Can municipalities learn sustainability?

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Municipalities are drivers of societal change and they have an important role to play in the transformation towards greater sustainability. Their heterogeneity increases the complexity of the task, but also presents an opportunity for producing a wide array of solutions – potential which past successes evidence.

Sustainability – its meaning and a frame of reference for municipalities

"Sustainability" is a term with a long history.[1] The phrase "sustainable use" was first employed more than 300 years ago, by Hans Carl von Carlowitz in Freiberg, Saxony, in 1713. The German accountant, who is considered the author of the first comprehensive treatise on forestry, called for the more efficient use of resources that were in short supply, the planned safeguarding of raw material sources and a search for alternatives. More than two and a half centuries later in 1987, the UN's Brundtland Commission interpreted the term "sustainability" much more broadly as "... (meeting) the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." Sustainable development is founded on the principle of seeing the environment, social justice and the economy as a whole and taking consequences and future sustainability into account in political decision-making.

Five years later, in 1992, 172 countries attending the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro adopted the Agenda 21 action plan. This action plan attached importance to activities at the local level for the first time and named local authorities as the key players: "Because so many of the problems and solutions being addressed by Agenda 21 have their roots in local activities, the participation and cooperation of local authorities will be a determining factor in fulfilling its objectives."[2]

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1 The timelessness or, rather, the perpetual topicality of the term "sustainability" becomes particularly apparent when we look at how firmly embedded in humankind's cultural history this principle has always been; cf. Grober, U. (2010): Die Entdeckung der Nachhaltigkeit. Kulturgeschichte eines Begriffs, Munich.
2 Cf. AGENDA 21. United Nations Conference on Environment & Development, Rio de Janeiro, June 1992, Section 3, Chapter 28.1; https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/Agenda21.pdf.

Under the motto of "Think globally, act locally", local authorities subsequently derived Local Agenda 21s as their independent contributions.

At the preliminary conclusion of this process, the New York Earth Summit on sustainable development held in 2015, the UN member states unanimously adopted the 2030 Agenda with its 17 global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Together with other guiding principles, this now serves as the standard framework for the political activities of local authorities.

This brief historical digression illustrates that sustainability is not a static mission statement, but rather a paradigm which is constantly adapting culturally to societal and political discourse.[3] Nonetheless, some of the basic principles are unchanging – intergenerational equity and an integrated view of the three sustainability dimensions of the environment, social affairs and the economy. These three dimensions of sustainability are increasingly complemented by a fourth dimension: culture.[4] Issues relating to distribution, fairness and good governance are additional integral components of sustainable development, such as the assumption of global responsibility, participation, actively tackling the issue of conflicting goals and successful vertical political integration.

Sustainable municipalities are characterised by the fact that the policymakers and administrators, local utilities, civil society and businesses systematically and consistently see these principles as being at the heart of their actions. Fortunately, the number of municipalities in Germany that are pursuing these goals continues to rise. Nonetheless, there is still a long way to go until this "mere" guiding principle systematically shapes the actions taken each and every day throughout the country.

What are "municipalities"?

Municipalities are a very heterogeneous species, and this increases the complexity of the task. A municipality's distinct identity is determined by its location, development history, size, economic structure and societal set-up, to name but a few aspects. As an example: the factors that influence air quality are generally the same across all municipalities, factors like industrial emissions, traffic emissions, long-range transboundary air pollution, etc. But the degree of pollution is very much dependent on other factors, such as topography. And, in turn, the options regarding action to reduce emissions are dependent on these factors. For this reason alone, the situation in Stuttgart is very different to that in Hamburg.

3 Cf. IFOK GmbH (publ.) (2010): "Gemeinsam Fahrt aufnehmen! Kommunale Politik- und Nachhaltigkeitsprozesse integrieren", Berlin/ Munich, p. 10.
4 Cf. Brocchi, Davide (2007): "Die kulturelle Dimension der Nachhaltigkeit", Cultura21, Cologne, https://davidebrocchi.eu/wp-content/ uploads/2013/08/2007_dimension_nachhaltigkeit.pdf (20 July 2018).

A municipality's options for taking action and the independent initiatives that are feasible also very much depend on whether it is part of a county or is independent.

In addition, a municipality is not a homogeneous entity – it is always also a complex network of players that include administration (divided into different areas of responsibility based on its size), municipal politics, local utilities, the private sector and the various civil society groupings, among others. Each player follows its own action logic. Their level of influence and how they communicate with one another vary from municipality to municipality.

Nonetheless, or precisely because of this, the local authority level is of crucial importance to implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. It is here that the consequences of a lack of sustainable action become directly noticeable. This boosts willingness to act and acceptance of the necessary measures. In addition, stakeholder diversity and local discourse increase the potential for innovative solutions. After all, it is within the municipalities and their neighbourhoods that there is the greatest opportunity for directly engaging with citizens.

