

Inside sustainability counselling. Members of the German Council for Sustainable Development (RNE) review their impact

Preliminary remarks.

Since 2001, NN public figures have belonged to the German Council for Sustainable Development (RNE). On the occasion of its 15th anniversary, they were all asked to evaluate the Council's work over the years, give an account of their specific experiences and talk about future prospects. Most of them seized this opportunity. Their accounts, some of which are in-depth, were published at www.nachhaltigkeitsrat.de in a brochure entitled "15 Jahre RNE" (15 Years of the RNE) with a foreword by the Council's Secretary General, Prof. Dr Günther Bachmann.

Below is a condensed summary produced for the international experts participating in the 2018 peer review of German sustainable development policy, itself supplemented by a summarised presentation of the facts. The affiliations the members are presented with are those valid at the time of their Council membership. Since 2013, the Council has had the right to select and co-opt eminent experts itself upon consultation with the government; two of the three experts co-opted so far present their views here as well. The quotes are listed in alphabetical order.

Dr Heinrich Graf von Bassewitz, agriculturalist, Federal Commissioner for Organic Farming within the German Farmers' Association (DBV) and member of the DBV's Executive Committee, Council member from 2010 to 2013

Theoretically, the Council ranks very highly within the Federal Chancellery, and when the Council intervenes, the federal government is expected to explain itself. Unfortunately, however, it is my impression that it doesn't play a particularly important role at the moment (2016), among other things possibly because there are too many other more pressing problems, such as refugee policy. I don't think the Council is visible enough in the public arena with its topics, and right now I don't

feel it is invested with the significance it should be. It should be made up of more people who will later have to play an active role in supporting the ideas they come up with. But business people obviously tend to be short on time. Another problem is that there is no longer a real representative of the agricultural sector. There was, at least, a “fig leaf” agriculturalist for the first 12 years, but for the past three years there has been no practising farmer on the Council.

Prof. Dr Gerhard de Haan, Professor of Futurology and Educational Research at Freie Universität Berlin, co-opted Council member from 2014 to 2015

Like many others, I felt the topics of education and communication were under-represented within the Council. I was therefore delighted when the Council asked me whether I would like to be involved. We, the Council members, then gave some thought as to which topic could be substantially raised within the Council, and chose the area of higher education, where there is currently (2015) a great deal of interest in the topic of sustainability. The idea was to endeavour to structure the German Sustainability Code developed by the RNE in such a way that universities could also make declarations accordingly. That was the focus of our activities. And I think they were very successful because in partnership with many university management teams and other players, we have developed a so-called beta version of the German Sustainability Code, enabling it to indeed be put to the test by universities. I think that now, in 2016, with around ten universities, we can attempt to use the Code as the basis for the reporting, evaluation and management of sustainable development. Adapting an instrument originally developed for businesses to universities is obviously far from easy. After all, universities aren't businesses – they're teaching and research institutions. At the same time, however, they are major operations that need and use a lot of resources.

The Council is a highly interesting body if, like me, you get excited about wholly heterogeneous topics and thinking outside the box. There were sometimes topics that I couldn't really contribute to, such as the whole complex of problems related to land, which is very, very interesting. The Council has a sharp eye upcoming topics and an interest in adopting clear positions. This is a key motivation for all the members, not least the Secretary General.

I also liked the fact that the Council is a very heterogeneous body. Some of the members engage in a little lobbying, while others only contribute their expertise. Nonetheless, the members are able to reach a consensus that doesn't merely represent the lowest common denominator, but which has substance and which isn't always to the liking of the current government. As far as education is concerned, the Council has recently not only recognised its importance in relation to sustainable development, but has also expedited the issue, resulting in some movement in this area.

Dr Joachim Faber, CEO of Allianz Global Investors AG, member of the Board of Management of Allianz SE, Council member from 2010 to 2013

I found my three years on the Council incredibly rewarding. All the members had extensive background in the area of sustainability. I learned an incredible amount and was also able to significantly improve my own position on the basis of experiencing and hearing about aspects of sustainability that were entirely new to me from all these different fields – the church, environmental associations, politics. This also absolutely honed, and sometimes also changed, my opinions. I obviously stood up for my convictions within the Council. And based on how people interacted with me, I didn't get the feeling that the business world was made the scapegoat or treated as an outsider by the group, and that rather I was absolutely respected as an individual and as a representative of this sector, and people were keen to hear what I had to say.

The German Sustainability Code was important to me because we wanted to position the German business world in a very tangible way in relation to the topic of sustainability. It also mattered to me since it obviously brought the German business world into contact with sustainability in a not terribly appealing way, because the general response was: "Uh-oh, here comes bureaucracy again – we're going to have to hire three new people just to get their seal of approval". Since the beginning of the last decade, even before joining the Council, I have tried time and again to raise this topic within business circles. As an investor, we have investments in all the DAX and Euro Stoxx stocks, so we regularly had the opportunity to talk to the investors or companies about such topics. I had some very interesting discussions as a result, some of which were highly controversial.

With regard to the incredibly high-profile issue of climate protection, I wouldn't go so far as to say Germany's energy transition makes us a role model, but it does still make us an especially outstanding case study. I worded it like this intentionally because the energy transition is an excellent example of how you can also do a great deal of damage with political and legal requirements. I think a lot of what has come out of what is actually a positive trend in the direction of promoting climate protection has been destroyed by the way in which the energy transition has been brought about.

Horst Frank, Mayor of Konstanz, Council member from 2003 to 2010

Among other things, local politics is about seeing the bigger picture and comparing best practices – simply to see what others are doing better and what you can adopt yourself. In the dialogue with mayors that I helped co-create, the focus was on exchange and also on feedback for the Council. On the one hand, the cities are realising they have to take on public discussion. And on the other, the Council receives new impulses from the cities again and again. The Council's dialogue is designed to directly confront the city councils and their heads with the topic of sustainability. Many mayors have made sustainability their top priority and have seen to it that their cities produce sustainability reports based on an indicator system or that there is a sustainable procurement system for their administration. As part of Dialog 2010, we also adopted the Strategic Cornerstones for Sustainable Development in Municipalities as guidelines. My time on the Council showed me

the importance of discourse between people from different sectors of society and walks of life. It allows you to comprehensively shine a light on a project – something that often falls by the wayside in day-to-day work. The international cooperation was likewise very rewarding, although it was sometimes a little difficult too; I would have liked to have seen the Council being more radical by making more pointed demands. Because as important as exchange with the various players is, the pressure to come to a consensus sometimes results in the direction not being clear enough. This was especially evident with the paper on energy policy and in how the matter of brown coal was handled. In this area, the industry and union representatives had an entirely different opinion to the majority and me. The result was some form of compromise in which the key issues were broached, but which also contained the recommendation that coal continue to be used for energy generation, with carbon sequestration and better energy conversion efficiency being promoted to this end. This was then not quite so targeted and explicit.

