

From the New York Earth Summit to voluntary fire departments

Ingo Arzt, Journalist



The world has had global Sustainable Development Goals since 2015. But what do these noble aspirations really mean in the field – in towns, cities and communities? This is the issue addressed by the Regional Hubs for Sustainability Strategies (RENN).

Tourism is rapidly changing. If you believe the experts, there are megatrends that are turning everything on its head: people want something individual and emotional, a sense of uniqueness. And then there's digitalisation, in which everything is rated, liked and compared.

But the global megatrend is actually something else much more fundamental – climate change as a global threat to the world as we know it. Floods and torrential downpours are getting worse and water shortages are exacerbating conflicts and wars, which are causing people to flee or be driven out in many places, in Africa for instance, resulting in ever greater migration pressure in Europe.

This was the argument posited by Max Schön to approximately 300 hoteliers, restaurateurs, tourism experts and local politicians attending a symposium on sustainable tourism held in Lübeck in February 2018. Schön, a businessman,

former President of the German Association for the Club of Rome and former member of the German Council for Sustainable Development (RNE), is an expert in the field of reconciling ecology and economics.

“Closed locks when there is flooding in Rotterdam and flooded railway lines illustrate the fragility of logistics and mobility when climatic events occur, which also impacts on tourism,” said Schön. He also highlighted a way out, namely the United Nations 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs for short) included in this. He argued that they would facilitate Growth 2.0 – a rising gross domestic product coupled with falling carbon emissions. This concept fundamentally changes tourism too. “Sustainability generates demand and is a marketing tool these days. This proves that something has changed within society,” said one of the symposium experts in summary.

RENN.north: new networks for the 2030 Agenda

The symposium is an example of how awareness of the 2030 Agenda can successfully be raised through new networks. It was organised by Tourism Cluster Schleswig-Holstein together with the RENN.north hub. RENN is an acronym that stands for Regional Hubs for Sustainability Strategies in German. Their purpose is to raise awareness of the global Sustainable Development Goals and the German Sustainable Development Strategy in particular within the parts of society that have so far remained on the periphery of this topic and in doing so help the goals be implemented. The RENN also bring people together who are making a commitment to sustainability. There are four hubs, each covering different parts of Germany: south, north, central and west.

In Lübeck, Schön's presentation on the SDGs served as the opener, after which the participants turned their attention to practical issues such as how to go about certifying hotels or even entire regions that operate sustainably. "The symposium was a great opportunity to familiarise the tourism industry with the 2030 Agenda. Some of the delegates hadn't even heard of the SDGs before," says Iacob-Lucian Mărginean, who manages the network of Germany's five northerly federal states from the office of the Hamburg State Association of the German Association for the Protection of Forests and Woodlands (SDW).

Rather than reinventing sustainability, what characterises the four hubs is how they bring initiatives together and strengthen them by means of partnerships across state borders and political levels. Among others, they work jointly with the RNE on projects to this end, such as the German Sustainability Action Days and the Project Sustainability award.

"Our idea was to give sustainability widespread exposure. We in Berlin can't keep track of everything that's already been achieved in Germany," says Sabine Gerhardt, who built up the network from the RNE office and now coordinates it centrally. "The RENN hubs also all operate differently because there are different prerequisites in each region," she says. As such, each RENN hub has its own focal areas. RENN.north, for example, focuses in particular on sustainable tourism and sustainable neighbourhood management.

RENN.central: small towns and a global metropolis

Meanwhile, RENN.central faces other challenges. This hub comprises five federal states in central and eastern Germany with a stark urban-rural divide. "On the one hand, we have Berlin with its hip city-based topics and on the other, there is the question as to why a voluntary fire department or the mayor of a small town in Thuringia or Saxony would be interested in sustainability," says Josef Ahlke, who manages RENN.central from an office within the Future-Proof Thuringia association in Erfurt.

