

“In our hands –
strategic cornerstones
for sustainable
development in
municipalities”



POSITIONS AND IMPULSES FROM
THE MAYORS INVOLVED IN
THE "SUSTAINABLE CITY" DIALOGUE

Supported by the



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Development





“In our hands – strategic cornerstones for sustainable development in municipalities”

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Municipal authorities are primary actors when it comes to realising the global and national sustainable development goals. This insight can be applied equally to nearly all areas of state responsibility. Due to the principle of subsidiarity and the associated self-governance at municipal level, they already have a strong role to play in the implementation of national measures. The 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement's climate goals have further strengthened the role of municipal action in Germany.

The "Sustainable City" dialogue facilitated by the German Council for Sustainable Development has since 2010 been bringing together the political leaders of over 30 municipal authorities throughout Germany. Their joint recommendations and policy papers provide crucial impulses for both national and municipal policy action and make clear how central the role of municipal importance and will are to realising the sustainable development goals. This voluntary dialogue among the vanguard of municipal sustainability is flanked by initiatives and networks between municipal umbrella associations, the ICLEI, the Covenant of Mayors, the Climate Alliance and others.





1. “Sustainable City” dialogue

At the invitation of the German Council for Sustainable Development (RNE), we – mayors from more than 30 cities – regularly meet to discuss strategic issues relating to the “Sustainable City”.

With sustainability targets being missed throughout Germany, especially in relation to climate protection and biodiversity, we too are called into action. Providing socially viable housing of good quality environmentally speaking, strengthening social cohesion, making farming and forestry sustainable, taking action against the floods of plastic, achieving gender equality, ensuring that construction and mobility are sustainable, providing education for sustainable development and putting in place sustainable finance are challenges which also – and especially – require action to be taken by local government.

With our urban societies, we are already acting as forerunners of sustainable development at municipal level. Many of us have already gained recognition in the competition for the German Sustainability Award for Cities and Towns and in other contests. The “Sustainable City” dialogue offers us an opportunity to discuss our experience of actions and obstacles and to talk about how municipal sustainability policy can be given a higher profile and greater weight in German federal policy.

We first prepared the strategic cornerstones in 2010. They have proved an important impetus for municipal sustainability policy and sustainable urban development. Today, we are presenting a new and revised version of them.

The German Council for Sustainable Development (RNE) facilitates the dialogue process, for which we are immensely grateful.



2. Why we are speaking out

We endorse the objective of climate neutrality and meeting the target of limiting global warming to 1.5 °C. We support the 2030 Agenda and its global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) along with the national sustainability targets set out in the German Sustainable Development Strategy. We want to find solutions for our urban communities which are socially, environmentally and economically viable over the long term and enable everyone to live in dignity within the limits of the natural resources needed for life.

We support the principles of sustainable development as agreed by the German Federal Government and the Länder¹, and gear our municipal policymaking towards them.

We are aware of the conflicts which arise from the sustainable development goals because even they themselves are not without contradictions. Conflicts of interest can even emerge within the environmental goals, for instance – such as between the expansion of renewables and the conservation of nature. The need for affordable housing must not be played off against the need for climate neutrality and resource conservation. We need to consider the matter carefully to find the best solutions. This is the expression of an open and vibrant democracy. In accordance with sustainable development, that means listening to the full range of views, persuading people, gaining majorities, incorporating individual interests into a holistic concept and making compromises. We do not just want to be judged on whether we meet the targets, but also on the way in which they are reached. We want as many citizens as possible to have the opportunity and chance to get involved and to help shape developments autonomously.

¹ German Federal Government, 2019: "Gemeinsam für eine nachhaltige Entwicklung - in Verantwortung für eine gute Zukunft in Deutschland, Europa und der Welt" (Together for sustainable development - with responsibility for a good future in Germany, Europe and the world) dated 6 June 2019; <https://www.bundesregierung.de/resource/blob/975274/1635198/256e9d0626cee951d31db3b99e1d75a0/2019-06-06-pm-erklarung-bund-laender-data.pdf?download=1>



There are no blueprints and no simple recipes for success when it comes to sustainable development. However, one thing is for sure: without a credible example, infectious engagement and a persistent initiative by political leaders, achieving it will be impossible. In line with the 2030 Agenda, that means accepting responsibility for the big picture and focusing on social, environmental and economic interests in equal measure. Sustainability is the path.

We invite mayors, everyone with political responsibility and the public to back our cornerstones.

