



*Interjection*

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# 2030 Agenda: The Courage to Achieve Sustainability

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Germany needs a public discussion on a broad approach towards sustainability. This is not a call for a backward-looking “ecological agenda”, but instead for overdue reforms regarding economic modernisation, climate protection, and innovation so that more people can live in peace, liberty, and prosperity. The courage to achieve sustainability is necessary if we are to look boldly to the future. The 2030 Agenda shows us the way.

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Greta Thunberg and the “Fridays for Future” demonstrators are not the first to insist that we must respect the limits of our planet. The extreme drought and heat that affected even the northernmost parts of Germany and Europe in the past years are underscoring the importance of this demand. No wonder then, that the discussion on sustainability in Germany is dominated by climate protection concerns. Yet, an exclusive focus on climate creates a distorted view of sustainability. Nor is it helpful when climate activists compete for the moral high ground and engage in activities such as harassing passengers at airports in an attempt to shame them for flying – as though blaming and shaming would disguise the fact that airlines all over the world are carrying more passengers today than ever before, and the number of passengers is rising.<sup>1</sup> Although the primary concern of climate protection activists, that CO<sub>2</sub> emissions be reduced, is valid, the number of airline passengers alone suggests that a different approach is needed to save the world. Whether it be abstaining from flying, driving, or eating meat: Given the rise of Asian nations and the growth of other regions around the world, asceticism by itself is no panacea. A far-reaching approach that looks beyond the national context is absolutely essential if we are to find a solution.

In this context, it is worth examining the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which was adopted by the United Nations in 2015. The Agenda requires nothing less than the transformation of our world.<sup>2</sup> Its understanding of sustainability is underpinned by three elements: It is based on a robust global economy with

technological progress that operates in harmony with the environment and is socially responsible. All states, both developing, emerging and developed nations alike, are called upon to play an equal role in its implementation. The Agenda also challenges citizens. We all need to play our part. However, while one-third of the time allocated to reach the sustainability goals has already elapsed, the 2030 Agenda has received little attention in Germany; only ten per cent of the population are acquainted with the term. And yet, Germans often advocate sustainability.<sup>3</sup> How can this contradiction be explained? Why is the Agenda so obscure in Germany?

### **The Agenda Is More than Climate Protection**

One reason is that the 2030 Agenda with its 17 sustainability goals, 169 sub-objectives, along with a multitude of indicators, is not particularly user-friendly. The topics are too complex, “everything is related to everything else”, and a holistic approach is a prerequisite for progress towards the frequently invoked sustainability revolution. Trying to simultaneously achieve the ecological, economic, and social dimensions of the sustainability principle is like squaring a circle. Moreover, no one should be left behind in this process. This doesn’t mean that implementation is impossible. But it will require prioritisation, whose impacts will differ depending on the emphasis. Addressing this issue requires confronting sustainability in all of its facets. For instance, it is only logical that a one-sided focus on climate change means neglecting other elements, be they social or economic. This is why the appeal by Rüdiger Kruse, member of the

*Bundestag*, for fellow MPs to follow “Nine rules for political work that will make Germany more sustainable”<sup>4</sup> is a welcome development. He advocates an approach that would reconcile environment, economy, and social concerns. Sustainability is by definition such an approach and Germany’s Christian Democratic Union (CDU) is best positioned to bring it about. As evidenced by its “safeguard creation” slogan, the party’s tradition is no stranger to the idea of sustainability. However, given the emergence of specific ecological movements and interest groups in Germany during the 1980s, the term has become strongly associated with ecological content. Still, only those who deem ecological sustainability to be synonymous with economic performance and social justice, have understood the 2030 Agenda and the course it sets for the future.

