

Multi-stakeholder peer review of Germany's Sustainable Development Strategy – a transformative example to follow

by Helen Clark, Chair of the international Peer Review Group 2018

It was my privilege to chair the 2018 International Peer Review of Germany's Sustainable Development Strategy. As members of the review team, we accepted the task knowing that what Germany does on sustainable development is of global significance because of the size and scale of the country. Its economy developed, as most have, with a big carbon footprint, and so it has heavy legacy issues in its transition to sustainability. That transition needs to be swift and it needs to be just. It is to Germany's credit that it is approaching these issues holistically as the 2030 Agenda urges all countries to do.

Germany, however, was ahead of many in thinking in this way. It produced its first sustainable development strategy in time for the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002. The Strategy which our team reviewed is Germany's third, and we were also the third international review team.

Our review team met with stakeholders across government, parliament, the private sector and civil society. From considering that wide range of perspectives, we concluded that:

- » The institutional architecture established to support the Strategy is sound. Leadership of it resides in the Chancellery, which convenes state secretaries charged with driving the strategy at ministerial level.
- » Nonetheless, the Federal Government's co-ordination capacities could be strengthened. With 29 of the Strategy's 63 indicators reportedly off-track, this calls for a strong action plan for the State Secretaries' Committee and for departmental action plans for which there is accountability for delivery.
- » At all levels of government, broad partnerships will need to be formed with stakeholders to turn around those indicators which are currently heading in the wrong direction rapidly. The Strategy's indicator system sug-



gests that there is a concentration of challenges relating to agriculture, land use and energy where targets would not be met on current trends.

- » There were areas where the Peer Review felt that the Strategy could be more ambitious in scope and/or speed of progress in the areas targeted; for example, on moving towards zero land degradation, reversing the current negative trend on biodiversity loss, phasing out both fossil fuel- and nuclear-based energy generation, achieving a circular economy, and in promoting informed public debate on why achieving sustainable development is critical for both Germany and the wider world.
- » Sustainable development in Germany is often seen as being focused on environmental issues, and, thus, civil society actors in the social and economic spheres do not always see the Strategy as speaking to them. Yet the Strategy is comprehensive in covering the social, economic and environmental strands

of sustainability. That needs to be better communicated, so that citizens perceive that their future well-being and that of the natural ecosystems on which human life depends are interlinked.

- » This calls for enhancing capacity for systems thinking and for education for sustainability at all levels of the education system and through lifelong learning. Politicians and officials need to comprehend the opportunities, the risks and the challenges implicit in the transition to sustainability to make optimal policy decisions and to implement them.
- » Leaving No One Behind is a core principle of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. Among those to whom we spoke, there was concern expressed that more people are being left behind in Germany itself. Efforts to secure social cohesion and solidarity are more important than ever amidst the growing diversity of the population. This challenge is

far from unique among high-income countries and is complicated by populist political reactions to economic and social trends in a number of them. The 2030 Agenda is an agenda of hope for inclusion, human rights and human development: following its principles does offer a way forward in these challenging times.

- » The oversight mechanisms provided by parliaments and national audit institutions globally are important in monitoring progress on sustainable development and ensuring accountability. The Peer Review recommended greater powers for the Bundestag's Parliamentary Advisory Council on Sustainable Development (PBnE). We also suggested that ways be found to reflect the Strategy in the Government's budget to

enhance monitoring. We also noted the decision of the International Organization of Supreme Audit Institutions Congress in 2016 that the national institutions should undertake performance audits on SDG implementation.

- » The German Council for Sustainable Development was established in 2001 and is a well-respected convener of stakeholders and advisor of government on cross-cutting issues of sustainability. Consideration should be given to it having a legal entity status which befits its independent role.
- » Germany's commitment to sustainable development positions it well at the European and global levels to be an advocate for meaningful action to advance the SDGs. Beyond its own shores, it can do more to address its overall

2018 PEER REVIEW

The state of sustainable development in Germany is regularly reviewed by international experts. Following on from the reviews in 2009 and 2013, an 11-strong team scrutinised the country and its sustainable development strategy for the third time in 2018. This time, the peer review was conducted under the auspices of former New Zealand Prime Minister and former Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme, Helen Clark. This was the first peer review conducted since the UN adopted the 2030 Agenda. The reviewers' assessments varied. They said that Germany was in a strong position on

the whole, but that there were also some shortcomings, namely that biodiversity was disappearing, land consumption was decreasing too slowly, the carbon footprint of, for example, transportation was stagnating, obesity was increasing and social disparity was widening further.

The peer reviews are special because the reviewers come from various countries and have expertise in the areas of science, the private sector, civil society and public administration. The RNE office organised the eight-month work of these peers and assisted in evaluating the surveys completed in writing by stakeholders

from politics, business, science and civil society. During a peer week held in Berlin, the experts also met close to 100 stakeholders in Germany's sustainable development policy. Helen Clark then presented the report to Chancellor Angela Merkel in person at the RNE's 2018 annual conference. The peers discussed the findings in detail with the State Secretaries' Committee for Sustainable Development at the Federal Chancellery, this being the committee responsible for effecting political consequences.

The published report is available at www.sustainabilitycouncil.de



footprint by committing to sustainable supply chains. Its substantial international development budget and its technologies and expertise can be even more significant in supporting developing countries to achieve the SDGs.

Overall, there is much that is commendable in Germany's Sustainable Development Strategy. Our review calls for keeping what works, elevating what is good and changing what doesn't deliver.

We commend Germany for its willingness to open up this core government strategy to independent, multi-stakeholder international review and commend this practice to all countries as a way of helping to strengthen implementation of the 2030 Agenda, the SDGs and national sustainability strategies.

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