

SHORT REPORT

by Klaus Milke, Chair of Stiftung Zukunftsfähigkeit

Klaus Töpfer: Building Bridges for Sustainable Development for All

Sustainable Development: A Challenge for All Humankind" - was the title of an event held on 7 November 2023 to celebrate the 85th birthday and achievements of Prof. Dr Klaus Töpfer. The event was organised by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, the Research Institute for Sustainability - Helmholtz Centre Potsdam (RIFS - formerly IASS) and the foundation Stiftung Zukunftsfähigkeit, which is affiliated with the NGO Germanwatch. In this report, Klaus Milke, Chair of the Board of Stiftung Zukunftsfähigkeit, shares his impressions of the evening.

In the course of the evening the host institutions paid tribute to the life's work of Klaus Töpfer and commented on diverse issues relating to sustainable development at the national and international levels. Moderated by Petra Pinzler, and with contributions from Prof. Dr. Norbert Lammert, Andreas Jung MdB, Tanja Gönner, Katrin Göring-Eckardt MdB, Dr. Kathrin Goldammer, Antje von Broock, Dr. Eckart von Hirschhausen, Prof. Dr. Mark Lawrence and Klaus Milke, the event shone a spotlight on the wide-ranging activities of the former German Federal Minister, UNEP Executive Director and IASS Founding Director.



The current Federal Minister for the Environment, Steffi Lemke, was also in attendance, along with several of Klaus Töpfer's successors – Barbara Hendricks, Peter Altmaier and Jürgen Trittin. With a top-class audience from across the democratic political spectrum as well as academia, the business community, and civil society, the event at the Konrad Adenauer Foundation Academy featured a lively programme that opened with an introduction by Prof. Dr Norbert Lammert, who outlined Klaus Töpfer's life and works and his influential role in shaping the CDU. Eckart von Hirschhausen gave a talk on German environmental and sustainability policy that was at once humorous and provocative, tracing its evolution and Klaus Töpfer's decisive role since the Chernobyl nuclear accident and the founding of the Federal Ministry for the Environment in 1986. Hirschhausen suggested that a politics of global responsibility, especially one that calls itself "Christian", should embrace the principle of "love thy neighbour" in its most comprehensive sense, extending it to all and including future generations.



"Transformation can only succeed together"
 Round table from left to right: Petra Pinzler, Tanja Gönner, Antje von Broock, Dr. Kathrin Goldammer, Katrin Göring-Eckardt MdB



Big applause / Standing ovation for the honoree

The concept of sustainability is on everyone's lips at both the national and international level – in political debates, in science and research, in business and in civil society. But time is running out as the climate and biodiversity crises continue to intensify. In this age of human dominance, the Anthropocene, we must urgently intensify our efforts to achieve more sustainable development – at home and abroad.



Andreas Jung, MdB



Dr Eckart von Hirschhausen

In his keynote speech, Andreas Jung MdB lauded Klaus Töpfer's persistent and determined efforts to shape political thinking within the CDU. The market cannot solve everything and requires the guidance of good regulatory policy and an adequate mix of instruments, he noted. Sustainable development is a cross-cutting issue in which the complex interactions of ecological, economic and, above all, social development must be carefully balanced.

In his address, Klaus Töpfer stressed that ultimately we must all take responsibility for the future and at all levels – locally, regionally, nationally, and internationally. Sustainable development is, in other words, a challenge that all of humankind must embrace for the sake of both present and future generations. The many far-reaching challenges, multiple crises, and wars and conflicts that we face today compel us – and indeed people around the world – to confront fundamental matters. What will underpin our future as the global population approaches 9 billion people? How do we want to live today? What kind of lifestyle should we lead to ensure that life on Earth is worth living for future generations? And are climate and environmental policies designed in such a way that they foster democratic participation and uphold fundamental human rights?



Prof. Dr. Norbert Lammert



Various contributions throughout the evening also highlighted the need to avoid double standards and, responding to developments in migration policy, to adopt a consistent approach to the causes of flight. Speakers repeatedly emphasized the vital importance of engaging with other points of view and appreciating other cultures.

Klaus Töpfer emphasized the need to accept the findings of science as the basis for action in the spirit of critical rationalism, while acknowledging that scientific knowledge is by necessity provisional. After all, scientific progress is made through falsification: "We err upwards". Töpfer also stressed the need to ensure that new technologies are resilient, democratic and repairable and will create jobs and benefit future generations.

Turning to domestic policy, he cautioned that we must heed the growing divisions in society and learn to examine issues more attentively and listen to others with an open mind rather than merely trading statements that reflect established positions. Trust, cooperation, new alliances and partnerships will be needed to tackle the challenges that we face both locally and on the world stage.

Klaus Töpfer is a prominent figure in German Christian Democracy and has also played an outstanding role in both science (and in elevating its relevance to politics) and civil society in Germany and abroad. The thunderous applause and many gestures of appreciation at the end of this long evening testify to the high esteem in which he is held – not least of all due to his clear-sighted analyses of climate strategies and commitment to sustainable development. The panel and many guests lauded the valuable contributions of a gifted innovator and thinker who always sought to build bridges, even when it would have been easier to dig trenches.



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