Hence, a genuine sustainability revolution cannot be achieved by simply protecting the climate alone. The general, legally binding global climate agreement resulting from the UN Climate Change Conference in Paris, as it was adopted in the post-2015 Development Agenda, certainly represents a giant leap forward. There is a reason why that year is considered the apogee of multilateral cooperation. Yet, even though Germany is demonstrating its commitment to multilateralism in times of increased protectionism and nationalism, not much has been said about the Agenda. Germany has a sustainability strategy. It was revised in 2016 on the basis of the Agenda and updated in 2018 to incorporate the input of non-state actors.<sup>5</sup> It is a cross-cutting strategy that is present in all departments and has an international dimension. Nevertheless, outside the group of “usual suspects”, little is to be heard about any progress or problems emerging in practice. Last year, a group of experts reached the conclusion that the term of sustainability is omnipresent in politics, but it is not always clear what it entails.<sup>6</sup> Criticism was not only levelled against the government. Given that there is more than one way to implement the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the parliament would be the place to discuss such approaches. Since this discussion rarely takes

place, sustainability policy degenerates into little more than a technical exercise. This also explains the public’s lack of interest.

## **CDU members of the *Bundestag* are already calling for the principle of sustainability to be anchored in Germany’s Basic Law.**

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What counts now is action. In view of an imminent extension of the sustainability strategy, the German Council for Sustainable Development recommends raising the bar. The strategy must not only sound good, it also needs to ensure that goals are achieved. Increased involvement on the part of civil society is the key here. The emphasis is placed on networking between local and regional actors.<sup>7</sup> *Bundestag* members Kai Whittaker and Andreas Lenz go a step further, calling for the principle of sustainability to be anchored in Germany’s Basic Law.<sup>8</sup> That would represent a seismic shift, but according to the former President of Germany’s Federal Constitutional Court, Hans-Jürgen Papier, it is the right course. Papier believes that the system of parliamentary democracy means that insufficient attention is paid to precautions. There needs to be a social balance not only within generations but between them, too.<sup>9</sup> CDU Chairwoman Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer also wants to elevate sustainability to constitutional status, calling for a specific implementation of policies that ensure ecological sustainability in addition to economic sustainability. Her aim is leaving neither piles of rubbish nor debts to the future generations.<sup>10</sup> One thing is certain: This effort will be binding only if sustainability becomes a guiding budgetary principle; this would mean budgets systematically taking SDGs into account as early as draft form, and the parliament conducting effective sustainability checks on the government. The first step must therefore be to expand the authority of the Parliamentary Advisory Council on Sustainable Development, making

it equal to that of *Bundestag* committees.<sup>11</sup> The Federal Ministry of Finance is considering how budget checks could take sustainability criteria into account.<sup>12</sup>

### **The Agenda Is Not an Elite Project**

We must also actively contribute to shaping the SDG process at the global level. It is true that many German citizens perceive the UN to be out of touch with reality, but it is essential for the global sustainability revolution. It is the only place where all nations come together, and the Agenda itself is the embodiment of multilateralism. Its portfolio provides a foreign policy coordinate system and covers the forward-looking issues of our time. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of the UN's process can be improved. For instance, progress in implementing the SDGs is discussed annually at the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF). Still, the Forum can be successful only if it has genuine support. This stance is not shared by all actors involved. The Voluntary National Reviews discussed at the HLPF are an example of this. Here, governments voluntarily submit their implementation reports. The instrument is enjoying growing popularity. This year, 47 states (seven of them for the second time), submitted reviews under the motto "Empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality".<sup>13</sup> By way of comparison: In 2017, there were 43. But the fact that even Russia announced a report clearly shows that the texts have little to do with reality. There are limits to comparing the reports of different countries. Despite guidelines and minimum standards, the reports can differ quite considerably – not only in scope, but also in quality. The gravest deficiency, however, is that insufficient HLPF authority has meant no binding consequences. The manner in which the forum works impedes its success. Experts are calling for structural reforms, a political upgrade to the forum, and more effective involvement of civil society.<sup>14</sup> There is much at stake. At the forum, and especially at the SDG summit, it is not only about exchanging experiences, but also about political momentum, too. That is why it is currently in such a poor state. The highly charged

