

The German Approach to Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

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Excellences, Ladies and Gentlemen!

It is an honor for me that you invited me address such an extraordinary audience. I particularly appreciate the work of the Namibian Sustainable Development Advisory Council and I again thank the GIZ for first making contact last year. I also thank Martha Naanda, the Vice-Chair of SDAC, for her brilliant panel appearance in our annual conference in Berlin back in 2015 and for her continued contributing to forming what will become the *open SDGclub.Berlin* later this year.

I thank you for the opportunity to share some insights into the German approach to sustainable development. For your country establishment and work profile of your SDAC certainly is a good move. In spite of a lot of differences between our Councils there are quite a few aspects that we share collectively, and that makes a perfect good reason to share experiences and to compare notes.

Please be reminded that all I have to present is work in progress. The German state of the art is a momentary view. It results partially from experiences from previous tries and approaches that either failed or did not live up to expectancies. As we all know, for a nationally adapted sustainable development there is no silver bullet. It all comes down to set priorities and to focus on what really matters in the national context.

Germany is basically following an inclusive and cross-cutting to sustainable development. In a comprehensive way we seek to address all three dimensions of economy, ecology and social. There, of course, is also a dimension for culture and the arts, as there is the necessity to invest serious funds into science and research. We have to better understand what is needed to safeguarding the planetary boundaries and really understand the concept of sustainable development. To do so, the German approach builds on mainly three major elements.

Firstly, we use targets and timetables as the crucial political tools of a national sustainable development strategy. Targets must be agreed upon in Government and Parliament. Targets and timetables, pretty much implement the notion of “what gets measured gets done”. Of course, we know that not everything that gets measured automatically gets managed. You can easily find yourself stuck in number crunching with no political action being taken. But it is more than a fair guess that a target that does not get into the book at all will probably not make any difference at all. Targets and timetables are a valuable asset for the long term thinking. If the time frame they cover is longer than regular time periods (given by e.g. return on investment, political mandates, life span) to strengthen coordinating and steering processes, both horizontal and vertical.

Secondly, we create space. Sustainability is, above all, about how to involve and empower people. In a world with geopolitical and financial disturbances, carbon constraints, resource restrictions and planetary boundaries the very idea of collective responsibility is in deep trouble. To say the least, it needs to encourage and to positively couple many ideas and action that otherwise are left isolated and most probably meaningless. Do the right thing and spread the news. That is why, in our understanding, aspirational steps towards sustainability need public arenas. In Germany, some progress has been made. But we still have to build the audience and the deeper understanding for meeting the challenges ahead. Everywhere engaged people, activists and leaders in the public and private sector can gain from visibility in their context and in the larger public. In the work of the German RNE, this translates into low-budget-solutions such as using social media and newsletters. We created the annual summit on sustainable development with more than 1000 participants showing up. With our neighbors in Europe Germany features the European Sustainable Development Week, a call for grassroots action. Again, this is a low-budget style projects. It invites grassroots and local communities to poste actions on a website. This year, in Germany alone, we were happy to count 1800 separate actions and contributions.

Thirdly, we thrive to empower institutions to deal with sustainable thinking. The principal idea is that of a transformative approach to institutions which means to transform capacities and competences where there are, as opposed to just create and add new institutions. Transformative action sets out to realign responsibilities and the patterns of reporting and decision making. Top level involvement is essential on every level of decision making and leadership.

On Germany's federal level the PMO (Chancellery) is of prime importance. Here is where the process is being drive. Here is where you expect the source of coherence and mutual responsibility. Here is where the Permanent (State) Secretaries drive the German Sustainable Development Strategy and provide progress reports every other year (since 2002). The main responsibility lies with the Minister of the Chancellery, Peter Altmaier. The Statistical Office reports on indicators and assesses whether targets will be met and where the need for additional measures is evident from the data. In these days, the German Government tabled the draft for a new sustainable development strategy. The impact of the SDGs is prompting extended changes in content (more areas covered), time horizon (now 2030 with a longer perspective where appropriate), and networking (vertical integration). There is also a housekeeping angle. In a way, it is about "walk your talk". The Government also addresses its public procurement practice in order to scale up sustainable development. The same is true for what you can sum up as "housekeeping" addressing e.g. event, transportation or travel management.