Vera Gäde-Butzlaff, CEO of Berlin's municipal cleaning company Berliner Stadtreinigungsbetriebe until 2014, CEO of Gasag Berliner Gaswerke Aktiengesellschaft and Chairwoman of the Supervisory Board of Nehlsen AG since 2015, Council member from 2013 to 2016

The positions of responsibility I have held in both public and private companies mean I can definitely realistically assess the many opportunities, and also that I have a good understanding of the problems that can arise. I am happy to contribute this to the work of the Council and I in turn get a great deal out of the Council too. Overall, I see a steady positive development in this direction. This does not come of its own accord, however, and calls for ongoing commitment. A good example of this is climate policy: for many years, the key players stood in each others' way. However, since the Paris Climate Change Conference, it has been plain to see that we in Germany aren't branching out on our own with the energy transition, but are setting an example for everyone.

Dr Hans Geisler, former Saxony State Minister of Social Affairs, Health, Youth and Family, Council member from 2006 to 2013

When I joined the Council in 2006, I came to the conclusion that there was only a very small circle of people interested in the topic and that, while the government was indeed aware of it, it was always being overshadowed by other issues. Fortunately, this changed over the first three or four years. In the first year, it was simply all about the degree to which we could integrate ourselves into society, parliament and the government. We then made some real progress in the period that followed, for example with the state secretaries' round table. The public annual conferences were good and should remain in place, but they only reached insiders who were already passionate about the issue. We therefore had to try to boost our public profile even more, and I would say sustainability has now almost been overdone in the public arena. Among other things, awareness of it increased greatly because of the work of the Council. In my active years, an international control process was organised (2009 and 2013 peer reviews). Here, the reflection and summary were somewhat different to the report produced at the end of a legislature.

Alois Glück, former President of the Bavarian State Parliament, President of the Central Committee of German Catholics, Council member from 2011 to 2016

Working with this circle of eminent people with various areas of expertise and experience is hugely rewarding for me. Sustainability is no longer seen simply as an environmental factor and issue, but is increasingly understood to be a fundamental and guiding principle for all fields of expertise and areas of life. This represents major progress, as it means a main theme is gradually being developed that promotes a holistic view and therefore, in principle a holistic orientation framework for policymakers – a common benchmark for “progress”.

I hope the Council continues to have a committed and expert panel of members in its next period. Above all, I hope the strong team in the central office can maintain their passion for this topic and the task, and continue to be effective within the numerous networks.

Rainer Grohe, Director of the Galileo Joint Undertaking, Chairman of the Environment Committee of the Federation of German Industries (BDI), Council member from 2001 to 2007

For many years, I was responsible in a voluntary capacity for the BDI’s environmental policy and I was always sad to see the conflict between the environmentalists (the “good guys”) and industry (the “bad guys”). Which is why we developed and implemented the Econsense initiative back then. Being broader, I think the Council is a suitable platform for tackling these issues more effectively.

I find it disappointing that, although sustainability is on everyone’s lips, in practical terms the good guy/bad guy model still applies in terms of environmental policy. You may well recall that in one of our first meetings attended by the then Chancellor, a number of us insisted that we had to discuss some key issues such as energy policy and demographic change. And look what the outcome was: an energy policy that doesn’t deserve to be called a policy. The energy transition is a disaster – not because its implementation is being hindered in a number of areas or because everything is becoming more expensive, but because it was never thought through.

Hermann Graf Hatzfeldt, forester, Chairman of the Forest Stewardship Council in Germany, Council member from 2003 to 2007

I was initially motivated to become a Council member by the attractive prospect of being able to take my environmental and energy policy concerns to a higher level, so to speak, because of the Council’s close ties with the Chancellery. During my time on the Council, I quickly realised that my involvement would be quite a bit more far-reaching in terms of agendas and that the real appeal lay in working and engaging with the outstanding representatives of the various interest groups.

I have mixed opinions on Germany’s sustainable development policy. There certainly is and has been some progress made, including progress that wouldn’t have come about without the Council,

such as the energy transition. At the same time, it's difficult to overlook the degree of political patronage and lobbying that goes on behind the scenes, the sluggishness of the policymaking and bureaucratic processes, and the general resistance within the business sector and society to fundamental change – change without which no real sustainability is possible.

Though I am not in a position to gauge the Council's current possibilities and limitations, I would like to see these structural and systemic hurdles be analysed in greater depth and tackled more boldly in the future, compared to my time on the Council. This applies in particular to the question of whether and, if so, how economic growth can really be sustainable – no matter how green it is.

Dr Volker Hauff, Chairman of the German Council for Sustainable Development (RNE) from 2001 to 2010, former Mayor of Frankfurt am Main, former Parliamentary State Secretary within the Federal Ministry of Research and Technology, former federal minister, Council member from 2001 to 2010

The definition involving intra- and intergenerational fairness became a classic. It was ultimately replaced by an interpretation that I was never all that happy with: the three pillars of economy, environment and social affairs. This is a necessary intermediate step in how the term is understood by the public. It made it manageable, especially for the business world. But we actually spoke more in terms of a culture of sustainability because the three areas all intersect. Culture is what triggers sustainable development in the first place. Gro Harlem Brundtland gave me a formative experience when she said that “the way in which we produce the report and how we communicate in the process is just as important as the report itself”. Which is why people from the Amazon Basin, dissidents from the Soviet Union and fringe groups from Japan had their say in the first week. We then developed the report in the second week. What none of us could have foreseen was that our recommendation in the closing comments that a UN conference on sustainable development be held would help give the topic its breakthrough. This is why the historic Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit was held in 1992. It was decided in Rio that there would be another meeting ten years later, in Johannesburg. The idea was that every government would then report back in 2002 on the sustainability strategy developed for their country. But for a long time nothing happened. The governments then began to stir about 18 months before the conference. Germany resorted to the tried and tested environmental policy model of institutionalisation, establishing the German Council for Sustainable Development (RNE), the State Secretaries' Committee to monitor implementation and, later, the Parliamentary Advisory Council to have an influence on legislation.

