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## Sustainability goals – also for Germany!

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# The Current Column

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## Sustainability goals – also for Germany!

Bonn, 26 September 2013. On 25 September 2013 the General Assembly of the United Nations (UN) met in New York for a special event to discuss the new development policy agenda for the time after 2015. 2015 is the year by which the current agenda, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), are to have been achieved. Numerous documents were drafted by high-ranking committees prior to the event. In a process lasting over one year more than one million people worldwide were asked about their wishes and ideas for a future development agenda. In view of this wealth of comprehensive documents with specific, visionary proposals it is remarkable how devoid of content and inexpressive the report that the UN General Assembly published as the result of their negotiations on 25 September was.

### **A thin document without vision**

Just three pages thick, the report of the UN General Assembly contains scarcely any concrete proposals. Instead, it limits itself to describing the next steps on the path to a new global development agenda, as well as commissioning further consultations and reports. For many people the eagerly anticipated report is therefore likely to be one thing above all: a disappointment. Given all the visionary reports with their partly very concrete recommendations one may ask why a document so free of content and almost of motivation was approved. It is easy to overlook the two sole specific proposals of the document, which appear at first glance trivial – but by no means are. The first proposal calls for a single development agenda to be in place after 2015. This may appear to be obvious – why should there be two agendas? However, it is anything but. Instead, this demand offers a plausible explanation for the paucity and vacuousness of the document.

### **The United Nations on standby**

On 27 July 2012 the UN General Assembly passed

a resolution that has its origins in a UN conference on sustainable development held in Rio de Janeiro in June of the same year – since known as Rio +20. Following on from Rio +20, measures included the establishment of an Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals, the objective of which is to develop a vision for sustainable development goals. The parallel nature of the two processes – the consulting on a successor document to the millennium goals on the one hand and the development of sustainable development goals within the scope of Rio +20 on the other – runs the very real risk of two, in the worst case incompatible, post-2015 agendas being approved – particularly in view of the fact that the first process was already on the agenda of the UN General Assembly this year but the second one is not to be discussed until 2014. Apparently the UN General Assembly has made a conscious decision to approve a sparse, vacuous document in order to gain time and combine the negotiations of the two processes during the course of the coming year.

### **A universal agenda**

However, this requires that a further aspect be taken into consideration: the resolution passed in the scope of Rio +20 requires that the goals of a future agenda be universal. The two processes cannot be combined without fulfilling this requirement. This explains the second of the two sole specific demands in the document passed by the United Nations this week: that all goals of a post-2015 agenda are to be "universal in nature and applicable to all countries". What is behind this formulation? It is tempting to interpret it as meaning that a future agenda must be "universally" approved by all countries. This interpretation may be the reason for the fact that the consultations on the future development agenda have so far generated such scant interest in western media and amongst the public as a whole.

After all, the objective is to formulate future goals for the combating of poverty in developing countries. Is it not?

### **Goals for Germany, too!**

Precisely this assumption is a significant mistake. A universal development agenda by no means signifies just one development agenda on which all countries should agree. Rather, the term means that a future development agenda should not only be valid for developing countries but for all countries equally. In other words, the goals approved by the General Assembly of the United Nations will also apply to Germany. Not just the development and environment ministries, all ministries – from education to health and economics – would have to not only align their strategies according to European requirements in future, but also according to internationally-agreed requirements. Because it is not just a few goals for fighting poverty that are the subject of

the discussions in New York, it is also issues such as education and health policy, the labour market, trade, international finance flows, more sustainable patterns of consumption and production and, not least, distributive justice. In brief, issues that are also of central significance for Germany and which have the potential to exert a key influence on our national politics.

In the developing and emerging countries extensive national consultations have already been conducted to incorporate the population in this process. A decision taken by the federal cabinet on 21 August 2013 states that the drafting of a post-2015 agenda "calls for the active, inter-departmental involvement of the entire federal government" and shows that German politics is preparing for the possible changes as well. It is therefore also time for the German public to follow the current developments in New York with greater attention than has been the case thus far.



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