With the local authority landscape being so multifarious, there is no one-size-fits-all recipe for the "sustainable city". At the same time, however, this offers great potential for a broad array of solutions to be developed. Past successes stand as a testament to this potential. However, to realise this potential, the municipalities need to be granted sufficient freedom and the necessary resources.

Progress and achievements on the way to creating the "sustainable city"

In the past, (integrated) urban development in itself already pursued individual goals directed at sustainability

The aforementioned three – or four – dimensions of sustainability have an intense effect on one another. This results in the potential not only for synergies, but also for goal conflicts, both between the individual dimensions and within a topic. For example, if a municipality wishes to reduce land use, it must allow denser inner-city development. Fresh air corridors and green spaces near residential areas are just as important, though, and not all of these can be realised in equal measure at the same time.

An integrated overall view is needed, both in order to mobilise synergies and to weigh up any conflicting goals. This is not a new realisation in itself. As early as the 1960s and 1970s, municipalities were making use of urban development planning as a tool. This can therefore be seen as the forerunner to the integrated urban development concepts that are increasingly applied within municipalities today. But with the development time of these concepts being so long, the concepts' high level of detail and the param-

eters constantly changing at the same time, the concepts were frequently already obsolete upon completion and were difficult to implement due to their complexity. The instrument fell into disrepute. In many places, there followed a period of "outlook incrementalism", which is often represented by the oversimplified catchphrase of "projects instead of plans". There are indeed cases of this approach being successful, a well-known example being the International Building Exhibition (IBA) Emscher Park development, a forward-looking programme of the state of North Rhine-Westphalia which effectively promoted structural change in the north of the Ruhr region between 1989 and 1999.

However, it became increasingly evident at the beginning of this millennium that this "strategy" was able to live up to the complex inter-

relations only to a very limited extent, if at all. Consequently, the instrument of the "integrated urban development concept" increased in importance. For instance, in relation to Germany's "Urban restructuring in the new federal states" urban development programme, the funding providers required the municipalities to produce integrated urban development concepts as a prerequisite for being awarded funding. Another important stimulus was the EU urban development ministers' adoption of the Leipzig Charter during Germany's Presidency of the Council of the European Union in 2007, which explicitly emphasises the importance of integrated urban development concepts in particular with regard to sustainability aspects.

Integrated urban development concepts are now smaller in scope than they were in the 1960s, this

SUSTAINABLE CITY DIALOGUE

Whether or not sustainability can work globally is decided at the local level. Integrated, sustainable urban development allows for mobility coupled with little traffic, creates affordable housing, develops new neighbourhoods in a resource-efficient way – including in terms of land use – strengthens civil society and takes intergenerational equity into account in municipal finances. This calls for committed citizens and political leaders who get behind the idea of sustainability.

Which is why the RNE established the Sustainable City dialogue back in 2010. It involves the mayors of 30 German towns and cities regularly discussing the latest challenges of sustainable urban development. They also provide important input at the federal level by means of joint publications such as "Strategic cornerstones for sustainable development in municipalities" and policy papers on the current challenges, for example land policy. While the challenges they face may vary greatly, the mayors see themselves as a

mouthpiece for responsible policies at the municipal level. As delegates of political responsibility, they champion the integration of sustainability into politics and public administration as a cross-cutting task. Adopting different approaches and using different examples, they demonstrate the importance of the role played by municipalities in implementing the global Sustainable Development Goals.

For further information, please see
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making them more practicable. However, they maintain or further develop their cross-cutting character nonetheless. All the stakeholders relevant to urban development, in particular also civil society, are already involved at the development stage. The towns and cities employ a wide array of communication formats to this end.

Success is dependent on the city officials, administration and politicians offering as much support as possible both during the development process and for the ultimate result. This is the best way to guarantee that those involved can implement the concepts over multiple electoral terms. It is also important that the concepts and their implementation be continuously evaluated and that adjustments be made if necessary. Furthermore, the communication structures put in place during the development process can nurture long-term, in other words "sustainable", discourse within a municipality and thus support new cooperation structures.

A lesson already learned is that the challenges the municipalities face do not stop at their borders. Cooperation among local authorities, and in particular between the main city and the surrounding municipalities in conurbations, has a crucial part to play in pursuit of the goal of sustainable development. Involving the urban fringe as early as at the development stage of an integrated urban development concept is therefore all the more relevant.

Successes and shortcomings on the way to creating the sustainable city

As was made clear at the beginning, awareness of the necessity of sustainable development and of action based on this has been firmly embedded in many municipalities for some time now and is part of the local DNA, so to speak, in many places. There is much concrete evidence of this in:

»   **Numerous statistics and other data** such as the increasing use and generation of renewable energies within municipalities or the rising number of childcare places for children under the age of three.

