

Steps towards a good life for all - what terre des hommes can contribute to a global transformation

I. Introduction - Mission

The mission statement of terre des hommes "What we stand for", adopted by the annual general meeting in 2018, states unequivocally: "terre des hommes is committed to social transformation towards socially just, ecological and economic sustainability in countries of both the North and the South. We advocate for fair trading relations and production conditions based on partnership. We raise awareness of the destructive impact of an economy based on the interests of global corporations, the wealthy few and the way of life in the Global North based on excessive consumption of resources. Together with allied organisations in Germany and Europe, terre des hommes works to ensure that not only development policy, but also our lifestyles, economic and trade policies and strategic interests are shaped with a view to achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals."

Against this background, the theme group on Alternative Development has discussed different approaches and practices beyond mainstream development thinking: the degrowth or post-growth debate, the concept of *buen vivir* (Andean region), the concept of radical ecological democracy (India) and the debate on *ubuntu* (Southern Africa). The following considerations represent a proposal for discussion by the theme group and have not yet been adopted by terre des hommes' governing bodies.

II. A radical change of course is needed

The economic system in the industrialised countries of the Global North, in East Asia, and also in the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) is based, regardless of all differences, on the drive for ongoing growth of the gross national product (GDP) and on extensive consumption. This is increasingly spreading to all regions of the world and subordinating all areas of life to economic interests. Regardless of whether the system is private capitalist¹ or state capitalist, the real ecological and social costs are unquestioningly externalised, especially to the Global South. The priority of economic interests is leading to an unrestrained exploitation of people and nature. Hence, on the one hand, there are considerable global economic and social inequalities and injustices. On the other hand, enormous material wealth has been accumulated in the Global North and increasingly also worldwide, and a way of life has been established that is critically² described as an "imperial mode of living" in the post-growth discussion.

However, it is becoming increasingly obvious that this economy and this way of life have reached their limits and are leading to an irreversible destruction of the livelihoods of present and future generations. Unfortunately, this situation is getting a lot worse due to the current global Corona pandemic. The pandemic and its handling are exposing global structures of domination. This is evident, on the one hand, in the massive increase in hunger, poverty and child labour and, on the other, in the unequal access to vaccines. The full extent is not yet foreseeable, but it is clear that politics and civil societies worldwide are under great strain. Humanitarian aid and conventional development

¹ Western "capitalism" is defined as an economic system based on private ownership of the means of production and, ideally, leaving the entire control process to the market (cf. V. Happe, G. Horn, T. Otto, Wirtschaftslexikon, 2012, p.192).

² Ulrich Brand/Markus Wissen, The Imperial Mode of Living. Everyday Life and the Ecological Crisis of Capitalism. <https://www.versobooks.com/books/3691-the-imperial-mode-of-living>.

cooperation will not be able to remedy these injustices. This means that tdh's project work is also facing new challenges.

This being so, a change of course is indispensable – away from the prevailing growth paradigm and from an economic system that is one-sidedly oriented towards profit and excessive consumption. But what can and should another, more humane and environmentally friendly path look like?

- **Overcoming the drive to grow: growing differently!**

In view of the immense threats to humans and nature, a global ecological, economic and social transformation both urgent and necessary. This can only be realised through a new concept of growth beyond the capitalist growth logic whose economic calculus is corroding many areas of society. It must be replaced by an economic system oriented towards the needs of people and nature, focusing on satisfying the basic physical and social needs of all people and overcoming the exploitation of people and nature. Political, economic and individual action must be oriented towards sustainable goals.

Even if the development of alternative economic approaches is not one of *terre des hommes*' tasks according to its statutes, we must actively engage with alternative approaches. This is because the reality of life and the future chances of millions of children and young people are massively impaired by the effects of the prevailing economic system.

- **Strengthening civil society through transformative education**

The transformation process can only succeed with the support of a broad majority. A socio-ecological transformation needs strong civil societies. For this, people need to acquire new ways of thinking oriented towards the common good as well as the ability to help shape processes of social change.

Transformative education plays a key role – i.e. a critical and emancipatory approach to education that goes beyond imparting knowledge about sustainability and aims at changing individual attitudes and behaviour. People reflect on their own involvement in power and dominance relations in order to develop collective options for action to change hegemonic structures in participatory learning processes. Experiences of their own agency, which young people gain for example in projects of NGOs like tdh, can motivate them to work in civil society contexts as “agents for change”– for global transformation.

- **Defending democratic values against populism and shrinking spaces**

Around the world, populist movements and parties are fascinating more and more people with simple answers to complex challenges. Populists are stirring up fears and prejudices, defaming and discriminating against minorities. Civil society movements are therefore faced with the task of countering these growing populist currents with positive civilisational change. They must be guided by human rights and verified knowledge and have the ability to distinguish interest-driven false reports from fact-based findings. They have to create spaces to deal with fears and complex contexts and to discuss different views.