This new edition of the strategic cornerstones gives the Federal Government and all involved stakeholders impetus to take the German Sustainable Development Strategy 2020 forward. We believe greater attention should be paid to the municipal policy aspect of the sustainability strategy. Good and helpful initiatives in towns and cities, regions and rural areas are to be supported on a permanent basis to enable projects to translate into structures and principles.



3. Where we stand

Fundamental changes are needed to facilitate urban development which is aligned with the international sustainability and climate goals. We are counteracting rising traffic volumes, the pressure on the housing markets, and the increase in extreme heat and heavy rainfall events by adopting new urban planning strategies to conserve resources, promote sustainable mobility and strengthen social cohesion. This calls for new forms of involvement and participation, new techniques and a return to good designs and qualities.

Around the world, young activists are protesting against climate policy hesitation and wasted opportunities. Numerous cities have already declared a climate emergency. Even cities which are not taking this bold step are developing climate protection strategies or examining parliamentary documentation with regard to climate impacts. We urgently need better parameters to actively counter climate change and its consequences today and in future.

It is impossible to ignore the call for more sustainability, which is being echoed by countless public utility companies and municipal enterprises, at schools and cultural centres, in organisations and associations, as well as the local economy. Our political responsibility goes far beyond crisis and conflict management. Sustainability is a major challenge for municipal policymaking because our towns and cities will look different from how we know them today if we achieve climate neutrality, make construction sustainable and socially just, and have zero-emissions mobility. We want future generations to inherit a world worth living in, where they can live in dignity. Although democratic negotiation processes can sometimes be long, we want to find the time to place sustainable development at the heart of political decision-making.



Our towns and cities are cosmopolitan and characterised by a culture where social diversity is valued and respected. International migration and the associated challenges for local integration will remain an issue for us. We enable everyone in our towns and cities – regardless of gender, religion or skin colour – to enjoy a safe and dignified life with strong public services. Safety also means that we resolutely and regardless of origins and background protect our basic values and uphold public safety for all.

We are continuing to work on making our towns and cities catalysts of sustainable development and that our catalytic effects are felt further. This also means we need to further consolidate regional collaboration.



4. In our hands – strategic cornerstones for sustainable development in municipalities

1. Embedding sustainability in municipalities

Sustainability is not yet sufficiently recognised as a municipal duty. As a consequence, it is often not safeguarded enough in local government budgets.

We advocate integrating sustainability across the board so that sustainability aspects are considered and funded in an interdisciplinary fashion. Legislators need to pave the way for this to happen. Our municipalities are already serving as models and providing impetus for sustainable development.

Sustainability is a top-level issue

We believe that sustainability is a top-level issue because it calls for clear decisions regarding sustainability goals and when conflicts arise between equally important targets or regarding the setting of priorities.

In our political responsibility for sustainable development, we act on our leadership responsibility. We ensure that the sustainability goals are implemented as coherently as possible in our municipalities. We are dedicated to raising awareness of sustainability – and the importance of this issue – in our councils by reporting regularly on progress and deficits. Sustainability assessments of council documents, sustainabil-



ity reports or linking the double-entry budget² with the sustainability goals can all be useful means of more strongly incorporating sustainability into political discussions and embedding it in decisions than has been the case up to now.

By providing impetus, we are strengthening sustainability in our municipal policymaking, our public authorities, the local economy and civil society. We listen and give societal initiatives for sustainable development the space and significance they need. For us, ideas and initiatives from schools, companies and municipal undertakings, neighbourhoods, sports clubs, other members of civil society and our own public authorities are key resources and an incentive to give even more weight to the issue of sustainable development. We accept responsibility for the big picture, forge ahead and strengthen the exemplary actions of our municipalities.

Making sustainability a cross-cutting topic for municipalities

Looking to tomorrow requires a way of thinking which brings together departmental responsibilities vis-à-vis the environment, society, the economy, and culture in a single future-proof vision. Our aim is to develop programmes using an interdisciplinary and interdepartmental approach based on professional dialogue and driven by the overall concept of sustainability.

We strive to perceive and act on sustainability as a cross-cutting topic in the day-to-day administration of municipal services and responsibilities. We are committed to an in-depth dialogue between and within the various levels of the administration as well as with political bodies and stakeholder groups.

