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Our Common Agenda – Impetus for an inclusive and networked multilateralism for sustainable development



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Preamble

To mark the 75th anniversary of the United Nations (UN) in 2020, UN Secretary-General António Guterres was charged with developing specific proposals for how the political declaration¹ commemorating the anniversary of the General Assembly can be implemented. The result, published in September 2021, was Our Common Agenda². Based on a comprehensive consultation process, the report is a cornucopia of concrete proposals and measures towards what Guterres calls a more **inclusive, effective and networked multilateralism** – including ambitious reforms of the global organisation itself. Guterres sets out his reform proposals explicitly in the context of the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement, both of which are to be accelerated in their implementation. A core theme of the report is greater solidarity between present and future generations – at the national level and in a multilateral system – aimed at helping to overcome complex global crises that already exist and prevent new ones from arising, while in general contributing to a more equitable world that is fit for the future.

The new Federal Government has a strong focus on international cooperation and strengthening multilateralism, a focus that is underpinned by the proposals outlined in the Guterres report as a comprehensive global frame of reference. Germany, both separately and with partners, is now called upon to show creativity and commitment in acting on and, where appropriate, expanding this wealth of ideas and to actively support the ambitious attempts to invigorate them in existing forums and alliances.

The German Council for Sustainable Development (RNE) recommends that the new Federal Government combine the strengthening of multilateralism referred to in the Coalition Agreement with the objectives of social-ecological transformation at the global level and, to do so, adopt many of the UN Secretary-General's proposals as its own.

¹ UN General Assembly (2020): [Declaration on the commemoration of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the United Nations](#) (accessed: 10 January 2022).

² United Nations (2021): [Our Common Agenda – Report of the Secretary-General](#) (accessed: 10 January 2022).



In the following, the RNE sets out, on the basis of the Our Common Agenda report, (1) concrete recommendations for action on implementing the agenda in Germany, (2) approaches for strengthening multilateralism in the United Nations and (3) possible courses of action for enhancing governance of the global commons.

(1) The Federal Government should actively implement selected proposals of the UN Secretary-General in Germany and lead the way internationally

Within the Federal Government, the implementation of the **2030 Agenda**, the fostering of **international alliances** and the **work with partners** within processes of the **United Nations** are distributed over multiple departments. The RNE recommends that the new government markedly reinforce the **coordination between the departments as well as political coherence** in line with the Coalition Agreement and the 2030 Agenda, especially on matters of international cooperation. **Multilateral approaches within cross-departmental subject-based strategies** (such as on climate change mitigation and adaptation or global health) should be explicitly developed and promoted³. Moreover, the government should draw up a **German UN strategy** and, in this context, develop **cross-departmental roles and work plans for sustainable development in, with and through Germany**. Up to now, the Federal Foreign Office has published a Cabinet report⁴ on the Federal Government's cooperation with the United Nations every two years ex-post. A German UN strategy could take the form of an ex-ante instrument, which would promote a coordinated and coherent position of the Federal Government and furthermore would enable targeted participation of interested actors. On the basis of such a strategy, the government should forge **alliances for tangible commitments in the transformation areas** of the 2030 Agenda⁵.

³ Weinlich, Baumann and Lundsgaarde (2020): [Germany's Funding to the UNDS: Towards a Better Mix for Stronger Multilateralism](#). Analyses and Statements 14/2020, Bonn: German Development Institute.

⁴ Federal Foreign Office (2020): [Bericht der Bundesregierung zur Zusammenarbeit zwischen der Bundesrepublik Deutschland und den Vereinten Nationen und einzelnen, global agierenden, internationalen Organisationen und Institutionen im Rahmen des VN-Systems in den Jahren 2018 und 2019 \[Federal Government Report on cooperation between the Federal Republic of Germany and the United Nations and individual, globally active, international organisations and institutions within the framework of the UN system in 2018 and 2019\]](#) (accessed: 10 January 2022).

⁵ In order to address the 17 UN SDGs coherently, the Global Sustainable Development Report (2019) has identified six transformation areas as entry points and four levers to bring about transformation (1. Governance, 2. Economy and finance, 3. Individual and collective action and 4. Science and technology). Building on this, the German Sustainable Development Strategy sets out six areas of transformation targeting the priorities in, with and through Germany.