Ahlke has been working as a local Agenda 21 coordinator in the “socio-ecological arena”, as he puts it, since 1998. He remembers the Agenda 21 era well. Adopted at the United Nations Earth Summit in Rio in 1992, this was the forerunner of the global Sustainable Development Goals. Ahlke says that although many of the projects and processes initiated back then ultimately petered out, this prior work is proving to be highly valuable today. “Back then, we had to develop pretty much everything from scratch and be very hands-on. But these days, sustainability is handled a lot more professionally at the local level

by local authorities, associations and initiatives,” says Ahlke. It is now also easier to find partners in the business world that are seriously addressing the issue of sustainability, he says. RENN.central includes a number of organisations that came about on the back of the Agenda 21 movement. The four RENN hubs were able to get down to work properly in 2017 – but they first had to establish some sort of structure. According to Ahlke, the first RENN.central meetings revolved around getting to know the existing organisations. The network therefore invited a lot of big names within the sustainability scene to its first

THESE ARE THE RENN HUBS

Many people and organisations in Germany are working towards fundamentally changing the country in order to leave an intact ecological, social and economic society for the generations to come. To disseminate these activities, forge links between and promote the many projects and ideas both large and small, there are four Regional Hubs for Sustainability Strategies (RENN) – North, South, West and Central. The hubs are based within organisations which have a history of working on the topic of sustainable development.

The aims of the RENN hubs are based on the 2030 Agenda and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which also

form the basis of the German Sustainable Development Strategy. The hubs communicate the details of these goals at events, usually cooperating with other organisations. The topics addressed include education for sustainable development, environmental protection, nutrition, consumption, mobility, free time, clothing, tourism, housing and energy consumption, to name but a few. The RENN hubs help coordinate the sustainable development strategies of municipal authorities, the federal states and the German Government.

At the recommendation of the German Council for Sustainable Development (RNE), the Federal Government is

financing the RENN hubs with a total of 17 million euros up to 2022. The hubs began their work in December 2016. The network comprises 20 predominantly non-governmental partner organisations that input their expertise in order for it to be disseminated to all the federal states.

The network is coordinated centrally from the RNE office in Berlin. The hubs invite people to the RENN.days in Berlin once a year in order to bring together pioneers of sustainability from all over Germany.

information, please see
www.sustainabilitycouncil.de

annual conference, such as environmental associations and “One World” networks.

The next step is to reach out to new players. “We’re still one step away from the fire department associations, but it’s precisely these organisations that play an important part in social cohesion in rural areas and which are frequently the only point of contact for the elderly,” says Ahlke. His network wants to become a mouthpiece for this kind of work and demonstrate that it’s all about sustainability, he says. “There’s a lot more sustainability in a lot of things than you might think at first glance,” says Ahlke.

RENN.south: the entire array of of sustainable living

RENN.south operates in Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg, where it faces conditions which are different to those of RENN.central. These two federal states are economically strong in their rural parts too and are characterised by civic involvement. The network is based within the Sustainability Office of the Central Environmental Authority of the State of Baden-Württemberg (LUBW) in Karlsruhe and the Bavarian State Network for Civil Engagement (LBE) in Nuremberg. “We focus on groups and small-scale initiatives with no legal form and forge links between them in terms of their topics, including across state borders,” says Dorothee Lang, who works for the network in the office in Karlsruhe.

The hub focuses on sustainable living and this covers a wide array of topics, including nutrition, consumption, mobility, free time, clothes, tourism, housing and energy consumption. In Munich, Ingolstadt, Karlsruhe and Heidelberg, for example, there are volunteer initiatives that organise consumption-critical guided city walks. In many places, the citizens are also working towards replacing disposable coffee cups with a deposit system in order to reduce waste. RENN.south seeks to bring the people who organise such initiatives together, because there is otherwise rarely any exchange between them. Anyone planning an event, publication, exhibition or similar campaign in the area of sustainable living can also ask RENN.south for a partnership. In Baden-Württemberg, for example, a range of practical workshops was put together on the topics of fundraising, social media, crowdfunding, organisational development and moderation together with regional “One World” promoters.