The early days of the Council were the best! We were guided by various points, three of which were especially important to me. Firstly, if we want sustainable development, we need both producers and consumers. It doesn't work with a government that dictates and believes it knows what to do. Rather, the government has to see itself as a partner who is reliant on civil society backing its decisions. Secondly, every goal has to come with comprehensible metrics, because only if I can measure something can I also manage it. For example, if the goal is sustainable agriculture, this means specifically that the use of nitrogen oxide per cultivated area should be reduced. These days, a government can't have a sustainability strategy that doesn't include such indicators. Thirdly, we live in a globalised world. I can't save the environment on my own in Germany, and I can't prevent

marine pollution solely on the basis of German decisions. We need international cooperation involving agreements, treaties, technology transfer and financing. Measuring sustainability is especially popular these days. The regular reporting of facts and figures has become so established in part thanks to the work of the Council. The current Secretary General Günther Bachmann and I initiated the progress report on the Sustainable Development Strategy. Later, we had non-Germans draw up reports – the so-called peer reviews – on Germany's sustainable development policy. This took a lot of people by surprise back then, but has since become widely accepted.

I look back on my Council activities with gratitude and a degree of pride and delight regarding the good cooperation. In particular, I had a major influence on the Council's style together with Günther Bachmann and Klaus Töpfer: instead of writing one report after the other, we sought to have practical relevance and we discussed topics through to maturity. This led to many concrete results, such as the German Sustainability Code. This now enjoys a great deal of support, but when we started out, there was a huge debate, with NGOs and the business world irreconcilably on opposite sides of the table. The NGOs argued that voluntary reporting with no statutory requirements was greenwashing, in other words meaningless blah-blah. In contrast, the representatives of the business world said that rather than being a legal responsibility, sustainability was part of their personal responsibility, and they refused to tolerate anyone meddling in this. The Council then acted as a mediator, appreciated both positions and their arguments, and asked: what information would a voluntary report contain? What is essential? What enables comparability? It was a difficult process. But in the process, we were able to firmly establish the Council's work style: we didn't want to simply win the debate, we wanted to be proven to be right. If we think about the challenges of the future, they are all related to sustainable development: health, transport, population, etc. If businesses develop away from the needs of society, they will disappear and others will come along. Only the businesses that make a significant contribution to sustainability over the next 50 to 100 years will survive. Businesses are increasingly using key performance indicators to measure their contribution. This is all very well thought out in technical terms, and I don't wish to fundamentally criticise this. But there's more to sustainability than this: it also calls for fairness and trust. This is a topic I am currently working on. Trust is a resource that is in short supply in a risk society. Twenty years ago, the big issue was the destruction of the environment. We are now seeing incredible social devastation. What enables people to live together successfully? What holds a society together?

Does the Council have sufficient political clout? It is certainly listened to and it has formulated many concrete suggestions that subsequently found their way into the government's practical actions. For example, over decades we slowly but surely fought for a sustainable procurement policy. This is one of the federal government's core processes. The public authorities are by far the biggest demander of office materials, computers and cars and in the area of building construction. Many of the ministries are now heading in the right direction. I firmly believe that we are still right at the beginning of a development. When I said back then that sustainability would be the mission statement of the 21st century, very few people took me seriously. I already knew then that this mission statement would only take effect long after my passing. This is how far ahead we have to think when it comes to these processes! Reconciling globalisation and sustainability will be our biggest responsibility.

Walter Hirche, former State Minister in Lower Saxony and Brandenburg, Chairman of the Governing Board of the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning in Hamburg, former Parliamentary State Secretary within the Ministry for the Environment, Council member from 2010 to 2016

There has been an increase in Germany in the general awareness of the necessity to act in the interests of sustainability. Progress has been made too, but some things are still in a sorry state. In particular, the conflict between power-based short-term social and economic wishes on the one hand and cross-generational necessities on the other has not been put on the public agenda in the slightest. The refugee issue with its global causes and local effects highlights the lack of a long-term outlook on problems that are growing around the world. We can only make progress through consensus regarding concrete goals, transparent indicators and evaluation of the results. Sustainable development policy needs to be more firmly embedded in the institutions and political structures. In the area of education, the action plan of the Federal Ministry of Education and Research in partnership with the German federal states, local authorities, business and civil society can successfully advance this embedding process (motto: "From a project to a structure"). We need similar goals in all areas of society.

The Council needs to be further strengthened in its capacity as the link between the political decision makers on the one hand and trade associations, social organisations and civil society on the other. In Germany, this means, for example, developing sustainability codes in other areas of society together with those affected, as has already been initiated for businesses and universities. Accountability reports must always also report on the impacts on the sustainability goals. Proposals need to be drawn up for better networked administrative structures and urban planning alternatives.

Prof. Dr Claus Hipp, Managing Director of HiPP GmbH & Co. Vertrieb KG, Vice President of the German Industry and Trade Association (DIHT), Council member from 2001 to 2003

Back then, sustainability wasn't a topic everyone was talking about like it is now. But as it's something we at HiPP have been looking at for a long time and a matter close to my heart, it was an honour for me to be able to assist the Council in its important work. As an advisory body to the federal government, the Council faced the major task of helping to develop a national Sustainable Development Strategy for Germany.

It succeeded in making itself heard on the key questions regarding responsible social and environmental policy. To this end, it engaged in responsible dialogue with the federal government and the public, and therefore became an important authority. I think the development of the German Sustainability Code was, in particular, a major milestone. The issues that mattered to me personally were soil conservation, land use, and sustainable and environmentally friendly farming. The Council addressed these issues in great detail again and again. For example, it reminded the federal government of its own goal to reduce excess nitrogen in agriculture. The aim is to limit nitrogen to 80 kg per hectare by 2020 and for 20% of all agricultural land to be cultivated ecologically.

I have the greatest expectations with regard to the development of tools that will be able to qualify sustainability and save it from the clutches of marketing and PR strategists.

Prof. Dr.-Ing. Eberhard Jochem, Fraunhofer Institute for Systems and Innovation Research ISI, Karlsruhe, Centre for Energy Policy and Economics (CEPE), ETH Zurich, Zürich¹⁵, Council member from 2001 to 2007

The Council doesn't have the status of a commission of inquiry like, for example, the commission for protection of the earth's atmosphere that greatly advanced climate protection in 1989. The question is therefore this: how can the Council express itself more clearly regarding the topics relevant over the next ten years? And what can the Federal Chancellery do and what does it want to do to lend the Council's recommendations more weight?

I was concerned with the issue of climate protection. Among other things, we on the Council discussed the role of coal in a sustainable energy policy. Because if the states continue to build coal-fired power stations, solutions will be needed for the carbon emissions produced. We engaged in talks with environmental organisations, and they already fully understood that we needed to capture carbon and possibly store it in the ground.

