

How are things, Germany?

On different perspectives and the role of the German Council for Sustainable Development (RNE)

by Günther Bachmann, Secretary-General of the German Council for Sustainable Development



If we consider the status quo in Germany, what still remains to be done currently outweighs what has already been achieved – our carbon footprint does not live up to the climate goals, the hopes of making progress with regard to glyphosate have been dashed, insects are dying out, the country is littered with plastic waste, and economic growth and overconsumption can hardly lift our spirits. Much of the environmental and social costs aren't even being accounted for in any balance sheet. By not paying for what really matters, we are impoverishing ourselves despite our growth. Of the 63 indicators that Germany uses to officially gauge its sustainability, close to half of them demonstrate serious shortcomings. Public sentiment is dominated by the diesel syndrome, the huge increase in rents and property prices, the spiralling out of control of the top salaries, and nursing shortages. People vent their dissatisfaction through the topic of migration even though it is not a serious cause of this.

But are some things changing for the good too? Is there anything positive at all to report? Yes, and this is most clearly demonstrated by taking a look at Germany “from the outside”. This perspective is often more important and more substantial than we in Germany believe or know to be true. This external view certainly does not overlook the home-grown problems. Nor do they shrink simply because the situation is worse elsewhere. The peer review of the German Sustainable Development Strategy is a good example here. It takes up questions from other countries, such as those concerning the energy system transition or examples of sustainable urban development, the organics boom, the extent of citizens' social responsibility and the sustainability management of many companies.

Sooner or later, these questions zero in on the German Sustainable Development Strategy, its institutions and mechanisms, and the participation of interested groups. How can such a

strategy – one which is rather dry and also a little expertocratic – be kept going in the long run? How can it present a long-term view (goals up to 2030) in the face of the otherwise very dominant trend of rapidity and immediacy? After all, the Sustainable Development Strategy has been one of the top priorities of successive German Federal Governments since 2002. Its development is continued in each new electoral term, the government puts together packages of measures, there are statistical government reports and political debates in the Bundestag and the federal government's draft laws are examined regarding their sustainability.

Germany was a driving force behind the United Nations' sustainable development agenda and the Paris Agreement, both of which were adopted multilaterally in 2015. It is now ambitiously implementing the universal Sustainable Development Goals (in other words, applicable equally to the global south and the industrial north) at the national level. The topic is addressed within civil society by foundations, NGOs and other associations. The Federation of German Industries (BDI) runs sustainable development forums. Cities are experimenting with new and unusual sustainability solutions. And this is all just the vanguard of a movement that proves that sustainability is alive and kicking because it brings a critical view of the here and now together with a vision of a bright future.

At its core, this is shaped by the institutional architecture of sustainable development policy, consisting of three components. The government organises its internal responsibilities under the auspices of the Federal Chancellery. The parliament has its own advisory council that monitors the Sustainable Development Strategy. And thirdly, the German Council for Sustainable Development (RNE) is responsible for advising the Federal Chancellery and for running its own projects.

This has not always been the case. For a long time, Germany too failed on this front due to a lack of governance and was unable to produce a meaningful Sustainable Development Strategy. The architecture is still modified occasionally, and this will continue to be urgently required for as long as the key target indicators of transformation remain negative. Even with all the successes outlined, we cannot afford to delude ourselves: even in Germany, sustainability remains a peripheral issue which is all too readily intentionally obscured or totally overlooked within the current debates. Drawing on experience and examples from abroad is therefore prudent.

What other countries do better

Successful examples of the widespread and effective embedding of the concept of sustainable development (Finland), the role of a strategic "green" infrastructure (South Korea, Bhutan), the supervision by national audit bodies (Canada,

Sudan, Cameroon) and the federal use of multi-level government structures (Austria, Mexico) are of particular interest to Germany. How you go about using any reports (on national sustainable development) made to the United Nations as a means of fuelling national policymaking (Togo, Spain) can also serve as an example. Examples of how sustainability aspects can be enshrined in constitutions (Wales, Finland, Bhutan, New Zealand) can likewise be of interest. There are certainly also clear instances of the paralysing effect of the term “sustainability” being reduced to nothing more than a meaningless label.

