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Countering uncertainty

What is at stake in international policy-making in 2019

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Bonn, 14 January 2019. 2019 will not be an easy year for international cooperation, the improvement of human welfare and sustainable development. In many places, domestic politics is hindering these goals. Societies are dividing into different ideological camps and are increasingly less able to agree on what the problems are and prioritise the challenges, let alone find common solutions. This often goes hand in hand with marginalisation of societal groups and individuals whose rights are not fully respected, a loss of compassion and a defensive attitude towards international responsibility. Violent clashes within societies and ongoing or frozen conflicts reflect an inability to look to the future and reach compromises based on common interests and a desire for peace. Many people are deeply troubled and unsettled by these phenomena, which are observable on every continent, including Europe, and within Germany. Our societies seem to lose a shared understanding of how to live together peacefully and productively, on what constitutes a free and prosperous society, and on why constructive international relations in policy-making, society and business are important.

These disconcerting trends within our own society, in the European Union (EU) and in international relations make it more difficult to take action, and yet, without a global perspective, there is no conceivable way of improving national welfare in today's world. Interdependencies and interactions characterise the 21st Century more than any other. These exist between industrialised nations, emerging economies and developing countries, between rising levels of prosperity and environmental pollution that threaten the stability of our planetary system, and between social, economic and political participation within nations on the one hand and international stability, security and cooperation on the other.

Policies for sustainable development must take account of all these aspects and are reliant on international cooperation. We have had an internationally agreed framework for action in this regard since 2015 with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). We need to think and act beyond the sum of national interest constellations and concepts of the common good in Europe and around the world. In this sense, this agenda provides global orientation for responding appropriately to current challenges, whether the reduction of poverty and inequality,

biodiversity conservation and climate change mitigation, or efforts to end war, displacement and flight. The Katowice Climate Change Conference achieved progress in some key areas for implementing the Paris Climate Agreement. It showed that international climate cooperation is alive, driven jointly by governments, cities, civil society, the private sector and the research community.

These challenges will be high on the policy agenda of the EU and the United Nations (UN) in 2019. In the run up to the European Parliament elections, political parties and their voters will have to agree not only on how to combine prosperity and growth with social justice and cohesion, but also on the level of global responsibility that should be borne by a modern Europe worth living in and how exactly this responsibility should be defined. The 2009 Treaty of Lisbon boosted the Parliament's influence. A forward-looking Europe needs a broad voter turnout that reflects its dynamic democratic core.

The UN will host two summits in September 2019, one on climate change and the other on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. This requires heads of state and government to step up to the plate. These summits and their topics must be considered together and connections made between them in order to prevent misleading competition and facilitate swifter action. The latest special report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change shows that ambitious implementation of the 17 SDGs could ease the adaptation and mitigation burden associated with climate policy. Social justice is a key concern of the 2030 Agenda and promotes the implementation of climate-resilient transformation pathways. Even in a world with a 1.5°C global temperature increase, the risks would increase, too, but there would still be better prospects of making progress on the sustainable development front in many areas. Consequently, the latest New Climate Economy Report underscores the positive correlations between swifter technological innovation, investment in sustainable infrastructure and greater resource productivity. The Better Business, Better World report shows that 380 million new jobs could be created by 2030, a large share of them in Africa, through investment in the SDGs.

2019 will be a good year if we use it to counter the uncertainty within and between our societies. The European elections in May and the UN summits in September offer a unique opportunity in this regard.