2 Double-entry system: a method of accounting used by local government.



Sustainability needs better structures

As political leaders, we have a special responsibility for the forward-oriented development of our cities and towns. We must lay the foundations for this today. We are creating visible and stable structures and processes in public authorities to permanently embed the issue in our municipalities. This includes making the necessary financial and human resources available, depending on the local situation. We call on the Federal Government and Länder to for their part make funds available which go beyond the limits of project support and help to establish structures – including the necessary staff. Even now, the bureaucracy involved in applying for project funding is often excessive and sometimes prevents applications from being made.

We ensure that the administrative services for sustainability and the staff remits within our sphere of responsibility are clearly recognisable. In our view, it makes good sense to appoint a sustainability officer or set up a strategic steering committee. They coordinate the sustainability activities of the public authority and the council, civil society, academia and businesses. Appointing individuals with responsibility for this field at the various departments can make for effective political implementation of strategies and measures in and by the respective remits. Close professional dialogue between and within the various administration levels as well as with political bodies plays a key role here. Regarding the employees responsible for the subject, this also means actively promoting their expertise where knowledge and shaping the future is concerned and bringing this into the public sphere.



Sustainability needs willpower and expertise

In our cities and towns, we are developing concrete mission statements, strategies and measures for sustainable development. By means of municipal sustainability strategies, we are creating transparency and developing suitable tools for systematic consideration of the various sustainability goals at local level. We develop these using an interdisciplinary and interdepartmental approach based on professional dialogue. Our targets specific to cities and towns are bolstered by suitable indicators (benchmarks). As part of a permanent monitoring system, we make our goal attainment visible and show in comprehensible adjustment processes where fine-tuning is needed. Incorporating sustainability goals into budgetary planning makes an important contribution to forward-looking municipal management.

We will gear public services more strongly towards the sustainable development goals in future. Owner-operated municipal enterprises, public utility companies and other municipal companies should also be aligned with a sustainability model and make their sustainability activities transparent, for example by using the Sustainability Code.

Creating sustainable local government

We welcome plans to make the Federal Government climate-neutral by 2030. Together with our employees, we want to achieve this goal of sustainable climate-neutral government as well.

Sustainable government could focus on the areas of procurement, advanced training offers, climate protection, company mobility, health management and property management. As far as possible, we use the legal tools which have been created for procurement in accordance with sustainability criteria. We also do this for the advisory services provided, for example those by the Competence Center for Sustainable Procurement (KNB) of the Procurement Agency, which forms part of the Federal Ministry of the Interior (BMI). We communicate successes in connec-



tion with sustainable development but we will address weak spots and areas where there is room for improvement with the same openness in our town or city councils, at regional and Federal Government level, and in municipal policymaking organisations.

We call on the German government and the Länder to intensify their dialogue with municipal leaders and municipal umbrella organisations to ensure that public administration is made climate-neutral in a way which is suited to the day-to-day work done.

2. Establishing sustainability as a joint effort

Strengthening sustainability at every level

Creating structures which favour sustainability-oriented action is a task for policymakers. However, sustainable development cannot primarily – and certainly not exclusively – be implemented with a top-down approach. It should also not be foisted on everyone by minorities contrary to a democratically constituted formation of opinion.

Rather, it must be put into practice at every level. It can only be achieved with the involvement of a large number of people in local communities, at schools, in companies, at sports clubs, at churches and other religious institutions, and at cultural establishments. We trust in the knowledge, experience and ideas of the people in our cities and towns. Conversely, we enable political participation independent of people's educational background, origins or their social and economic situation. We create trust by showing that this knowledge plays a part in our decisions. We are systematically and comprehensively embedding Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) in our municipalities and in all areas of education so as to further strengthen our citizens' skills, knowledge and engagement for sustainable development.



We stand for open and effective dialogue and facilitate participation

We support open, transparent and effective dialogue processes concerning important projects and investments. Genuine involvement also demands engagement from the public. With this in mind, we do not just facilitate involvement: we also demand collaboration, participation and the assumption of responsibility. We work with the population, local businesses and associations, academia, policymakers and municipal authorities to develop the concepts of the future for our cities and towns. By doing so, we create a reliable framework for political decisions with long-term impacts and establish a shared sense of identification. We see new digital tools as an opportunity to further improve participation and collaboration in our efforts to shape our cities and enhance the transparency and openness of action taken by local government. Digitalisation may not be an end in itself: rather, it must support and enable the transformation towards sustainability.