Unfortunately, the scope of action for human rights-oriented civil society groups is becoming more and more limited worldwide. Spaces for action are shrinking not only in authoritarian countries, but increasingly also in established democracies. In the fight against state repression, development policy organisations such as *terre des hommes* and its partners must form regional and global networks in order, at the political and legal level, to stand up in solidarity for the protection of civil society spaces for action.

III. Core elements of a sustainable world from the angle of *terre des hommes*

As mentioned at the beginning, the Alternative Development theme group has evaluated various "alternative" approaches to "development" from the North and the South that are fundamentally different from the currently prevailing growth and prosperity model. These cannot be presented here, but what they all have in common is that they strictly reject capitalist economies of any kind and an economy and life based on a use-oriented relationship to the earth, to life and to "nature". Beyond all the differences that exist between these approaches, we have worked out "core elements" that can serve as signposts for a fundamentally different understanding of development.

These core elements describe the goals to strive for or the framework of a partnership-based, global cooperation beyond the usual development thinking. At the same time, they are roadmaps and serve to steer the process of change towards these goals.

a) Ecological integrity and intergenerational justice

This means that the carrying capacity of the Earth's ecosystem, the natural cycles and biological diversity must be preserved. We must minimise or compensate for negative human interventions, recognising that "nature" is not only the basis of life for us humans – "nature" and all species also have their own value and need to be protected accordingly. Since there are permanent conflicts of objectives, binding minimum ecological standards and sanctions must be adopted worldwide.

Only in this way can the existing ecological resources be preserved to the extent that the livelihoods of future generations are not endangered. If ecological integrity is to be preserved in the long term, it must be the yardstick for all political and economic action. This also applies to every individual.

b) Economic justice

The Alternative Development theme group understands this to mean that all people can satisfy their basic needs and develop their abilities and potential in accordance with the equal dignity common to all human beings. The global, inter-societal relations of inequality, and the unequal relations within the poorer countries of the world, prevent each state from providing all their inhabitants with sufficient services of general interest, along with the corresponding infrastructure. In order to change this globally unequal distribution of economic opportunities, ways must be found to change trade, economic and social policies such that the present structurally unjust economic and trade relations are developed into fair partnerships, founded on minimum, human rights-based standards. At the same time, economic justice means strengthening a lifestyle in the Global North that redefines prosperity and is based on sufficiency ("enough").

c) Gender equality

Just societies are not possible without a comprehensive implementation of gender equality. Therefore, gender justice in politics, business, culture and education must be kept in mind at all levels and in every project, codified in law and enforced in practice. This requires appropriate emancipatory education with the aim of raising the awareness of all actors and empowering them in the spirit of agency.

d) Democratisation, participation and responsibility

Every person, including children and young people, and every community must have the right and the opportunity to participate substantially in all important decisions that affect their lives. This requires a participatory democracy that is institutionally secured and dynamic. Also important is a strong civil society (as described in section II). It needs self-confident and critical individuals who link up with others and are committed to the common good. Each individual must be expected to willingly take responsibility for his/her actions according to his/her position.

e) Solidarity and cooperation (conviviality)

Cooperative and solidarity-based thinking, economic management and action should be rediscovered and creatively promoted for the sake of the common good ("commoning"). This can create a counterbalance to the economically induced individualisation process that has been spreading in recent decades – not only in Western societies – undermining solidarity and endangering social

cohesion. By valuing social relationships and mutual respect, we can promote a flourishing living together (conviviality) both in small communities and in complex societies.

f) Cultural diversity and learning from each other

The world will only be worth living in if there is a tolerant exchange in every society and between cultures. Political decisions must respect the diversity of ways of life, philosophies of life, values and communities (e.g. indigenous peoples) and must acquire appropriate institutional form. In saying this, the Alternative Development theme group is not advocating ethical relativism. Rather, it is concerned for a critical and thoughtful examination of traditions and practices within the framework outlined here.