atmosphere and conflict between the leading powers make global governance appear weak. In spite of that, the 2030 Agenda and the commitment to sustainable development were mentioned in the final communiqué of this year's G20.<sup>15</sup> The sustainability revolution will require more dedication. This fact is underscored by the poor interim results presented at this year's Sustainability Summit in New York. Countries such as Denmark, Sweden, and Finland are in the top ten when it comes to implementing SDGs, and Germany is in sixth place. But they and the rest of the G20 countries (the US is ranked 35) must increase their commitment.<sup>16</sup> Or formulated differently: At the current pace, even the Nordic countries will be unable to reach the goals by 2030. A primary point of criticism is consumption behaviour on the part of rich industrialised countries (SDG 12). The UN warned that without an improved performance by the G20, which makes up two-thirds of the world's population and is responsible for 75 per cent of global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, the Agenda will fail. China, India, and the US are in large part responsible. But Australia and the United Kingdom, too, are not doing well with respect to "negative spill over effects".<sup>17</sup> That is why international organisations such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) argue that governance structures should be arranged strictly according to sustainability criteria to accelerate internal transformation processes.<sup>18</sup>

### **The Agenda Is More Than Development Policy**

It is also important not to get caught up in standard viewpoints. A hyper-connected world with a variety of demographic developments and growing migratory movements, will result in geopolitical shifts. If the estimates forecasting a rise in global population from 7.1 billion to 9.7 billion by 2050 are correct, humanity and the planet will face immense challenges. While Africa's population will double by 2050 and rise to four billion by 2100, Europe's population will decline sharply.<sup>19</sup> In Africa's dry regions, the great population growth will go hand in hand with pressure on already scarce resources such as water or





Not on their own! Industrial nations have a duty to help out developing countries reach their sustainable development goals. Source: © Jianan Yu, Reuters.

fertile areas of cultivation. The UN warned that the planet loses 24 billion tonnes of fertile land due to land degradation each year.<sup>20</sup> The effects on security and stability in the affected countries, especially those with weaker state structures, are easy to imagine. Having said this, the risk of instability and conflict will not only apply

to poor countries. The conversion to regenerative forms of energy may deprive prosperous countries dependent on fossil fuel exports of essential sources of income, and hence trigger a spiral of destabilisation. A rapid socioeconomic revolution could also accelerate the erosion of state institutions.<sup>21</sup> This risk primarily affects

countries in the Middle East and Africa, but Latin America is also greatly dependent on fossil fuel exports.

At the same time, the Agenda addresses competition and the question of who will be the leaders in future technologies. Among these technologies is renewable energy. Germany's energy revolution has put it in a favourable position, and German companies have gained valuable experience to conquer the markets. Yet, it is China that now leads the way when it comes to expanding its renewable energy capacities. Other growth centres in Asia also need to be taken into account.<sup>22</sup> As early as 2027, India may overtake China as the most populous country in the world. According to forecasts more than 60 per cent of the global middle class will live in Asia. In 2015, the number was only about 46 per cent.<sup>23</sup> In the 2018 Fortune Global 500 Ranking, 210 of the 500 largest companies (by earnings) came from Asia. One consequence of growth could be that the global value chain, in which many Asian countries and local companies are still at the bottom of the prosperity ladder, could soon reverse. Asia's rise will certainly lead to greater energy demand, consumption, and production. Viewed globally, this could wipe out the climate protection progress achieved by the West.

### **The transition to a resource-saving, environmentally-friendly growth model requires a financial sector that is oriented towards sustainability.**

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In order to keep pace with economic and technological developments in the West, more attention must be paid to the SDGs. They are the engine of modernisation and innovation. This implies placing more emphasis on sustainability principles in agriculture, transport, trade policy, and when shaping the single market. We

need the relevant European framework in order for this to work. So far, however, the European Consensus on Development has only adjusted development policy cooperation.<sup>24</sup> Much hope is on the president-elect of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, to focus on this task. She recently announced a "Green New Deal", which aims at the EU's carbon neutrality by 2050. At the same time, capital is necessary for a transition to a resource-saving, environmentally-friendly growth model. This involves aligning the financial sector as a whole. The European Commission has recently proposed legislation to that end.<sup>25</sup> In the limelight of the proposal stands a classification system that allows to clarify which activities can be labelled as sustainable. The Federal Ministry of Finance has initiated a "sustainable finance" strategy process.