Participation and dialogue are also keystones for collaborating with trade, industry and commerce. We want to work with firms to further develop the responsibility for sustainable business practices. We are stepping up our efforts to include the chambers, business associations and individual companies based in our cities and towns in the sustainability process. We support the broad application of the Sustainability Code.



Promoting sustainable lifestyles

The ambitious targets which local governments have set themselves for sustainable development require both efficiency measures and a change in social awareness and the actions of every single person. Against this backdrop, we are dedicated to encouraging behaviour which saves energy, produces less waste, is sustainably mobile and makes use of sustainable alternative products. We make it clear that sustainable, less or “different” consumption can mean better quality of life, greater happiness and improved health. That is why we promote dialogue about what a resource-light and good life can be like which minimises the environmental impact on the natural resources needed for life, helps to distribute what is available fairly, and looks at the bigger picture beyond the municipality itself.

We support creative approaches in our municipalities which can offer value added for everyone. That also strengthens social cohesion.

We welcome the better and closer links between initiatives and players at local and regional level achieved via the Regional Hubs for Sustainability Strategies (RENN). They are important partners. The RENN organised a number of meetings, conferences and campaigns, such as “Ziele brauchen Taten” (Goals need action), in 2019 at the height of the climate and sustainability debate in Germany. These are a crucial source of impetus. The Federal Government and the Länder should ensure that these activities continue. Private foundations and projects like “Municipalities for Global Sustainability” also make valuable contributions and stimulate our work.



3. Strengthening municipalities as players and partners in sustainable development and expanding their scope of action

Extending responsibilities

We know the challenges for sustainable development at local level and want to be able to exercise our responsibility and capabilities even better. Unfortunately, we regularly encounter legal and financial limits. The Federal Government and the Länder must place greater faith in local governments' expertise and strengthen and expand municipal policy-makers' scope of action as regards sustainability.

We want local government to have greater responsibility where sustainability policy is concerned. Sustainability and climate protection are a joint effort. Local government needs to be incorporated more strongly at every political level in order to take this collaboration to the next level. We call on the Federal Government and the Länder to consult better with local government, for example by creating structured dialogue processes. We would relish the opportunity to discuss this with the State Secretaries' Committee for Sustainable Development.

Improving collaboration

We have already aligned ourselves with the sustainability targets of the Federal Government and the Länder. We expect the Federal Government and the Länder to more closely orient their policies to this standard in future, address shortfalls in target attainment and consult better with local government on new goals and measures. We propose utilising municipal expertise and experience in the further development of the sustainability strategies adopted by the Federal Government and the Länder and developing a close, carefully coordinated dialogue process.



We call on the Federal Government to look comprehensively at municipalities' differentiated needs and capabilities and to consult with local government on targets and measures relating to sustainable settlement development. A target concerning the environmentally and socially just creation of housing should be added to the 2020 German Sustainable Development Strategy.

The Federal Government and the Länder must take their responsibility for sustainable development in all spheres seriously. We call on the Federal Government and the Länder to consistently gear their funding policy and associated support programmes towards the sustainable development goals and to evaluate their effectiveness in this regard. We support the recommendations made by the Committee of the Regions to use the global Sustainable Development Goals as the basis for a long-term EU strategy aimed at making Europe sustainable by 2030. In particular, we support calls to align the EU's cohesion policy framework more closely with the objectives of the 2030 Agenda.³

There are central changes to be made in the design and transformation of public services which would represent a decisive step forward for sustainable development. We call on the Federal Government and the Länder to create a better financial and legal framework for the necessary long-term reform of our infrastructures. This includes hiring and qualifying staff to take on these tasks and promote and drive dialogue at municipal level. Where possible, support programmes need to be simplified.

We are forging ahead with sustainable budgetary planning with the aid of sustainability budgets, sustainable investments and a ban on investments in unsustainable economic sectors. We call on the Federal Government to step up its involvement in this area and have a role model effect.

³ European Committee of the Regions: "Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): a basis for a long-term EU strategy for a sustainable Europe by 2030", 135th plenary session, 26-27 June 2019; <https://cor.europa.eu/en/our-work/Pages/Opinion-Timeline.aspx?opId=CDR-239-2019>



We back calls to incorporate sustainability into the Basic Law and into the constitutions of the Länder.

Strengthening municipal development cooperation

We consider it essential for local governments to strengthen their international links, maintain professional dialogue and contribute their positions and interests jointly at international level as well. We are working to strengthen municipal development cooperation legally and financially as this contributes to the goals of the 2030 Agenda. This centres on cooperation among peers and sharing good practice that is tried and tested. We also want to learn from our encounters with partners near and far.