The German Council for Sustainable Development (RNE)

The German Council for Sustainable Development serves as a driver of sustainability politics in Germany. Its members are newly appointed or confirmed by the Federal Chancellor every three years, meaning some 50 public figures have been Council members since 2001. The Council’s Secretary-General is chosen by the Federal Chancellery. The Council is a multi-stakeholder body, as demonstrated not least by the appointment of individuals from all areas of society and even more so by how it intervenes. On the one hand, the Council produces concrete recommendations for the Chair of the State Secretaries’ Committee. These relate to the national goals and indicators and their role in relation to measures with effects in Germany, with the help of German development

assistance and by Germany via solutions being developed which may be helpful elsewhere around the world. Alongside orientation with the 2030 Agenda, this triple approach of “in, with and by” is one of the key new additions to the current Sustainable Development Strategy. At the Federal Government’s request, the Council also comments on the internal instruments of the Federal Chancellery and the federal ministries.

On the other hand, the Council has steadily expanded its sphere of activity over the years and doesn’t merely produce papers. Both the parliament and the government have been convinced that it makes sense to adopt new approaches and forms of activity that focus on work processes which each involve a large number of stakeholders. For example, the Sustainability Culture Fund project puts us in a position to fund third-party non-profit projects. No less than 13 projects focus on developing a sustainable food culture by reducing food waste and using food which is produced responsibly more sparingly and with greater enjoyment. We promote the forging of links among regional sustainable development stakeholders through four Regional Hubs for Sustainability Strategies (RENN). This encourages action to be taken at the local level and affords the many initiatives greater significance and self-efficacy. Other projects encourage and test the development of positive visions of the future (after all, we have more than enough

dystopian visions) and get German cultural policy and many sociocultural centres involved in the area of sustainability. The Sustainability Code is a tool we developed together with interested stakeholders from the finance sector, industry and non-governmental initiatives.

Many companies now use the Code to publicly and transparently report on their sustainability activities. It is also available to interested parties from outside of Germany. Some key higher education institutions have also adapted the Code to their specific needs, with the



Code fuelling the debate regarding exactly how science, sustainability and responsibility go together in our society. Together with the Sustainable Finance Cluster and Deutsche Börse AG, the Council recently created the Hub for Sustainable Finance (H4SF) as a multi-stakeholder initiative which has tasked itself with getting involved in European sustainability regulation of the financial markets and financial policy. The annual National German Sustainability Award, which is presented in the categories of companies, cities, building, research and start-ups, shows it is possible to celebrate positive and

good news concerning sustainability too. But there is more to it than that – the competition encourages all the entrants to become more sustainable and demonstrates how sustainability can become the driving force behind business or municipal success. The Council also organises regular dialogues for exchange among the mayors of German cities that have made sustainability a top issue.

Nevertheless, involvement in stakeholder processes is not a master key – it calls for a high degree of leadership responsibility, the establishment of trust and good judgement of your own

THIS IS THE GERMAN COUNCIL FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT (RNE)

The German Council for Sustainable Development (RNE) has been shaping the topic featured in its name since it was established by the German federal government in 2001. From the beginning, the Council was involved in formulating Germany's first National Sustainable Development Strategy. This has served as a yardstick ever since for how Germany can jointly advance social, environmental and economic issues. It is now called the German Sustainable Development Strategy and includes the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations. Both of these form the fundamental framework of the Council's work.

The Council is an advisory body to the German Federal Government. It develops contributions to ambitiously implementing the German Sustainable

Development Strategy and promotes dialogue on the topic within society through its own projects and events. This encompasses recommendations regarding Germany's sustainable development policy, the Sustainability Code directed at companies, the founding of the Hub for Sustainable Finance, dialogue with all the stakeholders within society, recognising ideas within civil society and promoting new projects that highlight new ways in which society can be made more sustainable.

The Council, which is appointed anew every three years, consists of 15 public figures from the fields of business, nature conservation, development cooperation and churches. When a team of international experts subjected Germany's achievements in the area of sustainability to a peer review in 2018,

they wrote: "With its high convening power, capacity for foresight, and overall competence, the Council has set a high standard for similar organisations worldwide."