I believe it is the responsibility of the Council to make energy policy balanced. It didn't achieve this during my time on the Council. We have seen some changes only in recent years. Sustainability reporting is without a doubt one of the Council's particular successes. It raises awareness of sustainable development among politicians and in the Bundestag, within civil society and also in the business world. The Council is also committed to some very different topics, such as development policy.

Prof. Dr Margot Käßmann, Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Hanover, Council member from 2001 to 2004

Back then, I was already involved in issues such as wind turbines, biodiversity and sustainability within the World Council of Churches. Sustainability as the interplay of social, economic and environmental factors had become an issue for this council too following the Club of Rome's 1972 study entitled "The Limits to Growth". We talk in the church about "preserving creation" because we see endeavouring to protect creation absolutely as a Christian duty. But it was designed to be a body that would advise the federal government, and I initially didn't feel I had the competence needed for such a remit. I found the Council's role definition process quite challenging back then. I remember a very successful annual conference (2003) that gave us a sense that we really had found our role in terms of what giving advice and taking up topics could entail. Because in the beginning, the question was: what's this sustainability council all about? Isn't it little more than a guise for the government to say it has now politically addressed this topic too? There was a degree of scepticism for many in the beginning.

I found the mix very interesting – this interplay of various stakeholders from all sorts of different areas. In the early stages, there were some rather heated discussions, for example between the consumer organisations and environmental organisations on the one hand and representatives of the business world on the other. For my part, I didn't want to be part of a committee that would be used for the government to say "We have now addressed the issue of sustainability too and can get back down to day-to-day politics". On one occasion, we attempted to make this clear to Mr Schröder in person, although I didn't see evidence of any change following this. The Council did, however, play its part in seeing to it that the topic of sustainability wasn't simply dismissed as a "green" issue. This is something that had always bothered me: sustainability frequently being reduced to its purely environmental aspect. The Council made it clear that there was a lot more to sustainability than just that. Sustainability also has a cultural component and a social and economic dimension. These were the issues that were and still are important to me.

Prof. Dr Ute Klammer, Professor of Social Policy, University of Duisburg-Essen,
Council member from 2008 to 2010

Back then, we set up a working group within the Council that focused on education as a topic, and we did succeed in finishing one recommendation during that period – on education for sustainable development and on the sustainability of the education system in general. Many of the issues within this recommendation are now being discussed by policymakers, especially with regard to education chains or the sustainable long-term direction of education. Certain learning processes are becoming apparent in this respect and in some cases concrete progress has been made. It's obviously very difficult to now trace this back to our recommendation – that would be presumptuous of us. But I do think it brought together education policy topics that were being discussed separately and led to some changes in education policy.

Thomas Loster, Chairman of the Munich Re Foundation, Council member from 2006 to 2010

I was very curious and didn't really have any specific goals or expectations. I felt honoured and I was impressed by the Council's composition: 15 eminent figures from fields such as politics, business, trade unions and aid organisations. It was interesting to experience up close this diverse array of leading lights in their respective fields, these highly intelligent individuals, in the way they interacted and represented their standpoints. Volker Hauff, who was Chairman of the Council from 2001 to 2010, very much shaped the way in which the Council works. I was impressed by the way in which this thoroughbred politician guided the Council wisely and assertively. I learned a lot about how politics works. It's about respectfully reaching a compromise in order to achieve certain goals. The Council is caught in a conflict: it is affiliated to the Federal Chancellery and is funded by the federal government, but also critically reflects on the government's sustainable development policy. The different sides always had a critical appreciation of one another, to word it diplomatically. There is a great deal that's subject to political constraints.

I think the Sustainable Shopping Basket and the indicators used to measure sustainability and make it verifiable are great. We are all familiar with this now, but back then it was something quite new. I also appreciated how the Secretary General of the Council, Prof. Dr Bachmann, promoted art and culture. Together with social developments, both of these are important elements of sustainability. I believe it was also Mr Bachmann's idea to take the topic to young local politicians. I thought this was excellent, as you could really sense the momentum. The young people were enthusiastic and it served as a great catalyst within the local governments. It was also a very wise decision for the Council to go to the local governments and talk to the stakeholders there, as it made the Council more tangible.

What the Council achieved was ground-breaking at the time. It made important topics its own very early on. (...) A greater effort needs to be made to pick up on these topics, to make sustainability an issue for the whole of society.

My students aren't familiar with the Council. To them, it's a different world with a different language, and not their style. The Council's communication is very proper, very diplomatic, very political. It's what you would expect of such an institution. But if I want to reach out to new groups within society, I need to bring my language more into line with the people. You need to engage with the younger generations without lowering your standards. They represent the future.

Going by the formal criteria, the Council is very good and Germany has come a lot further with the Council than many other countries. But I'm not sure the Council is able to apply enough pressure within the federal government.

Kathrin Menges, Executive Vice President Human Resources and Chairwoman of the Sustainability Council of Henkel AG & Co. KGaA, Council member since 2013

Sustainability is a shared social responsibility. Businesses can and must make a key contribution to it. At the same time, the societal parameters – both in general terms and in the area of sustainability – have a major influence on businesses' activities. This being the case, my involvement in the Council gives me the opportunity to support the implementation and further development of sustainability in Germany. On the one hand, I can contribute the experience that we at Henkel have gathered in the course of business and our many years of sustainability work. And on the other hand, the open dialogue with the various Council members offers me new outlooks, which I can then apply to my work within the company and in our associations.

Among other things, good politics calls for the honest commitment of all of society's stakeholders. As such, my involvement in the Council is, to some extent, also a "civic duty", which I am happy to fulfil. What do I want to see the Council achieving in the future? The Council should continue to weigh in, provide momentum and use the diversity of the stakeholders within the Council to further promote a shared understanding of what really matters and what is expedient.

Prof. Dr Edda Müller, Executive Director of the Federation of German Consumer Organisations (vzbv), former Minister of Nature and the Environment in Schleswig-Holstein, Council member from 2001 to 2007

The Council is appointed by the federal government and is directly affiliated to the Chancellery, and it is also up to the government to choose its members. It is a microcosm of the various interests represented within society. And all the people on the Council have a track record – you know who they are and what their specific backgrounds are. Another question is how to communicate the message of sustainability. This is an undertaking which so far hasn't been remotely successful. When we first got going with the Council, there was a debate about the term being too clunky. But it's now absolutely ubiquitous and is used incredibly frequently. On the other hand, there definitely is a broad awareness within society of the need to think more long term and take into account not only the economic factors, but also the social and environmental ones. But if you compare this with concrete policies, it's evident that there are trains travelling at two different speeds: on the one hand, a fast train that's very much promoting a purely growth-based strategy that ignores the social and environmental issues and, on the other hand, a debate about values, about the need to be responsible for the future – this train is running alongside with the same people, but is barely reflected in concrete politics.

