

Chapter 33

The Potsdam Memorandum: a remarkable outcome of a most important conference

Klaus Töpfer



Klaus Töpfer was born in 1938 in Waldenburg, which then belonged to Germany but is now Polish. He studied economics in Mainz and Frankfurt and earned his doctorate at the University of Münster in 1968. After serving as a government official, professor, and adviser on development politics, he became Minister for the Environment and Health in the state of Rhineland-Palatinate in 1985. In 1987 Töpfer became Federal Minister for the Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety under Chancellor Helmut Kohl. From 1994 to 1998 he served as Federal Minister for Regional Planning, Civil Engineering and Urban Development. In 1998 he was appointed Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations, General Director of the United Nations office in Nairobi, and Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme. In 2009 he was appointed Founding President of the Institute of Advanced Sustainability Studies in Potsdam.

Note: This chapter is a commentary on chapter 32.

It was certainly a historic event that took place in Potsdam, Germany, in October 2007: The Potsdam Nobel Laureate Symposium entitled, ‘Global Sustainability: A Nobel Cause’. The conference was convened at a remarkable venue, a baroque palace built by the Prussian King Frederick the Great, reflecting the atmosphere of a monarchist epoch. This era also gave rise to the First Industrial Revolution, a revolution based on the technical innovations of the steam engine and railway systems, inducing the first major use of fossil fuels. It was also a social revolution as reflected in the Stein-Hardenberg reforms of the Prussian administrative system. All of this culminated in the collapse of the monarchy in Germany and the difficult start of democracy.

The Potsdam Memorandum, which was adopted at the end of this remarkable symposium, starts out by stating: ‘We are standing at a moment in history when a Great Transformation is needed to respond to the immense threat to our planet’. Shortly after this symposium the dramatic crisis of the financial institutions hit the world like a tsunami, provoking drastic consequences for economies worldwide. The quotation above reflects the double challenge we are facing. More than ever before, the relationship between economic development and stability, and the integrity of the ecosystems in our world are becoming evident. This global economic crisis is a declaration of bankruptcy of the ‘short-term world’, an economic paradigm focused solely on quarterly results, with a reward system directly echoing this short-termism. It is also a declaration of bankruptcy by a society that subsidizes its ‘wealth’ by externalizing the main part of the costs linked to production and consumption, imposing them on coming generations, on human beings living far away, and on nature’s capital. These costs involve the exploitation of the environment, as well as financial debts and burdens.

A further visionary conclusion of the Potsdam Memorandum was to emphasize the relationship between the right to development, mentioned in the Rio Principles as early as 1992, and the stabilization of ecosystems, especially the fight against climate change. The Potsdam Memorandum stresses that ‘Humanity is faced with the major challenge of making a drastic reduction in greenhouse gas emissions, which will require transforming lifestyles in rich countries, while meeting urgent development and growth needs in the poorer countries, the home of the vast majority of humanity, underlining the right to development’. Grasping this challenge should be the foremost priority of global society and should lead to political actions at all levels. It requires moving beyond short-termism, and appreciating our responsibility for the medium- and long-term consequences of actions and reactions in our world. In his epochal book *The Principle of Responsibility*, the German-Jewish philosopher Hans Jonas formulated a new categorical imperative, an ethical approach to decision making in our technological society: ‘Act in a way that the consequences of your actions are compatible with the permanence of real human

life on Earth'. This is a categorical imperative for a world committed to sustainable development. It is the alternative to a 'throw-away society', which was and still is a reflection of our short-sighted political and economic systems.

