German President Gauck warns us to take greater responsibility for our neighbouring continent. Of course, greater involvement in Africa is important. Military involvement in Africa is right. But only when it serves to hinder war crimes or to keep the peace. It would be wrong to place the emphasis upon military aspects. Above all, more responsibility for Africa calls for co-ordinated civil involvement.

Military intervention as a last resort – especially in Africa

The change of government in Germany has opened up the possibility of a new foreign policy debate. But why Africa in particular?

Conflicts in Africa are easier to resolve than in the Hindu Kush – at least this is how it sounds in the statements made by German politicians in recent days. This is a false conclusion! Participation in military interventions is to be considered carefully in the African context in particular. This also applies in the case of apparently safe operations such as the training of Malian soldiers by the *Bundeswehr*. Such training only contributes to stability and peace if it is linked to political and social processes. Otherwise there is a risk of tackling the symptoms without rectifying the structural causes of conflict. This would result in the endless propagation of the virulent conflict that has been simmering since the 1960s. For example, negotiations with armed Tuareg groups should be linked to convincing proposals for decentralisation reforms.

Military tasks remain. Whilst part of the Malian military is undergoing training, the population in the north of the country has to be protected from the criminal activities of smuggling gangs and – sometimes putative – Islamist terrorists. In the medium term this is a clear task for the Standby Force of the African Union. The aim should be to assist this further in establishing itself.

Responsibility for freedom and democracy

Misery and war: the prevailing image of Africa practically cries out for military intervention as a means of foreign policy. The problem: the monotonous history of violence and hunger is not even half of the truth about our neighbouring continent. Violent conflicts are also decreasing in African societies. In

countries such as Ghana or South Africa there is a burgeoning middle class. Labour-intensive industries are increasingly driving economic growth, as is the case in Ethiopia. Such peaceful states have a central significance for security and development in Africa. They form anchors of stability, enabling inclusive economic growth and social development. Germany – and the German private sector – can make a relevant contribution to peace and development. The people of Europe and Africa can benefit from the sensible and fair opening of markets.

However, the positive outlook in some African states should not distract from enduring problems and precarious living conditions. If Germany wishes to assume more responsibility in resolving African problems, then it needs to be stronger in its defence of democracy and human rights than has been the case thus far. The overwhelmingly restricted political liberties not only exacerbate feelings of impotence amongst the population. They also accentuate social problems. Africa's population is increasing at an average of 2.6 % per year, faster than any other continent. Food security will be an even greater problem in the future. Despite good geographical and climatic conditions, many states import staple foods from Asia and Europe. The extremely young societies – 41 % are younger than 15 – are frequently unable to offer the next generation future prospects.

Approaches for a responsible African policy

There are four aspects that are particularly relevant for successful German foreign policy in Africa. Firstly, it must take account of the complexity of African crises. When political problems meet social ones and develop into violent conflicts an integral approach is called for. This in turn requires pro-active co-operation between ministries such as the foreign, development, defence, education and agriculture ministries. Secondly, the foreign policy realignment should not lose sight of the maxim "African solutions for African problems". Germany should therefore keep its promise and continue to support the African security architecture of the African Union. Thirdly, thanks to its economic strength at European level Germany can use the global stage to persuade other states of the merits of a future-oriented African policy. Fourthly, more responsibility in the solving of African problems also means more values-oriented policies. The protection of human rights and the promotion of democracy will save more lives in the long term than military intervention.