The Council doesn't have the influence on the world of politics that it should. It has next to no influence over the political decisions that need to be made here and now.

Prof. Dr Lucia Reisch, professor at Copenhagen Business School, visiting professor at Zeppelin University Friedrichshafen, Council member since 2010

I am very happy with the work achieved by this, a voluntary council, in recent years – the quality is right, it covers a wide array of topics and the Council is working with an increasingly broad coalition of society's stakeholders (municipalities, young people, businesses, media, etc.). It would obviously (always) be nice to have more influence over concrete policy decisions, a broader impact with the work done and a higher media profile.

Hans-Peter Reppnik, Chairman of the German Council for Sustainable Development (RNE) from 2010 to 2012, lawyer, former Parliamentary State Secretary within the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, Council member from 2010 to 2012

In a well-known quote, Konrad Adenauer described European unity as a dream of a few that became a hope for many and is now a necessity for all. The same goes for sustainability: it became a hope for many at the latest with the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio. It is now an issue which can't be ignored. On the one hand, there's the realisation that we are one world in which everyone has the same right to development. Incidentally, in a global and interconnected world, the problems that we fail to help

resolve in developing countries will make their way to us. And on the other hand, there is taking systematic action in this respect. We still have a long way to go here: for sustainability to triumph, we need to progress from formulating goals and achieving some success to comprehensive implementation of sustainability. We still have a tough job ahead of us! Germany is already contributing a great deal.

The Council and its recommendations have initiated a great many discussions, influenced policy decisions, permanently changed the way businesses act and triggered societal processes. The Council has made a lasting contribution to changing the way in which society behaves. But there's one topic that should be singled out – Germany has achieved a balanced budget for the first time in decades. This is a success on the part of sustainability that cannot be overstated.

Prof. Dr Josef Sayer, Director General of the German Catholic Bishops' Organisation for Development Cooperation MISEREOR, Council member from 2001 to 2007

It's wonderful that a council like this was ever established. All the credit belongs to Gerhard Schröder's government. The concept was very good too: Chancellery Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier himself served as the link to the government, discussed things with the Council and had permanent representation at its meetings. Angela Merkel then maintained this arrangement upon becoming Chancellor, attended the Council's annual conference and gave the Council and the topic of sustainability a much higher profile with her keynote speeches. A State Secretaries' Committee on Sustainable Development was created, involving all the ministries. I therefore had hopes of truly coherent policymaking. But that was apparently somewhat naive of me, as economic interests continued to dominate. The key thing for me was the Council's composition. For example, there was Ms Zahrnt of Friends of the Earth Germany (BUND), with whom Misereor had already published a study called "Sustainable Germany", so I knew I could work with her. Then there was Mr Flasbarth of the Nature and Biodiversity Conservation Union (NABU), Mr Weinzierl of the German League for Nature and Environment (DNR), Ms Müller of the Federation of German Consumer Organisations (vzbv), the forestry specialist Graf Hatzfeldt: we were "natural" allies, so to speak, within the Council, with scientific support from Mr Jochem. Compared to the economically driven wing within the Council, we were keen to focus on people and protecting the environment, and on keeping the economic dimension in check for the benefit of the environmental and social aspects. The good leadership of the chairmen Platzeck, Hauff and Töpfer was important here – it is thanks to them that real dialogue came about. Special praise also goes to the Council's central office under the auspices of Mr Bachmann, a highly committed expert who listens to society and sounds out the Council's options.

On the whole, I would have to say we failed to exploit all the opportunities offered to us by the Council. For example, we should have created a network of the organisations that we all came from to promote sustainability. But I also think there was a weakness within the federal government and in particular within the political parties: how much funding were they willing to free up for educating in sustainability awareness and sustainable consumer behaviour? The Council keeps the issue of sustainability on the agenda – I believe this is the major benefit.

Tobias Schlegl, TV presenter, Council member from 2004 to 2007

I had to work my way through a lot of documents to prepare for the Council meetings. The more you know, the better you can develop a standpoint and have your say. Knowledge about the things that need to be done – back in 2005, we on the Council were already being told that the target of 2 °C was no longer really viable! I found that shocking. I've been really interested in this topic ever since!

When I was appointed to the Council, I thought it would be an opportunity to take a peek behind the scenes. But first of all, I had to find out what the Council, which no one really knew of, was all about. I endeavoured to get young people interested in the topic with pilot projects, such as a dance performance on the topic of sustainability accompanied by Simon Rattle involving young people with a migrant background and living in the Berlin district of Neukölln. Or we looked for sustainability ambassadors at the local level.

The Council's concept isn't in-your-face. Instead, it tends to work in the background. The Council seeks close ties with the world of politics and is affiliated with politics in almost a friendly way, and tries to achieve things in this way, rather than shouting at the top of its voice like an NGO or the opposition – something which is often entirely understandable. We invited the responsible parties and spoke to them about the things we didn't like. I felt having access to people like Gerhard Schröder, Frank-Walter Steinmeier and Angela Merkel within a small circle could bear fruit, and it went some way to restoring my faith in politics. It was about being close to politics without being corruptible. Although you always have to wait and see what the politicians actually do further down the line and whether they base their arguments on the constraints of politics and their party friends. But I did believe the good intentions they expressed within this small circle.

I tried to raise public awareness for a lot of the issues after my time on the Council. But because everything takes such a long time, I wrote my book *Zu spät?* ("Too late?"): I travelled all over Germany to see what was being done. For example, I went to IKEA with Graf Hatzfeldt, a former Council member and Chairman of the Forest Stewardship Council in Germany. We tried to find out just how sustainable the wood used by IKEA was. This was just one of many topics. This led to a two-part documentary for the TV channel NDR called "Schlegl sucht die Wahrheit" (Schlegl seeks the truth), which in turn led to the creation of the N Klub, in which activists present their projects. This started in Hamburg with me as the host and has since spread to other cities such as Hanover, Frankfurt and Cologne. The N Klub seeks to forge political ties, but is primarily a platform for committed individuals and activists.

