

Thinking ahead to move forward

The UN Summit for the Future and the legacy of Klaus Töpfer

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Bonn, 16 September 2024. When the United Nations Summit for the Future convenes in New York on 22–23 September 2024, Klaus Töpfer of all people will no longer be there to witness it. The former German Environment Minister and Executive Director of the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), who spearheaded sustainability policy for many years, died on 8 June 2024 at the age of 85. The Summit for the Future is designed to drive implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and to refine the UN in both programmatic and institutional terms – aims that are in line with Töpfer's passionate commitment to 'effective multilateralism' to overcome poverty and inequality.

Having shared part of Klaus Töpfer's sustainability journey – particularly Manfred, who worked with him over a period of several decades – we would like to pick out four guiding principles that we regard as being characteristic of his work. They may serve to indicate the tasks that arise for the international community on the basis of the Summit for the Future:

Firstly, think ahead: Klaus Töpfer was always careful to view political action from a future vantage point, aiming to set the course now before it becomes disproportionately expensive in both economic and political terms to do so later. Töpfer's untiring advocacy of the circular economy in the 1980s in his capacity as Environment Minister is a perfect example of this. Increasing global complexity, which is confronting us with all kinds of tipping points, makes it all the more important to adopt this approach in the 21st century. The Summit for the Future should be used as a starting point to promote this kind of approach at international level and to institutionalise it within the UN.

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Secondly, think bigger: What Töpfer objected to in current development and sustainability policy was the fixation on fairly small-scale projects, on 'spending money' and receiving aid. Policy that draws on administrative logic and ideological ways of thinking often fails to achieve its actual goal of changing fundamental structures. Ideas are what ultimately set things in motion from the very roots. In practice, sustainable development should be understood to a greater extent as an intellectual and political challenge. At all levels – from operational work in the partner countries to the intergovernmental forums – the UN should be the place where discourse and analysis on development and sustainability come together.

Thirdly, think together: Along with the executive, the legislative and the judiciary, Töpfer placed great importance on the 'consultative' as a fourth element of the democratic separation of powers. As an elder statesman, he used his powers of integration as the head of relevant formats at national and UN level. Although participation by civil society and other non-

state actors is well established in the UN, it is often of a merely representative and symbolic nature. A future-proof UN should mobilise this potential to a greater extent. In particular, this could strengthen the UN's ability to take forward-looking decisions, as the Pact for Future Generations seeks to do.

Fourthly, think with a focus on solving problems: The three previous points lead to an approach that focuses on solving problems, a way of thinking that was characteristic of Töpfer. He was able to acknowledge existing circumstances at the same time as anticipating changes and the challenges they create and addressing them boldly. As a long-standing politician, Töpfer was aware of the importance of symbolism and the difficulties of political action, but he saw events such as the Summit for the Future ultimately as an opportunity to shape solutions. Töpfer invoked Karl Popper when he repeatedly emphasised the need to apply the criterion of the falsifiability of research results to politics too. He believed that political will – for example the will to overcome poverty and inequality – should be steadfast, but that a political agenda should not be fixed. If, as the result of a change in situation, we become wiser, better technical options become available or new social constellations emerge, this may call for policy adjustments in order to achieve the overarching goals.

It is the responsibility of the member states to use the Summit for the Future to pave the way for this kind of adaptability. 'Effective multilateralism' is less the result of one-off resolutions at the summit or of new mandates, and more the result of the ability to perpetually overcome problems. In the present particularly tense relations between North and South and in view of manifest geopolitical disruptions, there is currently a lack of trust between states. Interests tend to be stated against rather than with one another. By preserving Töpfer's memory, we may be able to stand back a little from our political differences and join forces to look for solutions – in line with the spirit of 'We the Peoples', the phrase with which the UN Charter begins.