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Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
at a reception for guest researchers of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation and their families
at Schloss Bellevue
on 29 June 2023

A very warm welcome to you all here in the park of Schloss Bellevue! And as Federal President, I welcome you not just here today but to Germany in general. You are bringing a great deal of scientific expertise to our country, scientific expertise from over eighty other countries, from Bosnia and Herzegovina to Tanzania, from Costa Rica to Lebanon, from India to Israel. I am delighted that you are able to live and work in places all across Germany thanks to the scholarships and research prizes offered by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation.

We can see this morning how inspiring the work of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation is. And has been for seventy years now – I do not know if all of you have heard that the Foundation is celebrating its anniversary this year. And as Federal President I would like to offer it my heartfelt congratulations!

I am certain that Alexander von Humboldt would have felt very much at home in the large and diverse group that has gathered this morning. And I think that someone with his adventurer’s spirit would absolutely not have found the last few years, with all of the restrictions during the pandemic, an easy experience. Humboldt would not have been able to set off on any of his crucial expeditions. And without those expeditions he would never have gained nor written about the insight that everything is interconnected, and how it is connected. For us this means, in short, that the whole world concerns us, the whole world must concern us!

Today, therefore, although it seems very far away this summer, I would like to tell you a brief story that comes from the cold, from what we thought was the eternal ice.

In late April I spent several days in Canada, and during this trip I visited a small village high in the north, above the Arctic Circle, a tiny
Inuit community on the Arctic Ocean. Tuktoyaktuk, this village is called, and in a few decades it will be at risk of disappearing. As increasing areas of the ocean become free of ice, the wind creates such strong waves that the sea can eat into the defenceless coast. At the same time, the permafrost is turning into mud and slush, causing houses to sink or become uninhabitable. And up there in the far north, the ice is the infrastructure. Without the ice, people will no longer come together, the settlements will lose contact with one another, it will be impossible for them to be supplied or to support one another with even the bare necessities.

I have seen how passionately the people of Tuktoyaktuk are fighting against the effects of climate change. They are fighting against the loss of their home. These fishers and hunters live in harmony with nature; it is not that the Inuit are robbing themselves of the resources they depend upon to live. It is us. It is our way of life, our lifestyle, that is heating the Earth and that has a direct impact on the Arctic.

This example shows what lies behind the abstract term “climate justice”.

But what happens in the Arctic affects our lives, our futures, too – because everything is interconnected. Here in Germany, too, we are experiencing climate change up close, constantly needing new words for what feel like constantly emerging new climate phenomena. “Extreme weather event” is now a part of our everyday vocabulary. The last “drought winter” is still fresh in our minds, and now we are expecting the next “heatwave summer” with extreme temperatures and far too scarce, far too short periods of rain. Even if not everyone here always wants to hear it, the people of Tuktoyaktuk say to us: Less climate action is not an option. More climate action is the only option we have! And the fight against climate change is ultimately one that can only be won by all of us working together.

Today, I would also like to add that it is a fight that can only be won by all scientific disciplines working together. This is why we need you all, working as one – together with the tech firms that show how climate change works in practice, and with investors who back climate-friendly business models in industry, and with politicians who act responsibly, and of course together with the general public in all of our countries. To me, it is clear that this is about much more than just invoking mere goals. It is primarily about the path to reaching those goals. We must all become experts in the fight against climate change and for more climate action.

Climate change is sadly not the only challenge facing our world these days. For 491 days, the people of Ukraine have been suffering under the terrible Russian war of aggression; for 491 days, Ukrainians have been defending their home. Among you today, dear guests, are
scientists who have fled Ukraine, as well as researchers from Russia. You are all able to work here in peace and in freedom.

It is important for Europe, for the international community of states around the world to condemn this brutal war of aggression as one and to support those who are under attack. Putin may have reckoned on us, Ukraine’s allies, becoming jaded and looking away – but this has not happened. Europe has grown together in this confrontation. And I believe we can now also say that Germany and Europe have become closer to many other countries around the world. Putin will not succeed in dividing the freedom-loving democracies with his brutal attack on Ukraine’s freedom.

Ladies and gentlemen, for you as scientists, just as for me in my role of Federal President, it is quite routine – and indeed it is an obligation – not to despair at the complexity of the world but to work day in, day out to find a way to tackle complex problems. It is hardly possible for anyone to do that alone – even Alexander von Humboldt discussed his findings in depth with many of his peers during his lifetime, as shown by tens of thousands of letters that he wrote, by meetings and events that he attended around the world during his travels. I hope that you are able to use today’s reception to the same end. Enjoy the discussions with colleagues from other disciplines and countries, make new contacts, find inspiration, and let us work today and day in, day out to find solutions for a better, a sustainable, a peaceful world. I look forward to meeting and talking to you!