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# Too Big to Fail? – A Government Programme for the United Nations

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# The Current Column

*of 23 September 2013*

# Too Big to Fail? – A Government Programme for the United Nations in International Development

Bonn, 23 September 2013. Germany has been to the polls. While we wait for the outcome of efforts to form a government, one thing is clear right now: The effects of this election will be felt all the way to Turtle Bay in New York, home to the headquarters of the United Nations (UN). On reading the development policy concepts put forward by the parties, it is evident that reform of the UN's multilateral system could well become an important focus for this, the 18th parliamentary term of the German *Bundestag*.

From the point of view of developmental policy, this is both necessary and appropriate. For far too long, strategic questions on the future role, supervision, financing and shape of the UN with regard to developmental policy have remained unanswered due to a lack of consensus among the 193 Member States. These countries are now required to develop and implement new concepts on central issues in the next few years. So, what should the essential principles of a government programme for development policy at the UN be?

## Defining the Contribution to the Post-2015 Agenda

During the 68th General Assembly of the UN, which will take place from 25 September 2013, the question of the re-orientation of global development policy beyond 2015 is the dominant issue. The development model propagated by the Millennium Development Goals (or MDGs) set thus far, focuses in particular on income poverty and basic social services. Whether the future, post-2015 agenda should also include measures for a global transformation towards a sustainable development model, is currently being fiercely debated. This process is increasingly being shaped by various development organisations and interest groups emphatically campaigning for their own preferred development models.

But what does the UN "stand for" as a player in the field of international development? To date this has not become clear enough. In addition to peacekeeping, humanitarian relief and operational development work, the UN has been involved in the development of standards, for example with

regard to human rights protection, core labour standards or the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). The close relationship between normative and operational work fundamentally distinguishes the UN from other multilateral organisations. In this respect, it would be logical if the member states were to shift the focus of the UN more to the creation and implementation of the normative foundations of a sustainable development model. The Federal Government, which – given the energy transition ("Energiewende") in Germany – is also assuming a pioneering role internationally, should be aiming to ensure that this contribution on the part of the UN to the post-2015 agenda is clearly defined.

## Reforming the Steering Function

Even for a country such as Germany, it is a Herculean task to assume governance of the 37 development organisations gathered under the umbrella of the UN. The international community currently still allows itself a system boasting three dozen separate governing bodies. The reasons for this lie in the history of their origins, but appear less and less appropriate in the face of global challenges such as climate change, which require a concerted approach. Against this backdrop, the Federal Government should be advocating a comprehensive reform of the governance structures. The old proposal of upgrading the existing Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) analogous to the Security Council and merging within it the governing bodies for the various funds and programmes or at least of transferring central functions is a viable option.

## Modifying the Contribution Model

The former Director of the UN Development Operations Coordination Office, Sally Fegan-Wyles, pointed out some time ago that existing dysfunctions are mainly due to funding mechanisms offering false incentives. The UN is in a markedly worse position than other multilateral organisations with regard to its manner of funding, being largely funded by voluntary contributions, the specific use of which is dictated by individual donors. Traditionally the Nordic countries – meas-

ured in terms of their economic power – contribute the largest amounts and these can, within the confines of the mandate, be deployed where they are most effective. However, there are signs that the number of countries that feel responsible for the unearmarked financing of UN development work is shrinking. New initiatives such as “Sustainable Energy for All” evidence a growing financial requirement which needs to be met through innovative funding mechanisms. Given the shrinking importance and role of Official Development Assistance (ODA) in the funding of development work, the future of such mechanisms obviously lies “beyond ODA”. The next Federal Government should therefore take the first steps toward introducing alternative forms of funding.

### **Amalgamate Fragmented Structures**

In the field of development the UN has at its disposal a wide range of expertise and instruments, which enjoy a high level of acceptance in developing countries. However, on average there are no fewer than 15 different development organisations at work in any one country. The complex organisational structure bears the danger of overlaps. Ultimately, more mergers of organisations with similar mandates appear necessary. Member states could well follow the model of the organisation UN Women, which came about in 2010 as the result of the merging of four existing entities. At the same time, mergers are only ever an initial step towards greater coherence. The introduction of uniform administrative structures and business processes in particular would offer great potential

for improvement. Fixing a post-2015 agenda gives rise – in line with the formula “form follows function” – to a favourable opportunity to undertake structural reforms, which should be used by the next Federal Government.

The aforementioned essential reform areas have to be addressed by every incoming Federal Government regardless of its political affiliation. There would be many commonalities here with other European member states of the United Nations such as Switzerland. Germany still carries a great deal of weight in the UN, which it should use to bring forward-looking reforms to bear in the areas mentioned. United Nations development work is too relevant. It is “too big to fail” – the world would not manage without it!

*The views expressed in the Current Column are those of the authors.*

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