IV. Instead of development: cooperation for civilisational change

The core elements of alternative development provide important impulses for a sustainable concept of "development". But how might this be implemented? The Colombian anthropologist Arturo Escobar,³ one of the protagonists of "beyond development", proposes the following solution: He categorically rejects "development aid as practised, for example, by US AID, the World Bank and NGOs" with a "conventional" approach. On the other hand, "cooperation" that focuses on human rights, social and ecological justice, that supports grassroots communities, etc., seems temporarily acceptable to him. However, in his opinion, the aim is "**cooperation for civilisational change**" that "overcomes the opposition of 'we' (the 'haves') and 'they' (the 'have-nots') and strives for inter-autonomy". This would require building "coalitions, networks of collectives and autonomous communities in the global North and South".⁴

As an example of such a network, Escobar cites the Via Campesina movement, an international alliance of small farmers, agricultural workers, fisher persons, landless and indigenous people from over 80 countries.⁵ These movements need to work together and, in every case, relocalise the production of food and energy, re-communalise social life and implement procedures of collective decision-making and direct democracy. For such "cooperation to succeed, the contrasts due to different geopolitical and cultural conditions must be recognised, such as the tendency towards individualism in the North versus the emphasis on commonalities in the South".⁶ In this way, a supranational, global movement could emerge, based on the principle of cultural diversity - one of the core elements elaborated above. In general, the "core elements" fit effortlessly into Escobar's approach. This also offers a connection to Harald Welzer's call to **continue building on the civilisational project of the Enlightenment**.⁷

V. The core elements and their strategic location at terre des hommes

The special characteristic of terre des hommes is that all stakeholders are involved in important decisions. Therefore, it is important to examine and expand the outlined core elements in the context of further discussions with all stakeholders from full-time and voluntary work, project partners and youth representatives. terre des hommes must also check on how they relate to the international normative foundations on which it bases its work. In particular, children's and human rights as well as

³ Arturo Escobar (* 1952) is a Colombian-American anthropologist. He is professor of anthropology at the University of North Carolina in the USA and belongs to the above-mentioned group that rejects mainstream development cooperation.

⁴ Arturo Escobar: 25 years on: Post Development...A conversation between Gustavo Esteva and Arturo Escobar, Orla Office, Bogota, 9/2018, p.8

⁵ Arturo Escobar, Farewell to development, ila No. 439, Oct. 20, p. 11ff. The Arbeitsgemeinschaft bäuerliche Landwirtschaft e. V. (AbL), founded in 1980, includes a majority of small and medium-sized farms and is part of Via Campesina: www.abl-bw.de/startseite

⁶ Escobar, p. 14

⁷ Harald Welzer, Alles könnte anders sein, Ffm, 2019, p. 89,167. We are clear about the "dialectic of enlightenment" and its instrumentalisation by colonialism and neoliberalism. Cf. the reflections of the theme group on Alternative Development in the extranet (in preparation).

the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda should be mentioned here, to which the core elements refer at many points, either directly or indirectly. Only a few examples will suffice:

- The core elements "conviviality" as well as democratisation, participation and responsibility explicitly refer to young people. These elements are lived out practice in many projects, even though only the last-named issue is also stipulated in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and can therefore be "called for".
- In our understanding, "ecological integrity and intergenerational justice" belong closely together and are therefore brought together in a core element. In terre des hommes' understanding, intergenerational justice is an elementary, yet often overlooked component of sustainable ways of life and economic activity.
- If we compare the goals of the 2030 Agenda with the outlined core elements, there is a good fit in most cases. The core elements of ecological integrity and gender equality can be found in SDGs 5, 13, 14 and 15, the core element of democratisation, participation and responsibility fits in with SDG 16 "promoting just, peaceful and inclusive societies", etc. However, we should not overlook the tension between the core elements of ecological integrity, intergenerational justice and economic justice vis-a-vis SDG 8, which calls for "sustainable economic growth and decent work for all". This is because economic growth means an additional encroachment on ecological integrity. However, this contradiction is not exclusive to the core elements. It also exists - widely discussed in the literature - within the SDGs between the economic Goal 8 and the environmentally oriented goals on "climate action" (SDG 13) and "protecting ecosystems" (SDG 15).

The Alternative Development theme group is convinced that a strategy for a sustainable world and the realisation of children's rights (including participation rights) must go beyond the SDGs. Conversely, aspects such as ecological integrity, intergenerational justice and economic and social justice must influence human and children's rights processes more strongly. This insight is not new and has been addressed since 2020 with the terre des hommes campaign "My Planet - My Rights", which calls for ensuring the right to a healthy environment in the context of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Consequently, commitment to a global sustainability transformation is not a new, additional field of action for terre des hommes, but is intended – as a tdh-specific contribution to a sustainable world – to permeate the classic "child rights triad" of terre des hommes' activities: project activity, advocacy and spreading information.

In contrast to its activities to implement children's rights or the 2030 Agenda, terre des hommes cannot rely on conventions that are binding under international law.

Instead, terre des hommes must first contribute to winning socio-political majorities for a fundamental change in our global economy and way of life, and for the corresponding legal and international legal norms. The comprehensive transformation must not remain an abstract future goal - also and especially because it cannot be achieved simply by flipping some imaginary lever. Rather, despite all the immanent conflicts of goals, it is about swiftly tackling the global transformation in small and larger steps in Germany, the EU and in the project countries, putting it on the international agenda and making it irreversible.

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April 2021