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## Are we dreamers in the world of international cooperation?

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# The Current Column

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## Are we dreamers in the world of international cooperation?

Bonn, 19 October 2015. Critics such as economist William Easterly describe the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development as "senseless, dreamy, and garbled" - the kind of thing John Lennon was singing about in his famous song "Imagine". Are we all just dreamers?

So-called pragmatists are sceptical of the new universal Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) because they quite rightly attack the idea that development can be planned. These individuals refer to the goals derisively as a "high school wish-list". However, the SDGs provide new opportunities to focus on a common system of targets, both externally and internally.

The 2030 Agenda can also be viewed as a response to a change in international conditions and as an attempt to deal more honestly with this situation based on our increasing knowledge of the interrelationships between issues at different levels. First and foremost, this international consensus seeks to mainstream the SDGs within several (sub-)target systems in a complex world.

There is always a specific logic behind policy decisions, but this logic is often inadequate when it comes to achieving complex goals. For example, we could state that "fighting poverty" is the number one goal of our development policy, as the UK has done in its legislation. But even if we take this approach, we must still take account of planetary boundaries (climate change, ecological capacity) in order to provide relevant responses. Like any other state, the UK has to solve problems under complex conditions with many unknown variables, and security, for instance, is also considered to be fundamental in British debates. The impact of national policies at international level has so far been discussed as a matter of policy coherence, with the implied assumption that "international development" is an overarching goal to which all actors submit themselves. But this has not worked.

Adopting a global mindset and a long-term approach in national policy is not a task for one ministry alone, nor can it be outsourced to "internationally focused" ministries. Global issues are discussed by a range of government departments, including ministries for development, education and the environment, and even those whose policies supposedly have a purely domestic focus yet have an (unintentional) impact at global level, such as agricultural

and consumer affairs ministries. 15 years ago, political scientist Christopher Hill wrote "The changing politics of foreign policy" and raised the following questions: Does it still make sense to separate internal and external policy? Or has this distinction been largely blurred by globalisation and an increasingly connected world? Countries need to frame their own domestic activities in the larger context of global challenges, as in the current situation with refugee policy.

Change is also required in international cooperation to take account of all states and of transnational and civil society forms of cooperation. One long-term trend we can observe in the international community is the rise of several developing nations, with a marked increase in the number of middle-income countries. These states now need to take on global responsibility.

Additionally, there are more transnational actors than ever involved in international relations, including commercial enterprises with global operations, philanthropic foundations (such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and Open Society, founded by George Soros) and international non-governmental organisations such as Greenpeace. This phenomenon is also a long-standing discussion topic, with Michael Zürn calling for "governance beyond the nation state" back in the mid-1990s.

Partnerships outside of the North-South paradigm are becoming increasingly important, especially when we consider the environmental challenges facing all societies and the fundamental issues and changes they entail. This change is under way, even if institutions and established cooperation practices are lagging behind, often only recognising it after it has happened.

The 2030 Agenda is sufficiently comprehensive to provide a realistic picture of the diverse interrelationships involved in global development. Federica Mogherini, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs, was indeed right when she said that the world has become "more complex, more connected, but also more contested". Consequently, while a shared system of targets for sustainable development that incorporates the foundations (and boundaries) of human development may not be the solution to every problem, it is a step forward. Longing for a simpler, uncontested world with clear, less "garbled" answers on the other hand is wishful thinking.