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Assessing a Charter for the Future

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Assessing a Charter for the Future

Bonn, New Delhi, 16 December 2014. There is much to commend in the recent Charter for the Future (*Zukunftscharta*), which was presented to the German public and to German Chancellor Angela Merkel by the German Development Minister, Gerd Müller, on 24 November 2014. The Charter was posited by the community of German development practitioners and theorists in dialogue with different stakeholders invested in the idea of development. It spells out eight priority areas with clarity and draws our attention to the urgency with which these needs of 'one world' need to be squarely addressed.

For the purposes of my intervention, let me underscore a few questions which perhaps could be asked with regard to all the avowed goals of the Charter. While I think all the priority areas are laudable, the devil is in the detail. One should ask under what conditions are these goals attainable, do they obscure issues of vast power differentials in their manner of their benign framing and do they invoke the universal to momentarily conceal more limited geopolitical visions. Without being cynical, I still think there are some worthwhile quibbles one could have with the manner in which the mandate will be eventually translated and if there are some articles of faith on which an undue weight is placed. Here I am thinking about various conventional fetishisms in mainstream liberal discourse – human rights, the rule of law and good governance for instance as straightforward solutions which will heal a disturbed world.

Political theorists and philosophers have for long been interested in the question as to what constitutes a 'good life'. The Charter also inserts this language and sensibility while inviting us to probe our commitments to 'one world'. Purportedly, for Chancellor Merkel the 'good life' is directly linked to sustainable development, as mentioned in June 2014 at the Annual Conference of the German Council for Sustainable Development (RNE). Everybody aspires to a good life and many of the ingredients of a good life are indeed as Kant would have argued part of the generic human condition. However, context could introduce complications in our conceptions of the good life. Conversations around the good life stem from a deeper acquaintance with local cultural norms, values and expectations. Without sliding into the abyss of cultural relativism, one could suggest that this exercise regarding conceptions of the good life needs a larger comparative frame in order to reaffirm overlapping as well as divergent cross-cultural facets.

My apprehension is that in the anxiety to assume a 'one world' position, we must not end up steamrolling difference with a mere perfunctory and superficial acknowledgment of difference or ritualistic invocations of plurality and inclusivity. We need to ask harder questions here about the acceptance of differences and how best these could be negotiated bearing in mind another goal of the Charter, namely human dignity. To merely illustrate my point, within even the advanced industrialised realm, Islamophobia is widespread. Recent instances of race violence in the United States attest to the fact that racial differences still remain at a palpable plane fundamentally unresolved. One could as easily talk about class and gender as well in a similar idiom. How can the international community effectively redress structural economic inequities and how do we know that it genuinely intends to?

On a more positive note, I treat the Charter as a provocation to people all over the world to engage a hugely consequential question, namely of 'future models of co-existence'. These extend to quotidian sociality within and between nations but also to traditional arenas of 'high politics' such as contested claim making over territory both land and maritime. How can conflicts be resolved when they occur and how can they be prevented in the first place? How can we even for a few fleeting moments step out of the grip of Westphalian sovereignty in large parts of the world? Here again the Charter gestures to 'rules for peaceful conflict management' and unfortunately given recent experiences the images that immediately conjure are of claimants like doctrines of humanitarian intervention or the responsibility to protect. Surely, there is more to the 'management' of political conflicts. The challenge is for everybody committed to global peace to think more innovatively and practically to find ways to avert conflicts.

Converting normative goals into plausible policy frameworks is no easy task. However, it is not impossible. Justice is desirable and for that to happen we have to first create the enabling conditions. The hitherto voiceless have to find their voice. If it is a Charter for the future, we must give thought to how we wish to be judged by future generations. Envisaged new research partnerships must probe these questions with renewed enthusiasm if we intend being remembered more fondly than we are likely to right now. The current Charter provides us one interesting map of possibilities. Anybody who cares about the world we inhabit must engage with it in good faith.