Another focal area is fair procurement. Among other things, municipalities buy fire department uniforms, computers, coffee and toilet paper. All of these items can be procured fairly and ecologically, thus making the public authorities role models in the area of sustainable consumption. This is hardly a new topic – it’s something that the Central Environmental Authority of the State of Baden-Württemberg, where Lang is based, gives advice to local authorities on. But

here, too, much could be improved through clever networking. “We want to improve cooperation, for example between ‘One World’ shops that offer fairly traded products and the municipal public administrations,” says Lang. Nuremberg as a fair trade town is an example from which many local authorities can learn, she says.

RENN.west: a link between the federal government, the states and the local authorities

With seven partners, RENN.west has the most stakeholders and operates in North Rhine-Westphalia, Hesse, Rhineland-Palatinate and Saarland. Here, too, the partners’ expertise on, for example, climate protection, biodiversity, mobility, municipal development policy and education for sustainable development is incorporated into the network.

PROJECT SUSTAINABILITY

There are people throughout Germany who champion sustainable development at all levels of society. The German Council for Sustainable Development (RNE) has been recognising especially impressive initiatives and projects with the Project Sustainability mark of quality (formerly Werkstatt-N) since 2011.

Since 2018, it has done so together with the four Regional Hubs for Sustainability Strategies (RENN), and this has two advantages. On the one hand, the RENN hubs are located in various regions of Germany, which means the competition is brought to the attention of local projects much more quickly. And secondly, the winning projects can subsequently be incorporated into the local network activities.

One of the most recent winners was the project entitled “Zukunftsperspektive Umwelthandwerker – Kompetenzfeststellung und Weiterbildung für

Flüchtlinge” (Future Prospects for Environmental Tradespeople – Determining Refugees’ Skills and Providing Further Training) run by the Hamburg Chamber of Crafts. The project involves refugees being given training to work in the area of energy and environmental technology. Another winner is the “Tag des guten Lebens” (Day of Good Life) organised by the Agora citizens’ initiative and Cultura21 e. V. in Cologne. A traffic-free Sunday is organised in a different district of Cologne every year and the locals are free to choose how to use the roads in the district on that day. An award also went to the Klimaschutz+ Foundation and the Climate Alliance in Heidelberg for their Climate Fair project, which allows citizens to donate the environmental and social costs caused by them because of, for example, travel to a citizens’ fund, which is then used to promote sustainable development at the local level. Another award went to the “perspektive n” project established in Berlin in 2016 as a series of debates on the topic of sustainable

development within higher education institutions.

The number of competition entries increased almost twofold in 2018 due to the partnership with the RENN hubs. Ten projects are recognised per RENN hub, meaning 40 projects are recognised in total. It is by no means easy for the jury to make its decisions. All the winning projects receive 1,000 euros in prize money and are entitled to use the Project Sustainability logo to communicate their success. The competition is open to non-governmental organisations, social innovation initiatives, private individuals, municipal authorities, public institutions, companies and start-ups. Competition entry is subject to the project already being at the implementation stage. Four outstanding projects are also recognised at the national level as “transformation” projects.

For further information, please see www.sustainabilitycouncil.de

“As the link between the federal government, the states and the local authorities, we want to contribute to developing consistent sustainable development strategies and architectures across all the federal levels,” says Natalie Maib, who coordinates the hub’s work from within the State Working Committee Agenda 21 NRW in Bonn. The network is organised accordingly: in addition to numerous working meetings of the steering committee and the operational level, the RENN.west organisations meet with the representatives who are responsible for the four states’ respective sustainable development strategies, these usually coming from the state chancelleries or the ministries for the environment. “In the early days of RENN, we established ourselves as experts in sustainable development strategies for non-governmental stakeholders and local authorities and are in close contact with the state ministries and chancelleries regarding the federal states’ implementation of their sustainable development strategies,” says Maib.

