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'I believe that combating inequalities is crucial'

Udo Bullmann MEP explains what the current UN Summit on Sustainable Development means for the EU's external relations

Read this interview in German.

The heads of state and government are currently meeting in New York for the SDG Summit, the first major high-level meeting since adopting the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development in September 2015. You argue that the EU should also mainstream the Agenda 2030 into its external relations and international agreements, including trade agreements and development cooperation. How would this look like in practice?

> The responsibility for the effective implementation of Agenda 2030 lies primarily with the nation-states themselves. It's an agenda of shared responsibility that we also have to fulfil at home. Last year, together with my Socialist Group in the European Parliament, I therefore presented a comprehensive package of concrete proposals – our Sustainable Equality Report – for a decisive change in Europe.
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> In our foreign relations, it must be a question of helping our partners to fulfil their respective obligations and objectives. I believe that combating inequalities is crucial. Societies with insurmountable social and economic divides cannot achieve the transformation that we need. Instead of just pushing for the implementation of the Agenda 2030 with our development, foreign and trade policy instruments, we must use these instruments to help combat inequalities and thus create the conditions for successful change on the ground. I therefore propose that we develop methods for taking this objective into account in the early planning stage of policies, something like ex-ante reviews.

Currently, there's a heated debate about the EU's recent trade agreement with Mercosur. The largest member of Mercosur is Brazil,

whose current government shows no interest in environmental and climate protection. It also wants to massively restrict the protection of minority and labour rights. How does an agreement with such a government fit in the EU's set of values?

We, as the EU, must respond with a clear message to the unscrupulous clearing of rainforest areas and the general questioning of minority and nature conservation – in the interests of the Agenda 2030 and our community of values. I don't think the Mercosur Agreement in its present form serves these interests. It does contain a chapter on sustainable development, including the commitment to implement the Paris Agreement. However, I don't believe that the implementation and review mechanisms are sufficiently concrete – and therefore effective.

This doesn't necessarily mean, however, that the idea of an agreement must be completely rejected. Instead, the European Parliament – and here in particular the Committee on International Trade chaired by my colleague Bernd Lange – has the opportunity to achieve improvements in the areas of sustainability and the enforcement of standards, for example in the form of sanctions. It remains to be seen, however, whether this will be successful. It's only then that we can revaluate what's on the table.

How do you evaluate the record of the EU's development cooperation? What should Brussels focus on in future?

Good things have been achieved in recent years – and for this we owe special thanks to Development Commissioner Neven Mimica and High Representative Federica Mogherini. They have played a decisive role in ensuring that the UN's sustainability goals are taken into account in European development policy. Moreover, we've prioritised the fight against violence and discrimination against girls and women as well as the promotion of investments in our partner countries. That gives a clear progressive signature to EU development policy.

In the future, it will need to break new ground. We want to preserve the autonomy of development policy – and to this end the European Treaties set poverty reduction as the primary objective. In order to pursue the Agenda 2030 consistently, however, we must also work even more intensively on interlinking trade, foreign and climate policy issues – to name just a few areas. This must not, however, mean that development cooperation becomes an appendix to other policy areas. It's important to prevent the instrumentalisation of development cooperation to safeguard European security interests and to restrict it to questions of migration management, for example.

Shortly before the SDG summit, the UN climate summit took place in New York. How can the EU contribute to the fight against global warming in its external and development relations?

It will continue to be the EU's task to keep the issue of climate protection on the agenda – even against the resistance of powerful players such as the current US President – and to protect and, if possible, expand existing multilateral agreements. In cooperating with poorer countries, it's important to provide support in complying with obligations while preparing for foreseeable climate consequences. We must also promote the existing 'dormant' potential for independent development. To some extent, we're already doing that today: together, the EU and its member states spend over €20bn a year to finance the global fight against climate change – more than 40 per cent of global public funding.

We must continue along this path. We need an EU budget for the next few years that will allow us to further expand the EU's leading role. And we must also think much more in terms of partnerships so that Europe and our partner countries can learn from each other about how the transition can be shaped as an ecological, economic and social opportunity for progress.

There's a trend in Europe to link the payment of development aid to containing migration. But that's just tackling the symptoms, not the causes, of migration. How should the EU's development and neighbourhood policy be structured in order to fight effectively against flight and displacement in the Global South?

In my view, the European Development and Neighbourhood Policy cannot just be about containing migration and turning Europe into a fortress. Migration cannot only be an opportunity for the people who set out but also for the societies in which they integrate. Instead of running after the unrealistic goal of prevention, we must intervene in a such way that escalating crisis situations and, above all, mass death in the Mediterranean can be prevented.

This requires a comprehensive approach, for which Agenda 2030 is the right compass. Causes of flight – such as war or forced displacement – mean that people are deprived of their basic rights and that inequalities take on excessive proportions. Promoting broad health care provision, better education and good work are therefore urgent priority goals – especially for girls and women worldwide. In other words, it's important to align EU development policy with UN sustainability goals.

The EU Parliament's proposals are generally far more progressive than

those of member state governments or the Commission. What leeway does Parliament have when it comes to promoting the implementation of Agenda 2030 and the Paris Agreement in Europe?

As a Parliament, we have a central role to play in formulating policy objectives for the coming years. For example, we MEPs must confirm Ms von der Leyen's European Commission. This will only succeed if projects such as Agenda 2030 and climate protection, which are taken very seriously by a large majority in the European Parliament, are given appropriate priority by the Commissioners. Moreover, Parliament and the member states will soon resume negotiations on the EU's forthcoming Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), which must also set clear priorities when it comes to climate protection and Agenda 2030.

Last but not least, crucial development and climate policy goals as well as measures must be formulated in the form of laws of course, for example when it comes to agreeing on reduction targets. This is what the European Parliament's legislation demands. Similarly, such legal agreements in international accords, such as trade agreements, require ratification by the European Parliament. As Social Democrats, it's our ambition to lead alliances in Parliament that make full use of these opportunities to exert influence in the interests of sustainable development.

This interview was conducted by Claudia Detsch.



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Udo Bullmann, Member of the European Parliament, a trained political scientist and Jean-Monnet-Professor for European Studies, is the Chair of the delegation to South Africa and spokesperson for the Socialists & Democrats in the Development Committee. In the former mandate he served as Chair of the Subcommittee for Human Rights and S&D group leader.