

Tipping points and small steps

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In 2003 Dirk Messner was appointed Director of the German Development Institute (DIE). I was German Minister for Economic Cooperation and Development at that time. Now, after nearly two decades of our successful cooperation, I am still proud of this decision! Dirk and his colleagues turned the German Development Institute into the leading think tank on development policy that it is today. Thus the Institute became our relevant partner and counsellor in discussions on development, a partner we had been lacking before. It was the first time that I associated Dirk Messner with a tipping point – of course in a clearly positive connotation. He continued his dedication to providing his expertise and insight by joining the German Advisory Council on Global Change and by founding the German chapter of the Sustainable Development Solutions Network – to name just a few of the remarkable scientific bodies active at the interface with policy and society that he cooperated with. In 2018 he joined the Institute for Environment and Human Security of the United Nations University, and today he leads the German Environment Agency.

The positive tipping point that Dirk Messner brought about with the DIE had to do with the quality of political advice. That was way before we associated “tipping points” with ecological disasters, as we do today. And it reminds me of another tipping point in the quality of discussing global development: In 1977 the then president of the World Bank, Robert McNamara, proposed the establishment of the Independent Commission on International Development Issues, the so-called North-South Commission under the chairmanship of Willy Brandt. In 2022, 45 years will have passed

since this landmark decision! Of course, the world has changed so much in these 45 years: We saw the end of the Cold War with the collapse of the Iron Curtain, and the world is no longer divided between an Eastern and a Western block. However, if we look at the recommendations of the Brandt Commission, published in 1980, many of their proposals are acutely relevant and applicable to the problems we face today! Willy Brandt called for a globalisation of politics and a *Weltinnenpolitik*, maybe best translated as Global Domestic Politics. “In wide ranges there exists a defensive pragmatism and this at a time in which the interests of human beings and humanity demand new perspectives and farsighted leadership.” (Independent Commission on International Development Issues 1980: 17) For the Commission, this meant a new, inclusive and comprehensive understanding of security and a strengthening of the United Nations as well as the recognition of our joint responsibility to solve global problems: “None of the important problems can be solved effectively by confrontation. Reasonable solutions can only be based on dialogue and cooperation.” (Independent Commission on International Development Issues 1980: 32)

Today we have the 17 Sustainable Development Goals that encourage us to choose dialogue and cooperation over greed and confrontation. And the COVID-19 pandemic – as much as it was devastating – demonstrated that, first of all, the dangerous ideology of neoliberalism, which prevented the realisation of many of the Commission’s recommendations, needs to be left behind as it is not suitable to safeguard a fair and inclusive well-being of humankind. Instead, a social welfare state and social security systems which can protect their citizens have proven to be valuable and effective. Second of all: Pandemics – by their very nature – can only be overcome through international cooperation. It is not at all clear yet that this is a tipping point for the beginning of the end of destructive nationalism. It is not yet clear that the world will learn this lesson and establish a tighter global cooperation, much less a global governance, as Willy Brandt foresaw it. But there is a significant change today since the time when his report was written: Today we have a much stronger participation of civil society which can bring global solutions forward and which can help to overcome obstructions from vested interests.

In the face of historical tipping points such as a global pandemic, however, continued national and corporate self-interest stands in the way of a global perspective: What are the tasks that Dirk Messner – not alone, of course, but together with all those national and global partners – has before him?

The Sustainable Development Goals and the Agenda 2030 are the central reference for a social-ecological transformation of politics, economics

and society in all countries and regions. In the spirit of the Brandt Report 1980 and the Brundtland Report 1987, this means that the decisions of today must be judged not only from the perspectives of the coming generations but also from the perspectives of other regions, notably the Global South.

Dirk Messner, as long as I have known him, has always championed two key positions: First, that the ecological imperatives have to be obeyed, meaning the pressing need to decarbonise all sectors: the energy system, industry, mobility, housing, in short, all areas of consumption. Secondly, from an early stage on Dirk has advocated for the necessity to “leave no one behind” – a truly human-rights-based, social and empathetic position. In this regard I remember an argument Dirk made in a speech he held in 2016 to honour Erhard Eppler’s 90th anniversary: There will be no leeway to solve social divides in a spirit of justice when temperatures are rising and natural disasters become both more regular and more devastating. He also argued that the modernisation project, prescribed by the concept of climate neutrality, must be an inclusive modernisation project, because we have to prevent not only the ecological tipping point but must also prevent a tipping point in our societies. Quite right!

The challenges to achieve this together are huge, even more so after the COVID-19 pandemic. For the effects of the pandemic have hit the Global South, and specifically the poorest developing countries, a lot worse than the Global North, both in the areas of public health and economically. The pandemic has aggravated already existing inequalities, increased poverty and has thus further endangered the successful implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals.