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Imprint

Third edition, fully revised and updated

Published by the mayors involved in the "Sustainable City" dialogue

Mayor Andreas Bausewein, Erfurt; Mayor Andreas Brand, Friedrichshafen; Mayor Uli Burchardt, Konstanz; Mayor Michael Ebling, Mainz; Mayor Peter Feldmann, Frankfurt am Main; Mayor Peter Gaffert, Wernigerode; Mayor Thomas Geisel, Düsseldorf; Mayor Christian Geselle, Kassel; Mayor Dr Kurt Gribl, Augsburg; Mayor Wolfgang Griesert, Osnabrück; Mayor Klaus Herzog, Aschaffenburg; Mayor Martin Horn, Freiburg; Mayor Burkhard Jung, Leipzig; Mayor Matthias Knecht, Ludwigsburg; Mayor Thorsten Krüger, Geestland; Mayor Thomas Kufen, Essen; Mayor Markus Lewe, Münster; Mayor Dr Peter Lüttmann, Rheine; Mayor Jörg Lutz, Lörrach; Mayor Ulrich Mädge, Lüneburg; Mayor Dr Ulrich Maly, Nuremberg; Mayor Angelika Matt-Heidecker, Kirchheim unter Teck; Mayor Dr Frank Mentrup, Karlsruhe; Mayor Belit Onay, Hannover; Mayor Boris Palmer, Tübingen; Mayor Jochen Partsch, Darmstadt; Mayor Dr Daniel Rapp, Ravensburg; Mayor Dieter Reiter, Munich; Mayor Henriette Reker, Cologne; Mayor Elke Christina Roeder, Norderstedt; Mayor Ullrich Sierau, Dortmund; Mayor Ashok Sridharan, Bonn; Mayor Andreas Starke, Bamberg; Mayor Bernd Tischler, Bottrop; Mayor Dr Manfred Wilde, Delitzsch; Mayor Prof. Dr Eckart Würzner, Heidelberg

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Design: Bert Odenthal

Proofreading: Scholz & Friends NeuMarkt GmbH

Printing: druckriegel GmbH

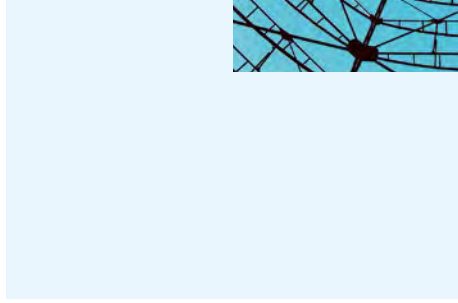
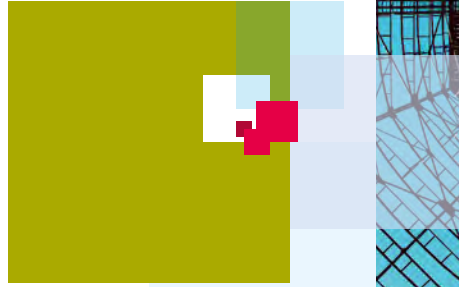
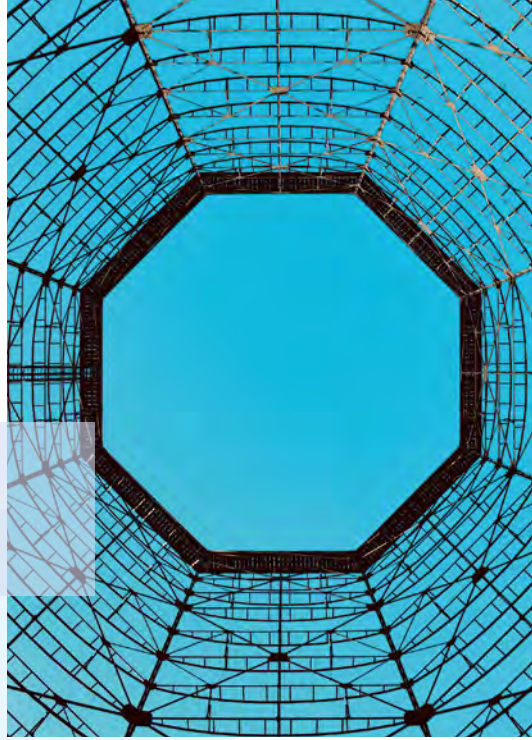
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