The Federal Government should aim to **visibly and strategically link its own national processes with international ones**.⁶ It should use, for example, the **High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF)** to help ramp up the ambition worldwide to put the 2030 Agenda into practice, also within the relevant EU coordination processes and with the other EU Member States. To this end, the RNE advises the Federal Government to develop, within the German UN strategy, an **annual plan of action for the four-year HLPF cycle** with the involvement of all federal departments. This would also include early and transparent communication around how the government intends to engage the relevant stakeholder groups in Germany.

The Guterres report views **social cohesion at the national level as essential** for also being able to champion solidarity globally. Some of its proposals, such as for basic social security, are aimed at less affluent countries. Others are also relevant for Germany, such as the call to allow **inclusive national dialogue formats on the future of the country** and greater political participation by young people, to boost science and expertise, to fight corruption, racism and discrimination, to promote gender equality and to fully meet our human rights obligations, not least in the context of flight and migration.

Furthermore, Secretary-General Guterres urges progress in **identifying and valuing additional ways to measure wealth beyond economic power**. Here the Federal Government needs on the one hand to apply existing but not yet consensual measurement methods for Germany, and on the other to consolidate the ongoing preliminary work on this into international processes and step-up efforts towards an agreement.⁷

(2) The Federal Government should advocate and support a more inclusive and networked multilateralism in the United Nations

The Federal Government should respond to the UN Secretary-General's appeal in a coordinated and ambitious manner and also push for a more inclusive and networked multilateralism at the international level. Many of the report's key requirements cannot be implemented without a great deal of political will and assurance on financial resources. Given the tense geopolitical situation, but also the reservations many countries have towards strong global structures, it is first

⁶ A good place to start is the Federal Foreign Office's white paper on multilateralism: Federal Government (2021) [A Multilateralism for the People. Federal Government White Paper](#) (accessed: 10 January 2022).

⁷ See also the final report of the committee of enquiry "[Wachstum, Wohlstand, Lebensqualität - Wege zu nachhaltigem Wirtschaften und gesellschaftlichem Fortschritt in der Sozialen Marktwirtschaft](#)" [*Growth, Prosperity, Quality of Life – Pathways to a Sustainable Economy and Societal Advancement in the Social Market Economy*]. (German Bundestag 2013; <https://dserver.bundestag.de/btd/17/133/1713300.pdf>) (accessed: 10 January 2022).



and foremost **political commitment along with mediation and negotiating skills that are required**. The RNE recommends that the Federal Government visibly and purposefully support the UN Secretary-General, within the context of the follow-up and consultation processes⁸ agreed in November 2021, in the reforming of the UN institutions and engage constructively in the proposed participation formats and processes. Moreover, as the demands set out in the Guterres report cannot be successfully implemented without **strong and inclusive North-South relations**, the German government must look to strong alliances with its partner countries in the Global South or – in matters of climate, for instance – embark on new ones.

The UN Secretary-General proposes a **high-level Summit of the Future for 2023**. Accordingly, the RNE advises the Federal Government to support this proposal and get involved in the process in close collaboration with the relevant EU coordination processes and its European partner countries. The Conference on the Future of Europe has already taught us that for a reform process to succeed, a concrete objective or vision must be formulated and a transparent and inclusive participation structure of the organised civil society must be defined along with specific work processes with set goals and timelines.

To enable a rapid and active response in the future in the event of complex crises with global reach, the UN Secretary-General proposes the creation of a mechanism that can swiftly trigger an **Emergency Platform**. Once activated, this would bring together those actors who were vital for handling such a crisis. Along with the Member States and the UN system, these would include international financial institutions, regional bodies, civil society, the private sector and research bodies. Possible instances of deployment could be future economic crises or crises where security, climate change or health collide. The report does not specify the possible decision-making powers of such a body, but nevertheless proposes that modalities for its activation and deactivation, composition and financing should be clarified in advance, to avoid losing precious time in an emergency. The RNE recommends that the Federal Government fundamentally support the idea. **The world is better prepared for future crises if the UN system is able to act swiftly in an emergency** and the UN Secretary-General has a convening role.

In his report, the Secretary-General also urges Member States to examine and support **proposals for the reform of existing intergovernmental organs of the United Nations**.⁹

For instance, Guterres proposes the establishment of a **Biennial Summit at the level of Heads of State and Government between the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), the G20 and the heads of international financial institutions**, which he himself would also attend. Such a gathering could **improve coordination between financial and sustainability issues** and encourage the

⁸ UN General Assembly (2021): [Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 15 November 2021 \(A/RES/76/6\)](#) (accessed: 10 January 2022).