The social security systems in the Global North have proven to be essential in coping with COVID-19. One of the prerequisites to fulfil the SDGs and a just transition is that social security systems in the Global South need massive support. This is an additional task, needed for states and initiatives that aim at social cohesion and solidarity in bringing public services forward.

Incredible tasks, and I can certainly not bring positive tipping points about – no one can, at least not alone. But what we can do is describe the “small steps” that might get us there, borrowing another political metaphor from Willy Brandt.

As a first step we need to address the issue that fundamentally threatens the survival of humanity and our planet: climate change. There should be a real Green Deal between the European Union and the African Union. The EU Commission and European leaders should take the cooperation with the African Union seriously. Africa is our closest partner continent,

and its development is essential, also for Europe's future. Such an alliance should comprise support for the adaptation to climate change. After the recent experiences of extreme weather events in Europe, there is perhaps a new understanding of African countries' urgent needs for climate change mitigation and adaptation. Such a Green Deal should also include support for climate partnerships to develop renewable energy strategies in the respective countries, in combination with efforts to reach the Sustainable Development Goals. For those countries that are still dependent on fossil fuels and their exports, this means the development of exit strategies and just-transition plans in order to prevent stranded assets. New partnerships, specifically for the production of green hydrogen, should respect the fact that African countries need to look after their own energy and electricity needs first to develop successfully instead of being looked at as mere "exporters". Climate partnerships should also consider the necessity of biodiversity protection, because the more we abuse nature, the higher the risk that new pandemics will emerge. Otherwise, the COVID-19 pandemic could only be a precursor of other devastating experiences to come.

Step two is a comprehensive international effort to finance the fight against the climate catastrophe together with the goals to fight poverty and inequality. Would we not need a new Independent Commission for International (Development) Questions to galvanise such an endeavour? For we would need a change in national taxation systems, an ending of tax evasion and tax avoidance and of money laundering, e.g. by ending profit shifting of big companies, by creating transparency of real ownerships and a global minimum corporate tax. A debt release for the poorest developing countries should be combined with support for the Nationally Determined Contributions to the implementation of the Paris Agreement of those countries. Would we not also need political initiatives to curb military expenditure worldwide in order to finance the pressing needs of the Sustainable Development Goals? Some aspects of these proposals could already be found in the Brandt Report. And at that time the East-West divide still existed! Would not now be the time to prevent a new armament race with China?

Step three is the fight against the discrimination of women – another area where I hope for new policy initiatives. But we also have to realise that, due to COVID-19 and the policy measures taken to prevent the spread of the virus, another "pandemic" has arisen, as Antonio Guterres has called the rapid increase of violence against women and girls. And in some countries, such as Afghanistan, groups have taken over that openly deny women their universal rights. During the pandemic, education for 90 percent of children in the world has been interrupted, and, as is so

often the case, girls are hit especially hard. There is also a tendency in some countries to deny women their sexual and reproductive rights. That is why sexual and reproductive rights of girls and women should be strengthened; better political representation of women should be one of the major goals of the coalition of the willing, and the fulfilment of UN Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security should be continually demanded by including women in conflict talks and crisis prevention. Moreover we have to outline clearly that women show much better abilities to cope with the challenges of the present and future: Their ability to adapt to new situations and their resilience are a much-needed asset in today's world that should not go untapped.

As a fourth step, finally, it is high time to start new initiatives to protect and secure universal rights, which are enshrined in the UN Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Human Rights Conventions. To do so, the Brandt Commission's recommendation to strengthen the United Nations should be remembered. One initiative should be to try to establish a UN Sustainability Council, which should comprise representatives of all regions, without any veto power of single countries. Such a UN Sustainability Council could help to implement the SDGs, monitor the ongoing process and help to develop global structures that can cope with the risks of globalisation. The High-Level Political Forum, although it is an important place of international dialogue, cannot fulfil these tasks.

Of course there are other areas which are not in the traditional development field but where we could strengthen the United Nations and support UN General Assembly initiatives. A very important one, which is backed by 130 states and became international law in January 2021, is the Treaty to ban Nuclear Weapons. I am sure that Willy Brandt would be tremendously satisfied if he could see how those initiatives to interrupt the nuclear arms race and to delegitimise nuclear weapons have gained support today. There: A small step – already taken!

There are tipping points to prevent, tipping points to bring about and many, many small steps in-between. Dirk Messner has described and explained so many of them. I very much hope he will continue to do so, so that we will keep having his guidance and his considerate advice.

References

Independent Commission on International Development Issues, 1980: North-South: A Programme for Survival. London: Pan Books.