Max Schön, entrepreneur, President of the German Association for the Club of Rome, Council member from 2010 to 2016

I firmly believe it is possible to reconcile long-term thinking with taking action right now. I am convinced we need to bring together global thinking and local action. I also strongly believe we need to keep on thinking about the four dimensions of sustainability – economy, ecology, social affairs and culture – in an interlinked way, as parts of a whole. However, sustainability doesn't

come about of its own accord – it has to be shaped. We have to get down to work again and again every day. This calls for staying power. Thinking about everything we have destroyed within a generation can make you quite bitter. But I firmly believe that the parameters for sustainable action have considerably improved in recent years thanks to the work of the Council and above all thanks to the commitment of many, many people around the world. There is now a good chance that many people's living conditions will take a turn for the better. So we need to stick at it!

Dr Imme Scholz, Deputy Director of the German Development Institute (DIE), Council member since 2013

What I like is the opportunity to establish closer ties between Germany's sustainable development policy and international endeavours in the area of sustainable development through being involved in the Council. We have learned a great deal about sustainable development policy in Germany – in businesses, in politics, at the federal government level, in the federal states and municipalities, and in many citizens' initiatives. The Council should intensify its efforts to consolidate all this experience, evaluate it and share it, including with other countries. Moreover, sustainable development policy in Germany still needs to be overseen critically – the Council will still be needed to perform this role in the future. The Council could expand its international contacts and use them to bring interesting experience and successes elsewhere to people's attention in Germany, because we too can learn from others.

Prof. Dr Wolfgang Schuster, Chairman of the Executive Board of the foundation Deutsche Telekom Stiftung, former Mayor of Schwäbisch-Gmünd, former Mayor of Stuttgart, Council member since 2012

For me, social justice is the ethical bedrock: acting fairly in the interests of our children and grandchildren, and also people in other countries and on other continents, so that they, too, can enjoy life and decision opportunities like those we already enjoy today. This is in keeping with the "golden rule" found in all cultural circles, namely that we should always take other people's needs into account in everything we do – do as you would be done by. I therefore hope that, with our work on the Council, we are able to contribute to generational justice and, accordingly, to the protection of natural resources, social cohesion and ever greater global responsibility.

Dr Eric Schweitzer, member of the Board of Directors of the ALBA Group, President of the Berlin Chamber of Commerce and Industry, President of the Association of German Chambers of Commerce and Industry (DIHK), Council member from 2010 to 2013

Successful cooperation only comes about when you engage in open dialogue, share your expertise, enter into value added partnerships and foster innovation – both on a small and large scale, and these days invariably across borders too. It was therefore especially important to me as a Council member to strengthen dialogue between the policymakers, business and the scientific community.

For instance, I consider the Werkstatt N (Workshop N) certification mark, which recognises sustainable ideas and initiatives within society, to be a pioneering example. Another important building block is the topic of standards – only with established standards can commitment to sustainability be made less arbitrary.

Sustainability needs to be transparent and comparable so that, as the word implies, it can have a sustainable impact. In this respect, I consider the German Sustainability Code to be one of the Council's most important milestones. It gives companies a reliable and, above all, voluntary framework with which to evaluate, expand and credibly communicate their activities. The Council can help further promote the green economy in Germany by making clear recommendations regarding the national Sustainable Development Strategy – and can highlight paths that are perhaps not obvious from within the business or politics bubble. Incidentally, this is and always has been one of the Council's greatest strengths.

I think the mere fact that the federal government has appointed a council that focuses on the issues of sustainable development and develops strategies and recommendations for the policymakers is a major success. Sustainability isn't just firmly embedded in my head, but also in the business sector, within the population and more than ever before in the field of politics too. This is not least thanks to the work of the Council, which is fulfilling its duties as an advisor and a driving force at many levels. Thanks to my family background and my work within the ALBA Group, you could say the circular economy is in my DNA. And I was able to contribute this during my time on the Council with, for example, the 2011 RNE publication "Wie Deutschland zum Rohstoffland wird" (How Germany is becoming a raw materials country), which gave the federal government a road map for achieving a 100% circular economy. The recommendations made in the study are as topical now as they were back then.

Marlehn Thieme, Chairwoman of the German Council for Sustainable Development (RNE) since 2013, member of the Council of Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD), Chairwoman of the Supervisory Board of KD-Bank (church bank) and member of the Supervisory Board of the Protestant Association for Media Communication (GEP) since 2015, Council member since 2004

Not all the wishes and objectives have been achieved in the 15 years of the Council's existence. But we have played our part in establishing understanding, methods and thought processes that have led to far more high-profile and more transparent dialogue concerning the conflicting goals. The related broader discussion incorporating experts from within civil society has resulted in greater acceptance of the more complex holistic approach within politics, the business world, the scientific community, culture and the media. The need to take action regarding the energy transition, climate change and immigration is now more widely recognised than ever before. This makes political leadership and resolving conflicting goals easier, with justification increasingly being needed for any lack of political action.

The strategy adopted of highlighting target-oriented sustainability solutions and constructive paths for concrete interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral topics is facilitating greater acceptance of the

sustainability principle. In my opinion, the participatory approach in the fields of activity relevant to society, from the business to the scientific community, from civil society to the media, can be developed more strongly as a model for other areas of government and society via the regional networks for sustainable development (RENN). Clear management can further intensify the cooperation with the ministries to further boost transparency, trust and intensity. The international networking in relation to Agenda 2030 needs to be rapidly expanded in order to comply with Germany's obligations. The sustainability principle needs to be strengthened and made more binding by being enshrined in the constitution.

Holger Tschense, Mayor of Leipzig, Council member from 2003 to 2006

In the early 2000s, we were still very much in the beginning stages of a local sustainable development policy, and the Council's influence really triggered a leap forward in Leipzig too. On the one hand, I see sustainable development policy and sustainable approaches becoming everyday practice in, for example, corporate concepts and urban development plans. On the other hand, I believe that at the local level in particular, "Agenda 21 jobs", in other words special coordination positions within administration, were abolished, because it was assumed sustainability didn't need special "minders" any more, with the environmental or urban planning agencies handling things instead. I still think the Council's existence and the work it does are important, up to date and motivational and enriching for anyone who is interested. There is perhaps still scope for improvement in the area of the Council's visibility.

Olaf Tschimpke, Deputy Chairman of the German Council for Sustainable Development (RNE) since 2013, President of the Nature and Biodiversity Conservation Union (NABU), Council member since 2010

If there's a vision of how to ensure we survive on this planet and how to give the generations to come a future too, it would have to be the principle of sustainability. A sustainable business style and lifestyle rest on accepting that there are limits to the strain that the earth's ecosystems can take. This is an area in which the Council can and must play an important part as an advisor and an initiator of change in politics, business and society.

