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Cooperation is the mother of all things:
What is stopping us from solving
globalisation problems?

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Cooperation is the mother of all things: What is stopping us from solving globalisation problems?

Bonn, Duisburg, 04.06.2012. Could globalisation be asking too much of international organisations, governments and of us as human beings? The crisis in the international financial markets has made the limits to national regulatory systems abundantly clear, yet it has not even proved possible to set up a body capable of actively supervising the European financial markets. After over fifty years of cooperation, the euro crisis is stretching the European Union to its limits. The calls for re-nationalisation are becoming increasingly loud. The World Trade Organisation has made no progress for over a decade. Former EU Trade Commissioner Mandelson warned on Whit Monday that doomsday was near for the WTO. The WTO's Director-General, Pascal Lamy, said there was a "crisis", but no reason to panic. Things do not look any better for global environment policy. Despite the worldwide consensus on the dangers of climate change and the shrinking limits of the earth system, climate negotiations have been marking time for years and the expectations of the earth summit to be held in Rio de Janeiro in June 2012 are steadily declining. The international system that emerged after the Second World War no longer appears to match the demands of the 21st century. Rather than global cooperation, global policy is increasingly beset by national egoisms, distribution conflicts and struggles for power. Machiavelli and Thomas Hobbes seem to be winning out against Kant, who coined the term cosmopolitan society (Weltbürgergesellschaft) as long ago as 1784. Is globalisation again bringing to light what economic theory has long preached: human beings are egoistic creatures preoccupied with optimising their own interests? The realistic school of international relations, too, might feel vindicated. It sees states as actors seeking to maximise their national interests in the anarchic world of the international system. Are human beings being thwarted by their own nature?

The principle of egoism as "human nature"?

In a column in the New York Times David Brooks wrote in 2007: "From the content of our genes, the nature of our neurons and the lessons of evolutionary biology, it has become clear that nature is filled with competition and conflicts of interest".

The successful Russian-American writer Ayn Rand sends the same message in her novels. For moral obligations and cooperation between human beings she has only scorn and derision. Egoism, she claims, is what drives human beings, the only obligation anyone has is to him- or herself. This view of the world is not new. In the 19th century the British philosopher Herbert Spencer was already describing the life of men and states as a never-ending struggle which is a matter of the "survival of the fittest".

Cooperation as the driving force of human development

At times of ubiquitous obstacles to cooperation in global politics the theory of the conflictive "nature" of humankind and its institutions undergoes a renaissance. It does not correspond to the state of research. Frans de Waal, a biologist, ethnologist and evolution researcher, has shown that, since Homo sapiens emerged some 200,000 years ago, human beings have been heavily dependent on each other for survival. In the course of their life cycle everyone, whether young, old or sick, needs the support of others. The unique cooperative abilities evolved by our ancestors allowed them to reach into previously unexplored areas in search of food and resources and, crucially, to coordinate the hunt of large animals. Cooperation for mutual benefit, or reciprocity, is a basic building block of human existence. In de Waal's view, humans are therefore primarily gregarious animals and social beings. They can be described either as highly cooperative creatures at pains to keep egoistic urges under control or as beings which, though extremely competitive, nonetheless have to strike a balance between competition and cooperation in order to survive as a species. Michael Tomasello, Director of the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology, reaches similar conclusions. He ascribes the unique characteristics of human beings that set them apart from other animals to their ability to cooperate. Shared goals, knowledge and beliefs, as well as the ability to think of a joint "we", are the foundations of humankind's cultural success story. Cooperation, in other words, became evolutionarily advantageous. If human cooperation fails on a significant scale, the

result is a rupture in civilisation, war, crisis. The basis of cooperation is not least the capacity for empathy, to which Theodor Lipps (1851-1914) had already referred. When we watch a high-wire artist, we instinctively hold our breath, we share his experience. Seen from any of these angles, the image of humans as self-interested utility-maximisers is a rather poor caricature of the evolution of humankind.

The ability of human beings to cooperate is also confirmed by the social sciences. In numerous studies on successful and unsuccessful attempts to protect such commons as forests, fisheries and water resources, Elinor Ostrom, winner of the Nobel Prize for Economics, has identified some essential requirements for cooperation: communication, trust, reputation, reciprocal behaviour, jointly developed sets of rules, evolving we-identities and means of punishing opportunistic behaviour. These are the foundations of successful cooperation. The "natural state" of human beings is not, then, ruthless competition and conflict. Cooperation is possible, but it can also fail without the backing of suitable institutions.

Global cooperation and the time factor

So why are the institutions necessary to cope with the global systemic risks not emerging at the beginning of the 21st century? The theories of evolution based on the natural and behavioural sciences might provide an answer to this question. Issues such as globalisation, climate change, tipping points in the earth system, and challenges to humankind have been discussed only in recent decades. The realisation by human beings that they are not only dependent on each other at a local level and in their national societies, but in fact constitute a global risk community is fairly new in the history of humankind. A theory of world society is thus still in its infancy. Cooperation was essential to the success of *Homo sapiens*

as a species early in its evolutionary history. Will humans learn to raise their evolutionary success programme as gregarious animals and beings capable of cooperating to the level of global society before serious global systemic crises arise? And how might this learning process be accelerated? Can "we-intentionalities" be scaled up to global level? Can human beings develop empathy in a global society context? Can the new communication technologies help in this respect?

The theories of cooperation similarly provide useful pointers to the reasons for the current dysfunction of international cooperation. Owing to the major power shifts in the world, some of the main conditions for successful cooperation are under considerable pressure or have yet to be created. A glance at the G20 formation quickly reveals how it differs from the western clubs – from the G7 to NATO – with their declining clout: trust, dense communication patterns, reputation, we-identities, common sets of rules and joint learning processes have yet to be developed between the old and new powers. Whether this investment in the cornerstones of global cooperation will be effected quickly enough for serious globalisation crises to be avoided and what form institutions capable of managing global problems should take are not trivial questions.

Whether and how a model of global civilisation based on worldwide cooperation and capable of containing conflicts can emerge will be considered by the Centre for Global Cooperation Research in the coming years. The Centre feels committed to four basic principles: radical interdisciplinarity, bringing together researchers from all regions of the world, interaction with international cooperation practitioners and a global perspective as the basis for research.