

Earth Day 2021

Come on, into the "Green Twenties"!

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"Restore Our Earth!" is the theme and rallying cry for this year's Earth Day on 22 April. This is not something that can be achieved on a single day. According to UN Secretary-General António Guterres and pertinent scientific reports, humanity has just under a decade left to take the necessary measures. If the 1920s were captured as "années folles", "goldene Zwanziger" or "Roaring Twenties" in Western narratives, the decade that now lies before us might go down in history as the "Green Twenties" – and from a global perspective as well!

The chances of this are greater than they were believed to be just a few years ago. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Paris Agreement on climate change provide governments all over the world with the normative foundations as well as explicit political mandates and goals for shaping the future.

Yet the desired transformation is not only an ethical imperative. Structural economic necessities are even more compelling than any potentially short-lived zeitgeist, something that holds true in wealthy industrialised nations just as much as in aspirational developing countries and emerging economies. We have also had a considerable build-up: sustainable development has been embedded as a paradigm of international cooperation and combating climate change as a core issue on the international political agenda ever since the first official Earth Day in 1990. In other words, it is not a historical coincidence that the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement, in effect, form the framework for international action for the 2020s.

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As well as demanding a slowdown in global warming, the Paris Agreement also calls for the risks associated with climate change to be addressed and global financial flows to be rigorously redirected to this end. The 2030 Agenda in turn provides the framework for 17 tangible Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which apply universally and are intended to leave no-one behind – combined with the explicit aim of meeting these targets by the year 2030.

The COVID-19 pandemic has set these efforts back. It is measurably undermining the successes achieved in socio-economic development in previous years. It is overwhelming

healthcare systems and exacerbating the impact of other crises playing out in parallel, whose multifarious causes include catastrophic droughts, plagues of locusts and violent conflict.

At the same time, the global response to the pandemic offers major opportunities for driving forward structural measures for transformative change and giving them greater clout. Success hinges on the economic recovery packages that run into the trillions being used as a lever for changing course, socially and environmentally, and not – as happened after the global financial and economic crisis of 2008/2009 – largely to restore the status quo. There is unlikely to be any shortage of necessary resources: even as early as October 2020, the amount of economic support being pledged around the world in response to the pandemic was already roughly three times as much as in the wake of the 2008/2009 crisis.

Thus the COVID-19 pandemic provides us with a drastic illustration of how taking an integrated view of complex interdependencies reflects material realities rather than coming from a desire amongst academics to entertain themselves. Linking stimulus packages to social and environmental objectives also means dovetailing a country's national climate policies with the SDGs and prioritising fields of activity likely to act as powerful catalysts: renewable energy; conserving biodiversity, land and water resources; and low-emission infrastructures, specifically in urban development. The complexity of the interlinkages involved is exemplified by the need to increase agricultural output so as to guarantee that a growing global population will be fed, while also reducing greenhouse gas emissions from the agricultural industry in order to prevent a climate change that, in turn, will undermine the conditions for agricultural production. This is one of the key tensions between sustainable development and climate policy, the success of which itself is dependent on healthy land resources and carbon sinks.

The recently published and extensively revised edition of the German Sustainable Development Strategy as well as the European Green Deal both point precisely in the direction of such an integrated understanding at policy level. If we succeed in our efforts to breathe life into strategies like this under the pressure of the Corona crisis and bridge the gap that has persisted to date between understanding and doing, then there is much to suggest that we are at least at the start of the "greenest" decade that the world has seen since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. However, this does not mean that the necessary transformation will happen all by itself. In order to curb climate change and achieve the SDGs, governments and societies must make consistent use of the available levers. And there is no time to lose, because even the greenest decade will only ever be a mere heartbeat in contemporary history.