Like the other hubs, RENN.west has set its sights on making the topic of sustainability more widely known, true to the holistic idea behind the SDGs. According to Maib, the major challenge they face in terms of expediting the implementation of sustainable development at all levels is that of not simply addressing only the obvious stakeholders. “We actively try to reach out to new target groups. At our next annual conference in November, we want to specifically also address stakeholders in the business world. We need to

bring about a profitable rapprochement in this area with regards to content,” she says.

Overall, Maib sees the work of the RENN hubs as a major opportunity for civil society and municipal authorities. “Forging links between the stakeholders is not an end in itself – it can only be considered a success if it results in contributions that accelerate the implementation of the global and national Sustainable Development Goals,” says Klaus Reuter, Managing Director of the State Working Committee Agenda 21 NRW and head of RENN.west.

As such, there is still a great deal for the RENN hubs to do. In June 2018, a team of international experts presented its peer review on Germany’s endeavours in the area of sustainable development – in which they explicitly recommended that the RENN hubs be strengthened. The review said that the Federal Government should first safeguard the hubs’ funding through 2030, rather than up to 2021 as is currently the case. It was also recommended that the RENN hubs be incorporated into “top-level stakeholder forums run by Government” – in other words, that they pass more of their local experience upwards. The hubs were involved in the Federal Chancellery’s Sustainability Forum in 2018 for the first time.

It is often suggested in talks with people who work within the RENN hubs that a great deal needs to be achieved but with only limited

GERMAN SUSTAINABILITY ACTION DAYS

A "chopping party" was held in Straubing, Bavaria, at which people in the town came together to cook something delicious using vegetables that would otherwise have been thrown away. The University for Sustainable Development Eberswalde held a climate protection week. A clothes swap was held at the Linse youth club in Berlin, while ten foreign embassies in the city hosted a week of discussions, films and much more related to the topic of the United Nations 2030 Agenda, all organised by the Federal Foreign Office.

This all happened during the German Sustainability Action Days, which ran from 30 May to 10 June 2018. The German

Council for Sustainable Development (RNE) initiated the Sustainability Action Days in 2012 on the occasion of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development. The Action Days testify to the wide-ranging commitment to sustainability of people throughout Germany. Taking part is easy – you simply need to register on the Action Days website. Anyone can take part, be they private individuals, clubs, associations, initiatives, foundations, schools, play-groups, universities, churches, companies, social institutions, local authorities, municipal utilities, authorities or ministries.

There was record involvement in 2018 with a total of 2,500 events. This was in part due to the fact that the project is now advertised by the Regional Hubs for Sustainability Strategies (RENN). As there are similar initiatives in other countries, the Action Days have been a part of European Sustainable Development Week since 2015. This likewise set a new record in 2018 with a total of 6,035 events spread across 34 countries.

For further information, please see www.sustainabilitycouncil.de

means. On the one hand, the major global and national Sustainable Development Goals need to be explained to people at the local level, even though these won't initially mean much to them. And on the other hand, it needs to be explained to the policymakers what makes the country and the people in it tick and how they can be pulled on board for the lengthy process of socio-ecological transformation. Sabine Krüger, who works for RENN.north in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, vividly describes the workload situ-

ation: "My work for RENN is a part-time position – that's 3.9 hours a day that I have to handle the entire federal state. The work is a balancing act between what all the associations and initiatives need and what you are capable of achieving," she says. But she takes a positive view of the situation: "We may sometimes only manage small steps, but the good thing about small steps is that everyone can keep up." And this is then sustainable in the best possible sense.

This article was published in the "German Almanac of Sustainability 2018: Ideas and actions. Transformation!". You can find the complete publication on the website of the German Council for Sustainable Development www.sustainabilitycouncil.de