### **The Agenda Means Taking Responsibility**

It is important to have an honest discussion. Not everyone will automatically be a winner in the revolution that has been set in motion. The transition stage is fraught with risk of instability and crisis, to which the weakest are most susceptible. At the global level, the weakest are fragile countries, and according to the World Bank this applies to 36 countries with slightly more than half being located in Africa. Their fragility does not manifest itself in war and other prolonged conflicts of a violent nature, but instead affects all countries in which people live in extreme poverty or are exposed to unbearable levels of crime, weak state institutions, or natural disasters.<sup>26</sup> It is obvious that these countries will face the greatest challenge when it comes to achieving the sustainability goals. Not surprisingly, in many places women and children will bear the brunt of this. At the moment, 15 countries, including Niger, Nigeria, and Afghanistan, are far "off track".<sup>27</sup> Nor are there reliable data that would more accurately determine the deficits. The industrialised nations are therefore obliged to assist these countries in achieving the SDGs by providing humanitarian aid, engaging in economic and development cooperation, and lending support in establishing statistical

and monitoring systems. To date, few countries, even in the EU, have allocated the agreed-upon 0.7 per cent of GDP for official development assistance (ODA). However, it would be a mistake to focus on market forces alone. Both public and private investment are necessary in order to tackle the challenges in these countries. Smart regulation can help set the right course; global value-added chains are an example of this. In the past, developing and emerging countries benefited from these chains owing to their low wages. While in turn consumers in rich countries benefited from low prices. Yet, the internationally interwoven economy is exerting high levels of competitive pressure.<sup>28</sup> Whereas in developing countries this pressure has often manifested itself in the form of poor working conditions and greater pollution, in industrialised states competition with low-wage countries translated into stagnating wages and unemployment within several industries. Consumers can support sustainability as well as making their decisions to purchase goods conditional upon social and ecological criteria; however, that is not enough to correct social disparities within societies or abuses at local production sites. Companies must also assume responsibility. In 2016, Germany adopted the National Action Plan for Business and Human Rights, requiring all actors in a supply chain to adhere to the UN's Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, it is proving difficult to implement the plan on a manufacturing process that is distributed across a vast number of countries and producers. Still, the obligation of business to fulfil this is only one side of the coin. Governments in developing countries must do more, too. If the vicious cycle of poverty and precarious employment conditions is to be broken, there needs to be an increase in productivity. Providing better framework conditions and market access to the private sector are just as important. Given that national efforts often fall short of the mark, international cooperation and financing are essential. It was against this background that the UN adopted the Addis Ababa Action Agenda. Unlike earlier development financing, ODA and private investment is to be supplemented by increased tax revenues

in the developing countries themselves in order to pave the way for SDG implementation. Experts point out, however, that little has been accomplished so far. The existing gaps in financing cannot be closed this way, especially not in low-income countries.<sup>30</sup>

There is therefore no doubt that “business as usual” will not achieve anything in regards to the 2030 Agenda. Without decisive action, no country, not even Germany, will achieve the SDGs by 2030. Such action will require public discussion of a broad approach to sustainability. This is not a call for a backward-looking “ecological agenda”, but instead for overdue reforms regarding economic modernisation, climate protection, and innovation so that we can continue to live in peace, liberty, and prosperity as well as enabling other people to do so in the future. Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel recently called on Germany to “make the future its home”<sup>31</sup>. We should take this challenge to heart. The courage to achieve sustainability is necessary, if we are to look boldly to the future. The 2030 Agenda shows us the way.

*—translated from German—*

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