»   **Many qualitative indicators –** sustainability is already a topic addressed by many local councils,[5] there are active climate protection managers in many cities and municipalities, sustainability reports are prepared and participatory processes are now the rule rather than the exception. The excellent activities in the area of accommodating, supporting and integrating refugees are also noteworthy.

»   **The results of various competitions** in which municipalities that act sustainably are recognised.

5 55 per cent of the local politicians surveyed said the topic of sustainable development was discussed either frequently or very frequently within their council; cf. Honold, Jasmin (2017): "Ergebnisse einer Befragung von Kommunalpolitikerinnen und Kommunalpolitikern", in Bertelsmann Stiftung (publ.): "Monitor Nachhaltige Kommune", 2017 report, p. 62.

» **The declarations of intent of many local stakeholders** ranging from the signing of the Aalborg Charter in 1994 to the signing of the resolution of the Association of German Cities entitled "The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development: Building Sustainability at the Local Level"; many local authorities have passed political resolutions to pursue sustainability-oriented goals and are involved in stakeholder dialogues such as the German Council for Sustainable Development's dialogue with city mayors.

However, even with all these pleasing developments, it is evident that there is still a great deal to be done:

» **Integrated urban development concepts, approaches and perspectives** must be made more widespread.[6]

» There are **management shortcomings** and therefore also shortcomings in terms of strategic management.

» There is still a lack of awareness among the decision makers regarding **certain sustainable development issues**, such as the topics of poverty (as a local authority issue), funding which is fair for all generations, and the assumption of global responsibility.

» **Political target values** are frequently neither achieved by municipalities nor does it seem that they will be achieved in the foreseeable future (examples: particulate pollution, child poverty, childcare for the under threes, 30-ha land use goal, etc.).

» Municipalities are **permanently structurally underfinanced**,[7] and therefore make too few investments in sustainability.

These are just a few of the aspects, just like only a few of the successes so far have been mentioned. But it does also show that the municipalities are dependent on the higher echelons with regard to many of the topics. As well as highlighting that there is a need to learn.

Municipalities as places of learning

Municipalities are the primary place of learning for sustainability in many respects. They are learning systems in the sense that they can independently expand their knowledge about sustainability by bringing together past experience and existing knowledge and by ultimately implementing these again within political, administrative and civil society activities.

Within a learning system, everyone – be they from politics, administration, local utilities, civil society or businesses – is both a learner and an information/knowledge sharer. Ideally, the local

6 Cf. for example Grabow, Busso and Honold (2017): "Transformation zur Nachhaltigkeit in Kommunen – empirische Befunde" in Heinrichs/Kirst/Plawitzki (publ.) (2017): Gutes Leben vor Ort, Berlin. pp. 7–12, or Berlin Institute for Population and Development; Wüstenrot Stiftung (publ.) 2017a, p. 15.

7 Grabow, Busso (2013): "Kommunale Finanz- und Investitionspolitik: strategisch und nachhaltig" in: Deutsches Institut für Urbanistik (publ.) (2013): Urbane Räume in Bewegung, Berlin, p. 202 ff.

authority stakeholders learn from the cause for thought provided by civil society, which itself learns from exemplary local authority action and at local authority places of learning in the sense of education for sustainable development. Municipalities are initiators and inspirers that communicate the Sustainable Development Goals and visions and manage their implementation.[8] They support the sustainable development and learning processes within society.

Learning requires knowledge, and this knowledge comes both from within and from outside (cf. section 5 "Connected learning"). At the same time, a common understanding of sustainability[9] is a fundamental prerequisite for creating future-proof and liveable cities, municipalities and regions.

There are many fields of learning. All those who assume responsibility for sustainability at the local level or who wish to require the following:

» **Knowledge of sustainability in the various fields**, such as climate protection, mobility and social justice to name but a few.

» **Management knowledge:** this includes knowledge of strategic and operational management and of organisational matters,

and a willingness to tackle the aforementioned goal conflicts. Goal conflicts are inherent to every sustainability approach; what's needed is "nexus thinking"[10], i.e. an understanding of the interrelations, interdependencies and concurrence of the SDGs.

» **Successful communication** in order to arrive at a common understanding of sustainability. Horizontal coordination of and cooperation between administrative departments, functioning networks encompassing the public authorities, local utilities, civil society and businesses, and the involvement of communication experts can all help here.