There has undoubtedly been a significant increase in the importance of sustainable development policy, as signalled in particular by the UN's adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals, the sharpening of the national Sustainable Development Strategy and the energy transition. But in spite of the progress made in terms of findings, the deficits in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Strategy are actually far too big and the pace is far too slow, considering the dimensions of the challenge.

The Council should be given a greater influence over the policymakers, to be able to accelerate sustainability as a cross-sectoral responsibility of the government's policies.

Christiane Underberg, co-owner of Underberg KG, Council member from 2007 to 2008

At the Council's inaugural meeting, I made it clear that the word "sustainability" was difficult for the general public to get its head around – it's impossible for people to associate it with anything either emotionally or in concrete terms. Which is why I argued that we had to make the future "enkelfähig", in other words shape it in the interests of our grandchildren! This is a term that a lot of people are using now. It's amazing to see what you can make happen. And this should give young people hope.

The Sustainability Code is certainly a major achievement. I like the fact that it's not too narrow in its structure, and can also and in particular be applied by small and medium-sized enterprises. The Council showcases pioneering projects at its events in Berlin. This has a big impact, but there is still not enough influence being had on the majority of society. There needs to be more interdisciplinary cooperation in schools in particular – we need to make it clear that everything is interrelated!

Prof. Dr Fritz Vahrenholt, former Senator for the Environment of the Free and Hanseatic City of Hamburg, CEO of REpower Systems AG, Council member from 2001 to 2007

For me it was important that the right balance was being struck between economic development, environmental protection and social justice in difficult times too. Sustainable development policy has increasingly been reduced to narrow environmental targets. This is conducive to ecologism, i.e. the attempt to turn ecology into a world view. You can see this, for example, in supposed climate protection, nature protection and species protection falling victim to renewable energies (biogas, wind power in the forest), while the Council says nothing. Yes, you go round in circles, you stick with your own kind and voices that are critical of the mainstream don't stand a chance.

Prof. Dr Hubert Weiger, Chairman of Friends of the Earth Germany (BUND), Council member since 2013

I value the fundamental debates within the Council that are enthusiastic and solution- and policy-oriented, in which the various standpoints within society come together: environmental and development policy, the scientific community, business and the church, trade unions and local politics. Debates encompassing all the groups within society are possible here, and these are precisely what we need in order to achieve fundamental change – something we need to tackle in the next few years in the industrialised countries in particular. What I would like is for the Council to increasingly address these issues – socio-ecological transformation, sufficiency, liveable conditions around the world – and incorporate them into the sociopolitical discourse. What we need in order to achieve this is, among other things, an ambitious and binding sustainability strategy and the effective implementation of global goals. In its 15 years, the Council has played a large part in shaping the debate regarding sustainable development within our society thanks to its nuanced statements concerning key issues in the areas of climate protection and resource policy, land and soil, universities and science.

Hubert Weinzierl, President of the German League for Nature and Environment (DNR) until 2012, since then Honorary President, Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the German Federal Environmental Foundation (DBU), Council member from 2001 to 2013

The idea was for the concept of sustainability to be given a greater role in policymaking through the Council. This has been a success, because all new laws are now examined from the perspective of sustainability. This is thanks to the progress reports on the German Sustainable Development Strategy, in which the Council was heavily involved. All the same, there is still a great deal to do. I am still meeting politicians at the national and federal state levels who are not familiar with the Sustainable Development Strategy or the Council.

Prof. Dr Harald Welzer, Honorary Professor of Transformation Design and Communication at Europa-Universität Flensburg, permanent Guest Professor of Social Psychology at the University of St. Gallen, Director of the FUTURZWEI Foundation, co-opted Council member from 2015 to 2017

If modern-day societies wish to avoid coming under intense pressure due to environmental and climate change, they need to change themselves. But a transformation of this kind is not an end in itself: it is first and foremost necessary in order to preserve democracy, liberty and the rule of law. Rather than being technical in nature, a sustainability transformation is therefore above all a sociopolitical task covering everything from lifestyles and economic forms to immigration and energy policy. The Council stands out in that it doesn't examine the individual problems of non-sustainability narrowly from a technical and administrative perspective, but rather is always willing to develop a more comprehensive perspective. This is also where I believe there is the greatest potential for future sustainable development policy: defining and promoting sustainability as a sociopolitical topic between grass-roots activities on the one hand and expertocracy on the other. In view of this, I find being involved in the Council very rewarding.

Prof. Dr Angelika Zahrt, Chairwoman of Friends of the Earth Germany (BUND) until 2007, since then Honorary Chairwoman, Council member from 2001 to 2013

Economy, ecology and social affairs definitely do not automatically fit together harmoniously to create a win-win-win situation. Rather, there is an environmental space, which is defined by the earth's ecological capacity. The economy and social affairs can then develop within this environmental space. This is a key issue for me, because sustainability otherwise becomes a catchword that the interested parties negotiate over – but you can't negotiate when it comes to the climate.

The Council had a very good line-up at the beginning, with Volker Hauff as its Chairman, who understood the history of sustainability and had a great deal of political experience, and also individuals such as Klaus Töpfer and Hubert Weinzierl. In addition, it was fortunate in retrospect that the Council was first convened only relatively shortly before the 2002 UN conference in Johannesburg. This put us under some time pressure, because the federal government was required

to present its Sustainable Development Strategy. As a result, a lot of what we recommended was indeed adopted. For example, it was important to us that the strategy contain not only long-term, but also medium-term goals.

We also wanted these goals to be quantifiable and for there to be appropriate indicators in place. There was also to be policy continuation with public involvement every two years and neutral monitoring of target compliance. This fell within the remit of the Federal Statistical Office. We also proposed that the strategy be embedded within the Federal Chancellery and that there be a “green cabinet” – a committee of the state secretaries in order to move away from ministerial silo thinking. After all, sustainable development policy is about the long term and about interaction across topics and ministries. I therefore got heavily involved within the Council in the sustainability action days and in competitions such as Werkstatt N (Workshop N) that involved local groups and various sections of civil society.

These initiatives helped bring these groups together in a network and forged stronger links between the national Sustainable Development Strategy and the activities at the local level. The awarding of competition prizes likewise gave innovative projects and initiatives a boost because it sent out the message that these projects were so important that they merited recognition at the national level.