⁹ UN Secretary-General (2021): Our Common Agenda, p. 76 ff. (accessed: 10 January 2022).



resolution of topics like international debt, but also boost investment in a green and just path to prosperity. The RNE advises the government to embrace and support this instrument. The summits would bring the global finance system better into line with global priorities like the 2030 Agenda, tackling inequality, and climate change. There have long been calls for better cooperation between international financial institutions and the UN. Collaboration between the G20 and ECOSOC on global governance could provide useful impetus for the respective institutions: the North-South divide could start to shift, and development based purely on economic growth could be expanded to include political and human-rights aspects too. This could, however, face potential resistance. In its policy paper on UN sustainability governance¹⁰ from February 2021, the RNE already recommended the creation of a **UN sustainability council** and gave suggestions for upgrading ECOSOC, intensifying report analysis, anchoring foresight within institutions and operating more strategically overall. To date, such a **high-level, cross-cutting instrument of coordination at the UN level** has been lacking – one which could transcend the grouping into G7, G20 and G77 and lead to greater coherence around the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement. With this in mind, the Federal Government should support making this regular summit permanent.

The UN Secretary-General additionally urges Member States to play a more active and visible part in the HLPF in July each year. Furthermore, in the course of the reviews of ECOSOC and the HLPF in 2021, two new dialogue formats were developed at UN level: **(1) the ECOSOC Coordination Segment**¹¹ in the spring and **(2) the SDG Moment** in the autumn. The Coordination Segment in February gives the German and other governments the opportunity to push for the ECOSOC system to align its work purposefully with the HLPF ministerial meeting in July and the Ministerial Declaration to be approved there, and in particular to consolidate the economic and social issues with the environmental challenges¹². It would be particularly important to step up the focus on systemic interdependencies in order to leverage synergies and resolve conflicting goals. At the same time, the Coordination Segment should work towards ensuring that the decisions of the ECOSOC/HLPF Ministerial Declaration from the previous year are acted upon and, as part of the work of the ECOSOC system, implemented and retained. At the SDG Moment set to open the UN General Assembly in September, outstanding contributions to the Decade of Action should be honoured and/or, as suggested above, commitments by transformation alliances presented.

As recommended by the UN Secretary-General, the Federal Government should further underpin the human rights bodies and work of the United Nations, be it in relation to **transparent election processes for the Human Rights Council**, or to

¹⁰ RNE (2021): [Reform options for effective UN sustainable development governance](#). German Council for Sustainable Development.

¹¹ This replaces the Integration Segment, which previously took place immediately before the HLPF.

¹² Beisheim, Marianne (2021): [Conflicts in UN Reform Negotiations. Insights into and from the Review of the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development](#). Research Paper 2021/S 22, Berlin: German Institute for International and Security Affairs.



more solid and flexible financing. Furthermore, the government should **attribute more relevance to the Universal Periodic Review process on human rights.**

The role of the **Peacebuilding Commission** in proactive **crisis prevention** and tackling cross-cutting issues should be strengthened. Equally, Guterres's recommendation **to update the structure of the UN Security Council so that all parts of the world are fairly represented** should be emphatically supported by the Federal Government.

Another recommendation by the UN Secretary-General is for greater inclusion of civil society representatives as well as other stakeholders in the work of the United Nations. This would involve, for instance, setting up 'focal points' for civil society actors to contribute in all UN entities and modernising the work of the United Nations Office for Partnerships. **The RNE recommends that the Federal Government push at the UN level for the inclusion of civil society actors.** What is more, particularly those who are most affected by the decisions of UN processes and partnerships should have a right to be heard. The World Committee on Food Security (CFS) and the Secretariat of the Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples' Mechanism (CSM) are regarded as model participation platforms, which successfully give a voice to those who are affected by political decisions.¹³ **Partnerships between UN organisations and the private sector should be designed such that government action cannot be undermined. Framework conditions for participation structures should especially be aimed at transparency, accountability and the avoidance of negative social and environmental impacts.**

