Transformation is in vogue – no question about it. Although the term may not mean much to many people, most have encountered it in some form or other, if only in the media. Because societies around the world are in a state of flux. The images of the Carnation Revolution in Portugal and the end of dictatorship in Spain and Greece may have all but disappeared, but the transition process in Eastern Europe, the striking dock workers in Gdansk, the protest movement in Hungary, the Monday demonstrations in Leipzig, and the image of Boris Yeltsin in front of the tanks that laid siege to the White House in Moscow are all very much a part of the collective memory of our times. The world’s attention was also drawn to other upheavals such as the end of Pinochet’s rule in Chile or Nelson Mandela’s triumphant release from prison following the end of apartheid in South Africa.

And the process of transformation continues – from China’s emergence as a market economy to the Arab spring in 2011 – virtually no region in the world has been left untouched by the will to change.

However different all these events may be, transformation is the common denominator of the change towards greater opportunity, greater justice, self-determination and freedom. It is widespread because the world has become increasingly interwoven and the impact of this is felt not only in the markets. Much like economies, societies too are ever more interlinked. Not only do we have a flow of goods, but we are also flooded with information, images and eyewitness accounts. They allow access to different parts of the world, different lives and realities, allow us to draw comparisons, and arouse in us the desire and hope for a better future. Physical distances and political boundaries no longer separate people like they once did and ideological divides are blurring.

In a situation such as this, more and more people are aware that they are poorly governed and that those in power have no satisfactory answer to the needs of growing populations and stagnating economies. They also realise that many of their everyday demands and rights are ignored or violated. In most cases, years of pent-up frustration and expectation erupt, of-
ten triggered by the symbolic actions of an individual.

It would be wrong to interpret the winds of change simply as the adoption of the Western or European model. While the allure of life in a free market democracy can hardly be overestimated, many transformation processes are not guided by a vision of a society that adopts a particular model or a set of codes or laws on rights. There is convergence at best in the fact that people everywhere strive for a better life, the definition of which, however, includes much of what constitutes a democracy and social market economy in Europe. Transformation is expected to create new economic opportunities and offer families opportunities for the future. Access to education is expected to be the gateway to a better life. People have a sense of dignity and want to be respected. They would like to have rules that apply to all and are observed by all; a life without corruption, without the whims of the powerful, but with social justice. This convergence includes the desire for consensus between the governing and the governed and the desire for a role in the economic and political process.

Transformation is the constructive political response to these expectations – it is the attempt to honour the needs and demands of a society. In this sense, transformation stands for a strategy for change for a better public order, for better governance and for a more efficient public and private sector. Although transformation, at its core, is a normative concept based on the vision of democracy and a socially responsible market economy, it is a concept that remains open to all the possible individual steps, the various paths and changing priorities during the transition process. This understanding of systemic change is illustrated by the conceptual rationale for the Transformation Index, compiled by the Bertelsmann Stiftung and leading academics over several years, and published every two years for the past decade. The discussion of the Index in vastly different regional and national contexts, and consultations among the network of Transformation Thinkers, brought together by the Bertelsmann Stiftung and GIZ since 2005, have highlighted its broad applicability. A qualitative and comparative global analysis of transformation strategies lends impetus to reform, identifies best practices and opens up comparative prospects also for the countries that only follow part of the transformation agenda or are focused on a pluralist, representative democracy along the lines of the European model. The most interesting debates among young transformation actors have therefore not been drawn on the relative similarity of their ideas to European models, but on a direct exchange of best practices among themselves.

This dialogue, commonly referred to as South-South communication in the past, illustrates one of the strengths of the concept of transformation: change doesn’t just happen – it is created. Transformation is based on decisions, forethought and planning. It is an actor-centred strategy based on the premise of the possibility and necessity of shaping systemic change. It highlights the role of actors in politics, the economy and society. Change management is therefore an independent assessment basis in the Bertelsmann Stiftung’s Transformation Index, and creates an incentive for actors to invest their skills and political capital in reform strategies.

Nevertheless, neither the Index nor the international discourse have simple blueprints for success – transformation is not a one-way street but a complex process without a built-in mechanism for driving progress. This is illustrated in the Transformation Atlas, available online free of charge. A comparison of the data in the Atlas compiled over the last ten years for Thailand, Mali, Bolivia and Hungary, to mention only a few examples, underlines the importance of inputs that actors make to shaping change, inputs that also draw on failures, mistakes and oversights.

In the long run, no country, perhaps not even North Korea, will be able to swim against the tide of global integration with all its social and political consequences. The strategy for transformation provides the tools for the job but does not determine the outcome. The story of the struggle for a good and just public order does not end here, but merely opens another long chapter. ■

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