However, we were unable to reach a consensus on statements concerning environmental tax reform or demographic change – which I still think is regrettable. There were other important topics such as transport and the relationship between sustainability and economic growth that we didn’t tackle. It was nonetheless overall a very good and productive time. The Council set targets with its positions, such as the 30-hectare land use target, the Organic Farming Gold Standard and Germany as a raw materials country with 100 per cent recycling.

Consumption habits and lifestyles were also made high-profile sustainability issues with the Sustainable Shopping Basket. The Council also helped advance climate protection in public buildings and sustainable public procurement. These achievements were the joint effort of all the Council members, with key support from the members of staff in the Council’s office.

The Council has certainly left its mark on political and societal debate. If this hadn’t been the case, I wouldn’t have stayed on the Council for 12 years. It’s not possible to say precisely what impact the Council has had on day-to-day politics, but it has marked out positions of reference that are cited time and again. One of the Council’s projects, the German Sustainability Code for businesses, is now firmly established. Another of the Council’s responsibilities is outward communication. The Council’s office was highly creative here, developing innovative dialogue formats such as the Challenger Reports of external international experts and the conference of the 100 youngest politicians at the local level. As such, the Council has already contributed greatly to establishing sustainability in the public arena and in the political landscape. One of the positive indicators of this is that the Council continues to exist without a scratch and continues to pursue the same goals – in spite of the various changes in government.

The to-do perspective.

Günther Bachmann, Secretary General of the German Council for Sustainable Development (RNE) since 2001, head of the jury of the German Sustainability Award, member of various scientific and political committees, honorary professor at the Leuphana University of Lüneburg

Mandate

- The Council advises the federal government on all issues relating to sustainable development policy. It makes recommendations, gives its opinion of political developments and makes suggestions.
- It does not block or initiate any legislation and it does not have any right of veto. In some instances, however, its input has had a direct impact on the legislative process, such as recently with Germany's implementation of the EU Directive on corporate reporting, or on the government's programme measures, such as those for the protection of resources and for public procurement.
- The Council's input has the greatest direct impact on the development and drafting of the federal government's Sustainable Development Strategy. This is the Council's core "line of business", so to speak.
- The Council's advisory role is somewhat different to that of Germany's conventional, tried-and-tested scientific committees of experts. Aside from giving advice the Council independently conducts its own projects and organizes public debate and political awareness of the topic of sustainability.

Modality

- There has never been a lack of critical voices within the Council. The Council members didn't all come to the table with consensus in mind. Fifteen years of Council work mean 15 years of listening and learning that the reality is made up of real alternatives. There are always alternatives. Consensus is arrived at by handling conflicts with respect, rarely and only indirectly by means of legal proceedings and never on appeal.
- The transformation levers are often viral, unusual, asymmetric and discursive. The Council bases the proposals it makes and the practical projects it offers on people's strengths and is familiar with their weaknesses. Sustainable development policy works when processes are initiated that develop their own dynamic or when people impart their different outlooks on the shared public sphere to one another.
- The Council members' narratives highlight some very different impact patterns, or their self-appraisals at least attest to different priorities. In Peer Reviews, international experts attributed a great deal of importance to the Council in 2009 and 2013 (next Peer Review is scheduled for 2018). However, these ratings cannot be considered independent due to the Council's facilitator roles within the review process. The federal government considers the Council to be an important institution within the trio of institutions that focus on sustainability content and processes (State Secretaries' Committee, Parliamentary Advisory Council, German Council for Sustainable Development). This, too, can only convince

outsiders to a certain degree because the federal government is the Council's originator and user.

- The most robust answer to the question regarding the Council's relevance is the appointment of new Council members every three years. Without credibility and relevance for the Council, it would not be possible to persuade high-ranking representatives of public politics to get involved.

Success

The success and impact of the Council can be evaluated in the context of the political and societal "feedback", its agenda setting clout and the appeal of its communication with the stakeholders. The Council's output can be evaluated on the basis of this impact. It's not the number of published recommendations, opinions and studies that matters, but the feedback from the world of politics and from society that these have triggered. Without claiming to be exhaustive, the following points are specifically emphasized:

- The Council was instrumental in establishing quantified and monitored sustainable development goals in Germany (as of 2002) and in backing the new governance features for "management by objectives", such as the policy cycle of monitoring and relaunching the strategy.
- Shaping the institutional architecture of sustainable development in Germany by leading cutting-edge projects and establishing high-quality informational newsletters and communication tools.
- Five members and the Secretary General served as the backbone of the Ethics Commission for a Safe Energy Supply that prepared the government's decision on phasing out nuclear energy and introducing the energy transition in 2011.
- The RNE office as the facilitator of the internal peer reviews in 2009, 2013 and 2018; establishing the case for that kind of ambitious review as part of the exercise of monitoring verification and reflecting the implementation of sustainable development goals.
- The Council encouraged ambitious moves as regards long underestimated agendas such as sustainable consumption patterns (by leading projects such as the Sustainable Shopping Basket).
- The Council established and backed major multi-stakeholder partnerships, in particular the German Sustainability Award and Chemistry3.
- The Council provides widely recognised expertise to the scientific community and as an advisor to the government regarding experimental administrative projects.
- The Council's impact on vertically integrating the notion of sustainability is highly regarded, especially thanks to the RNE initiatives such as the mayors' dialogue on sustainable cities, the establishment of regional hubs for sustainable strategies, the grass-roots projects on sustainability and the grass-roots action week (organised by the Council in Germany and by ministries in other European states).
- An advocate and driver of sustainable public procurement, with a clear shift in practice within federal government and changed legal language.

- The Council spearheads the German Sustainability Code. Following ambitious, ongoing stakeholder consultation, the Code has been established as a transparency tool for enterprises reporting on their non-financial performance. The Council manages the public database, the establishment of a coaching system and a strategy to internationalise implementation of the Code. The Code is in line with the new legal requirements for enterprises (as of 2017). Acceptance of the German Sustainability Code indirectly contributed to the EU's CSR Directive being passed and to its adoption into German law.
- The Council leads debates on key issues of Germany's sustainable development policies such as land consumption, organic farming, the circular economy, climate and energy policies.

Activities that failed

- The RNE failed to pass a recommendation that would have paved the way for the enforcement and completion of the German environmental taxation scheme.
- There is still an ongoing battle with departmental silo interests. Misuse of the sustainable development political cycle for turf battles or seeing it as preaching to the converted or hailing special-interest constituencies instead of a cross-cutting leverage point.
- The RNE did not find a leverage point for a sustainable mobility strategy.
- No legal definition of sustainable development; sustainable development is not a constitutional right or obligation.