(3) Courses of action for enhancing governance of the global commons

Global public goods (e.g. oceans, forests) are the lifeblood of humanity and especially of future generations. Equally vital is the need to secure global health, the world economy and peace. The localised view and limited resources of nation states cannot accommodate this.¹⁴ The Guterres report therefore calls for a new **global deal**, at the heart of which are greatly improved protection or provision of global public goods and the addressing of global risks. For this mission to succeed, it is imperative to strengthen the international governance structures of institutions. Accordingly, the UN Secretary-General intends to convene a **High-level Advisory Board, led by former Heads of State and Government**, whose

¹³ Duncan and Claeys (2018): [Politicizing food security governance through participation: opportunities and opposition](#). *Food Security* (10): 1411-1424.

¹⁴ Messner and Scholz (2018) [Globale Gemeinwohlorientierung als Fluchtpunkt internationaler Kooperation für nachhaltige Entwicklung: ein Perspektivwechsel \[Global Orientation towards Global Commons as a Focus of International Cooperation for Sustainable Development: A Change of Perspective\]](#). *Zeitschrift für Außen- und Sicherheitspolitik [Journal of Foreign and Security Policy]* (11): 561-572.



job would include identifying, on the basis of his report, promising options for better international governance of the global commons. Such a body would aim to accelerate the hitherto cumbersome UN advisory processes. The Federal Government should support this process both politically and financially, but also with substantive proposals of its own. It should use its membership of the EU and of group formats like the G7 presidency, the G20 and the Alliance for Multilateralism to lead constructive discussions on better governance of global public goods with the UN as the central point of connection.

Guterres is also developing a number of proposals for how to **better integrate the concerns of both young people and future generations into UN processes** – also in order to devise a counterpoint to short-sighted and purely geopolitical interests. For the former, he proposes upgrading the existing role of Envoy on Youth to a Youth Office. For the latter, he would like to appoint, inter alia, a Special Envoy for future generations, who should promote the long-term perspective in decision-making processes. Moreover, the UN Secretary-General invites the UN Member States to consider whether the suspended **UN Trusteeship Council** should be repurposed as a **multi-stakeholder body to tackle major emerging challenges**. Established to facilitate various decolonisation processes, the Trusteeship Council was decommissioned in 1994. However, the structure continues to exist on paper in the UN Charter and could be used to advise on longer-term governance problems, the preservation of global public goods, global risk aversion as well as the interests of future generations. That being said, a number of countries have voiced reservations about repurposing a politically and historically significant body for pragmatic reasons. The RNE asks the Federal Government to consider carefully the pros and cons of this option. Of course, the needs of future generations are not just a concern of the UN Charter, but also notably of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The government should support the efforts to find acceptable instruments of governance for this topic.

Systematic foresight should be a central element in a world with escalating environmental and health risks.¹⁵ As such, the UN Secretary-General proposes a **Strategic Foresight and Global Risk Report by the UN every five years**. The Federal Government should take up and support this proposal, enlisting support among other Member States for adequate financing and insisting on systematic foresight being anchored within the institutions. The aforementioned Emergency Platform could access this information, as could the Independent Group of Scientists who produce the **Global Sustainable Development Report (GSDR)**¹⁶. Essentially, such advisory bodies require appropriate facilities to ensure they can contribute effectively.

¹⁵ Brozus (2019): [Strategische Vorausschau für multilaterale Politik. Herausforderungen, Chancen und Erfolgsfaktoren](#), SWP-Aktuell (55) [*Strategic Forecast for Multilateral Policy. Challenges, Opportunities and Success Factors. SWP-Latest (55)*].

¹⁶ Global Sustainable Development Report (2019): [The Future is now: Science for achieving sustainable development](#) (accessed: 10 January 2022).

About the German Council for Sustainable Development

The German Council for Sustainable Development (RNE) advises the Federal Government on issues of sustainability policy. It acts in this capacity as an independent entity, and since 2001 its members have been appointed every three years by the Federal Government. The Council consists of 14 public figures, comprising individuals from civil society, the business sector, the scientific community and the political arena. It has been chaired since 2020 by Dr Werner Schnappauf and his deputy, Prof. Dr Imme Scholz. The Council also carries out its own projects aimed at advancing the topic of sustainability in practical terms. In addition, it helps shape topically focused momentum within policy and societal dialogue. The Council is supported in its activities by an administrative office based in Berlin.

Imprint

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