More than ever before, we require a new paradigm for economic and political action. The Potsdam Memorandum rightly calls for a *'third way* between environmental destabilization and persisting underdevelopment'. At the moment we are confronted with a myriad of signals indicating that the responses to the financial and economic crisis are again based on short-term reactions. The measures taken mainly aim at preserving existing structures; they clearly do not start the journey to a 're-invention of our industrial metabolism', nor do they lead 'the way to the Great Transformation', as called for in the Potsdam Memorandum. Analysis of the economic stimulus packages decided upon by nearly all governments around the world to overcome the economic crisis shows that those hundreds of billions of dollars and euros are mainly being spent stabilizing demand for the old structures of roads and cars, and backing the purchasing power of the consumer. Only a few countries have taken the path towards a 'Great Transformation', towards a world with higher energy-efficiency and a massive decarbonization of energy supply. South Korea stands out for having committed around 80% of its economic stimulus funds to measures in line with a 'green economy'. In China the corresponding share is around 30%, in Germany it is as low as 13%, in the United States around 11%. The message of the 'Great Transformation' requires that the financial crisis must be taken as an opportunity to kill two birds with one stone. This means responding to the short-term financial and economic crisis in a way that supports long-term sustainability of the global economy and society. The new 'industrial metabolism' must be the focus of global attention if we are to overcome the crisis of our age.

It is ethically wrong that the poorest of the poor again have to bear the main burden of crises that were caused by those living and acting in the so-called developed part of the world. The facts that Muhammad Yunus mentioned in his speech on the occasion of the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize ceremony in Oslo must be addressed: 'The world's income distribution gives a very telling story. Ninety four percent of the world's income goes to 40% of the population, while 60% of people live on only 6% of world income. Half of the world's population lives on two dollars a day. Over one billion people live on less than a dollar a day. This is no formula for peace.' Development is becoming synonymous with peace in this globalized world.

Tackling the double challenge of honouring a right to development and successfully combating climate change urgently requires a 'global contract between science and society'. This message was a most important conclusion to the symposium. It reflects the huge opportunities arising from science and technology in our world. The acceleration of scientific discovery, which is unprecedented in history, has given us deep insights into the patterns of nature and life. These insights form an

important basis for successfully realizing the ‘Great Transformation’. The necessary scientific understanding must be further deepened by investing further billions of dollars and euros in research and technological development. It is most apt that the Nobel laureates in Potsdam called for a new ‘Apollo Program’, to leverage innovations and technologies that allow for the fulfilment of basic human needs without exceeding the Earth’s capacity for renewal.

In his ‘Berlin speech’ of 2009, the German President Horst Köhler called for the next industrial revolution to be an ‘ecological industrial revolution’. The turnaround that he called for comprises a revolution of efficiency in energy and resource use. It must also put an end to the externalization of social and environmental costs, and address the categorical imperative of responsibility, including responsibility towards future generations. Beyond an unprecedented boost to investment in science and technology, the Potsdam Memorandum also calls for a ‘removal of the persisting cognitive divides and barriers through a global communication system’. A new general understanding of the interrelationship between science, society and politics must be established. The founding idea of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) was to involve governments in a process led by climate scientists. This intergovernmental practice must be broadened to counteract the growing gap between the insights of science, their acceptance by society, and their implementation by politicians. Again, the crux of the matter is to accept responsibility. When Hans Jonas formulated his new categorical imperative for the technological society he did not in any way deny the need for technical progress. Today, at this historic time, an increasing number of ‘science outlet centres’ is needed to advance mutual understanding between science, society and politics.

Science and technology form without any doubt the basis for the ‘Great Transformation’. However, a change in consumption patterns in the developed world is also urgently needed. The Potsdam Memorandum called for ‘transforming lifestyles in rich countries’, taking into account that the lifestyle of the global rich is highly subsidized – voluntarily and involuntarily – by people in other parts of the world and by future generations.

The Potsdam Memorandum, concise as it is, represents indeed an historical document. It focuses on the dramatically destabilized economic and ecological world of today. It not only describes the problems and formulates the challenges; this memorandum also suggests the solutions. The utmost must be done to apply these recommendations to day-to-day decisions in this crisis-stricken world. The ‘reinvention of our industrial metabolism’, the ‘Great Transformation’, the ‘global contract between science and society’, the categorical imperative for the technological society – these are not abstract, academic considerations. They must become the cornerstones of our common endeavour to pass on a sustainable world to our children and grandchildren.