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Cooperation rather than isolation: the challenges for 2019

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Three years have elapsed since 2015 and the key commitments on which the international community, meeting within the United Nations, reached a series of crucial agreements: the Paris Climate Agreement, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and the launch of negotiations on the future status of high seas protection. These agreements reflect a shared conviction that cooperation between States provides not only global benefits (a more stable climate, for example), but also, for each of the signatories, individual benefits that outweigh the constraints implied by this cooperation. However, three years on, the difficult international context is deterring this cooperation, and its advantages must once again be demonstrated. As 2019 begins, IDDRRI examines these policy challenges and the analyses and proposals that think tanks will need to provide in order to address them.

Where does sustainable development stand?

Over the last three years, the difficulties have built up, both at the international level and in Europe or France. In particular, in response to the new US position on climate and environmental concerns, some influential countries are beginning to renege on their long-standing environmental commitments (for instance Japan, with the resumption of commercial whaling¹) or to distance themselves from the IPCC findings² .

Yet the achievements of the Rio Conference of 1992, which were consolidated three years ago, are resisting: the [climate COP in Katowice](#) adopted rules for implementing the Paris Agreement; [the biodiversity COP in Sharm el-Sheikh](#) began work to prepare its global strategy; and the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) is about to publish a global assessment of biodiversity, of which much is expected.

Where the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is concerned, we should consider the initial progress made. Reducing inequalities, SDG n°10, which is a major political achievement of Agenda 2030, is currently central to the agenda of not only the development banks (World Bank, Agence Française de Développement), but also the major financial policy institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund . The rights-based approach is progressing, including before the courts. In Latin America, the [Escazu Agreement](#) on Access to Information, Public Participation and Justice in Environmental Matters was adopted in March 2018 in the framework of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), constituting a landmark legal and political event. In many countries, Agenda 2030 is becoming a reference for public policy and stakeholder commitment. The meeting of the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) in July 2019 at the United Nations General Assembly, which will review SDG implementation, will be a political highlight of 2019.

The need for in-depth discussions

At this point in modern history, when the fundamental constructions and values of the post-war period are being called into question—multilateral governance, the gradual removal of borders, international solidarity, the cooperative management of common goods, nuclear disarmament, the progressively shared vision of social and democratic governance that enhances the fundamental freedoms, the relevance of European integration—IDDRI clearly has a crucial role to play in demonstrating that the principles and values of sustainable development and Agenda 2030 can contribute to a renewal of public life in all its dimensions and at all levels, with the participation of the actors concerned. The sharp increase in radical protests and criticism, whether or not they are legitimate and reasoned, means that sustainable development actors now have two urgent priorities:

- contributing to an in-depth examination of the problems, especially for social issues, and of what has not worked, including in the fundamental institutions of multilateralism or European integration;
- convincing states that cooperating with other countries to protect global common goods (climate, biodiversity, but also equity and food security), is the best way forward, even for our individual interests.

One of the issues running through most of these protests concerns the globalised economy. Perceived as creating competition between territories and countries that are prepared to do anything to attract investors and jobs, with huge social and environmental impacts caused by the race for the lowest costs, it prevents the citizens of these countries from designing their own long-term social project and investing in their future. It thus rapidly leads to withdrawal and to a refusal to engage in ambitious cooperation with other countries, on the grounds that that this will ensure greater sovereignty. But this is an illusion: on the contrary, the only option to protect individual and collective interests is

cooperation to improve regulation, in the multilateral framework and within Europe.

Three key challenges

This is both a challenge and a historical opportunity for Europe, which has the capacity to unite the Member States around a shared project. This is what should be at the heart of the campaign for the upcoming European elections in May. The European Union, the third largest trading power in the world and the largest common market, should play a major role in influencing globalisation trends. The rules governing trade between Europe and the rest of the world should stimulate a new globalisation model, in the face of different projects (for example, Donald Trump's "America First" or Xi Jinping's "Belt and Road Initiative") and to support the most vulnerable countries. Highlighting Europe's strengths, but also the unquestionable achievements of European integration and of the Member States, on both social and environmental issues, must not prevent an analysis of the current obstacles to progress that are causing citizens to turn away from the European institutions. What is currently standing in the way of a profound reform of the Common Agricultural Policy to enable the transition of the agri-food sector in order to improve its health and nutrition, social and environmental impacts? Can the rules of competition within the common market or the potential benefits expected from new free trade agreements have more influence in trade-offs than the social or environmental challenges raised by citizens and civil society? This poses some key questions about European integration and the EU institutions that will need to be explicitly addressed during the campaign.

It is of course the responsibility of each country, in Europe and elsewhere, to address the challenges in order to truly implement the ecological transition in society. This is known, in the international sustainable development arena, as "ambition". Today, being ambitious no longer implies simply setting goals, however high they may be. It also means finding ways to achieve these goals. And this must be done with and for citizens, with realistic alternatives, anticipated solutions and the indispensable social support. The great national debate launched this week could be the first opportunity to clarify the solutions and the policy choices they imply.

In a globalised economy and faced with global environmental challenges, these country-level efforts must be supported by further consolidating the multilateral cooperation framework, to ensure greater effectiveness and solidarity. In this respect, 2020 will be an important year, with the expected submission of more ambitious country contributions to climate action, the negotiations in Beijing on a new framework for biodiversity protection, and the conclusion of negotiations to establish a high seas treaty.

The goals are clear: a strengthened European project for sustainable development, the successful implementation of the transition at country level, and an effective, inclusive international cooperation framework. IDDRI and its partners throughout the world will be fully mobilised in these three areas, in order to inform and structure these intense policy debates on issues that are critical for our future.

We wish you all a very happy 2019!

¹ https://www.lemonde.fr/planete/article/2018/12/21/le-japon-annonce-la-reprise-prochaine-de-la-chasse-commerciale-a-la-baleine_5401112_3244.html

² <https://www.franceinter.fr/environnement/cop24-clash-autour-du-rapport-du-giec>

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