For further information on the Council, its activities and its projects, please see: www.sustainabilitycouncil.de

What has the German Council for Sustainable Development achieved as viewed by its members? What place does sustainability occupy in society, politics and the business sector? Current and former Council members take a look back and talk about their motivation, expectations and views. The English summary of the publication "15 Jahre RNE" (15 Years of the RNE) is available at www.sustainabilitycouncil.de

effectiveness. And most importantly of all, these processes must support representative democracy and the political mandate rather than seeking to circumvent them. A round table and a few votes are not enough.

Taking opposition seriously

A recent letter predicted once again that the Council was doomed to failure because there was no such thing as anthropogenic climate change and we were therefore dwelling on a phantom problem. And a journalist declared that sustainability was an empty buzzword and that all that was needed was “sensible” policies. They posited that grouping such policies under the banner of

“sustainability” was superfluous and was merely the result of parasitic advisory coteries.

Opposition must be taken seriously, no matter how invidious or erroneous it might initially appear. It goes without saying that it is precisely the success of discrete legitimate interests that results in goal conflicts: between renewable energies and nature conservation, between marking out land for new housing and greenfield conservation, between food and consumption, between short-term and long-term interests, between the many facets of possessing a lot and living well, cheap and affordable, and savings and investments. Goal conflicts of this kind need to be resolved in the interests of the common good and the fair distri-

SEEING MULTILATERAL RELATIONS THROUGH THE EYES OF THE 2030 AGENDA – AN EXAMPLE TAKEN FROM THE RNE’S ADVISORY ACTIVITIES

Since the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was adopted, the Council has repeatedly said that the agenda’s transformational and comprehensive aspirations make it necessary to generally strengthen and restructure bilateral and multilateral cooperation. The Council therefore campaigned during Germany’s G20 presidency in 2017 for a comprehensive G20 partnership with Africa based on the values enshrined in the 2030 Agenda and the African Union’s 2063 Agenda and to be drafted by all the partners.

The Council has identified trade, agriculture, energy, infrastructure and

health care as focal areas for implementation of the 2030 Agenda on the African continent. In all of these areas, parameters need to be established and measures developed that will promote sustainability on the basis of the local circumstances while also achieving sustainability at the global level.

The Council’s advisory activities are founded on the maxim of considering how implementation of the 2030 Agenda can be promoted at all political levels and in all political relations without making the traditional distinction between national and international politics.

The recommendation of the German Council for Sustainable Development “For a comprehensive G20 partnership with Africa to implement the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” is available on our website at

**[www.sustainabilitycouncil.de/
medialibrary](http://www.sustainabilitycouncil.de/medialibrary)**

bution of responsibilities across the generations, including from a global perspective. It is now recognised within the fields of science and politics beyond all possible doubt that the atmosphere is reacting to having greenhouse gases continuously dumped in it.

New certainties

Opposition is important for the purposes of self-reflection. Germany is changing and the change process is greater and more fundamental than is often perceived. But it is at least felt by many people. Among other things, this is highlighted by the way in which people cling to certainties and how things were “better in the past”. This explains why, while the Berlin Wall has now been gone for longer than it stood, it continues to be a point of reference for many people which is more important than the prosperity improvements resulting from greater European integration, reformed citizenship laws, the 2011 nuclear phase-out, global climate targets and most

recently the 2030 Agenda and the UN’s 17 Sustainable Development Goals.

The greater the change, the more heavily this weighs. And the change certainly is great: the party system is no longer stable, geopolitics are more impenetrable than ever, and in the EU, reaching agreement regarding difficult issues is no longer simply a question of time and money, but of whether agreement is wanted. Digital technology is already changing our lives and everything suggests that this change will only increase. In addition, there are the imponderables of climate change and many people’s life situations that lead to despair and flight.

New certainties arise: complexity is not bad per se. The nuclear phase-out is not a lifeline for coal-fired power stations. If you can bring creativity, innovation and commitment together, you can generate more of all three. Sustainability gives rise to optimism. Positive visions of the future are not naive paintings, but the lifeblood of an open society. Sustainability is more than just a word.



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www.sustainabilitycouncil.de