A willingness and ability to learn are not enough for progress to be made on the way to achieving sustainability – the framework conditions must also facilitate sustainable actions. These include in particular a reformed, future-proof municipal funding system, the amendment of a large number of legal standards, giving experimental pilot and model projects greater leeway, and successful vertical integration of the sustainable development activities of the EU, the German government, the federal states and the municipalities.[11] These pressing challenges are not specific to Germany – they are a global issue. The

8 German Council for Sustainable Development (publ.) (2015): "Städte auf Kurs Nachhaltigkeit. Wie wir Wohnen, Mobilität und kommunale Finanzen zukunftsfähig gestalten", Berlin, p. 85.
9 Cf. ibid., p. 79.
10 Cf. Federal Environment Agency (publ.) (2017): "Auswertung der Agenda 2030 und Folgeaktivitäten hinsichtlich ihres kommunalen Bezugs", Dessau-Roßlau, p. 19.
11 Deutsches Institut für Urbanistik (ed.), German Council for Sustainable Development (publ.) (2011): "Städte für ein nachhaltiges Deutschland. Gemeinsam mit Bund und Ländern für eine zukunftsfähige Entwicklung", Berlin, p. 60 ff.

following aspects are mentioned as significant obstacles to sustainable development in cities: "limited political and fiscal power, lack of access to development finance, low level of institutional capacity, absence of robust multi-level government cooperation and integration ..."[12]

Connected learning

"When it comes to sustainable development, cities copying one another is not forbidden and is indeed very welcome and productive. We can and must grow on the basis of and through the experiences of others."[13]

The municipalities' different approaches to pursuing sustainable development result in the creation of a large array of tools. Even if a local authority has to adapt a measure developed by another municipality to its specific local conditions, this process of learning from others (both from negative and positive experience) contributes to the municipality's own resources being used more efficiently and new ideas being promoted.

For this to be a success, exchange formats are needed that promote the interconnectivity not only of the municipalities, but ultimately also of all the relevant stakeholders within society, thereby broadening horizons. The Ger-

man government, the federal states and the municipalities all have work to do here in equal measure, and a great deal has happened in this respect in recent years. Digital media are playing an increasingly important role alongside the "traditional" print products. Be it Internet research, video conferences or e-learning, they all represent an important opportunity for knowledge exchange and discussion.

Even with these new avenues, the face-to-face contact experienced at networking get-togethers, (vocational training) events and the committee meetings of, for example, the local authority associations remains highly significant.

Competitions such as the Klimaaktive Kommune (Climate-Active Local Governments) competition or the National German Sustainability Award serve as an incentive and spread best practice knowledge. The European Energy Award reflects the status quo of the efforts made, provides impetus for their ongoing development and promotes the forging of links between municipal actors.

Conclusion

Municipalities are fundamental to achieving the goal of transforming society in the interests of sustainability – in keeping with

12 Cf. Sustainable Development Solutions Network (publ.) (2016): "Getting Started with the SDGs in Cities. A Guide for Stakeholders", p. 12.
13 Cf. former mayor of Freiburg Dr Dieter Salomon in Deutsches Institut für Urbanistik (ed.), German Council for Sustainable Development (publ.) (2011): "Städte für ein nachhaltiges Deutschland. Gemeinsam mit Bund und Ländern für eine zukunftsfähige Entwicklung", Berlin, p. 51.

their role as drivers of societal development. They are places of considerable impairment of the determinants of sustainability. Municipalities are the cause of problems on the one hand and the victims of these problems on the other. In view of this, they can make a significant contribution to reducing burdens and offer major potential for overcoming these challenges. A great deal has already been achieved, but everyone involved must continue to make more of an effort, including by engaging those who should contribute more to helping shape sustainable living environments than they have to date.

Municipalities are not uniform, they are multifarious. As a consequence, tailored concepts and measures based on these are needed if the different local circumstances are to be optimally taken into account. Nonetheless, there are certain general bases for success. These first and foremost include a willingness and ability to think and act in an integrated way and to express this in the form of integrated urban development concepts. To develop and implement these, all the stakeholder groups of relevance to urban development must be involved and must work together across municipalities. Transparency is crucial in order to justify strategy content and measures,

and a careful weighing up of conflicting goals is equally important.

Sustainability can only be guaranteed in the medium to long term on the basis of the ongoing evaluation and, if necessary, further development of concepts and measures. This requires all the stakeholders to be willing to learn, be open to reviewing their own positions and have the opportunity to exchange knowledge. Municipalities are the primary place of learning about sustainability.

However, the municipalities will only be able to live up to their role if the European Union, the German government and the federal states es tablish the appropriate framework conditions. These include adequate financial resources and the legal leeway to develop and implement innovations. Municipalities must also be involved in the discussion and decision-making processes at the higher levels.

The developments of the past few decades show that, while there are unquestionably still major challenges, the municipalities are ready and able in terms of both content and tools to build on the experience garnered and take the necessary steps for sustainable development, thus living up to their responsibility towards society.