Since 2004, the German Parliament has a Parliamentary body exclusively devoted to sustainable development. It controls the Federal Sustainability policies. In particular, and with a formal procedure it runs the legal sustainability assessment. This instrument checks whether any piece of legislation the Federal Government brings in for parliamentary decision making takes reference to the goals and principles of the federal Sustainability Strategy. Of course, Parliamentarians engaged in this commission also to play an important role in the general agenda setting for sustainability policies in Germany.

The German Council for Sustainable Development plays the most innovative part in this institutional setup. Council Members are appointed by the Chancellor. They serve

3-yrs terms which can be continued. Council Members come from pretty much all parts of society and represent the churches, the nongovernmental movement, the small and medium sized enterprises as well as the corporate sector, the trade unions, the local communities, the academia. It is my job is to organize the Council, both content-wise and regarding its political standing, and to connect our work with the Government and the larger arena of stakeholder groups. Chancellor Gerhard Schröder first established the Council in 2001. The Council reports to the PMO. Agenda-wise, we are independent. The Council is staffed and budgeted. Its prime task is to advise the Government on all issues of sustainability and, secondly, to advance the practice by e.g. proposing and conducting projects that would address the broader public. Thirdly, the Council facilitates projects such as the Peer Review and catalyzes partnerships and dialogue such as the voluntary meetings of a group of Lord Mayors that are committed to the cause of sustainability.

When the list of SDG emerged and took shape in 2014, the Chancellery asked the German Council for Sustainable Development to produce a first assessment. We scrutinized the set of 17 SDGs against the backdrop of a potential German implementation. We analyzed gaps and shortcomings as well as options and chances for a German reading of SDGs. The RNE recommendation delivered a first outline of how to re-shape the German national sustainability strategy whose relaunch is due by the end of 2016.

Now, I want to cover another angle. I know from the talks with SDAC that how we address the private sector is of most interest for you. Actually, we follow different tiers. We are highlighting best practices performance. For this purpose we form part of the prestigious German Sustainability Award. As for sustainability reporting we set up the German Sustainability Code as a robust and easily to access set of ambitious criteria describing what a company, independent from size and business case, has to think about in order to comply to sustainable development. The Code is generic and builds on practical experiences from the field. It works for very different branches and under different economic frameworks. I can tell this from concrete experiences from setting up Code-related arrangements between the RNE and the housing industry, the food industry, the saving banks, universities, and others, including international demand within the EU arena and beyond. Companies can upload the declaration of compliance to a databank that we provide. Other than internal costs in staff and internal research there are no costs implied for a given company.

Furthermore, there is a need to advance the impact of research and innovation for a sustainable economy. That is why the Council is increasingly involved in a couple of research efforts and in research policies.

All this we do in the understanding that for a given company there a different ways to get engaged into sustainability management. Some might see reputation and human resources as a key, for others it is the supply chain and customers or investors relation. For some, the branding of products and change management in emerging markets turns out to be a key driver. Or the environmental and social contingency is requesting ambitious responses.

The point of departure is a quite simple question: In ten years from now will you still run the very same business case? If only the slightest doubt occurs you made the first contact with the transformative impact of sustainability thinking.

Finally I would like to make a comment on the SDGs: They are the driving force for renewed efforts toward sustainable development.

Granted, no diplomatic agreement will ever solve the world's problems in one swoop. But what the passing of the SDGs and the Paris agreement on climate change mitigation do show us, though, is what the world can accomplish when we work together. This is not a given. Germany played an active role during the intergovernmental deliberations that lead to the SDGs. The SDGs signal that there is a longing for leadership and perspective. In my opinion, this is growing beyond the level the mainstream in political culture and business is apt to provide right now. That is why SDGs should be used to catalyze new networks and action.

In this, we are all in together. All countries are countries in development. That is the basic message of the SDG universality. SDGs must be implemented on national level. That, in return, asks for new ideas how to create mutuality und collective networks that would facilitate sharing experiences e.g. on addressing supply chains, consumptions patterns, wicked risks, emergencies or chances and opportunities.

We need to work out alternative pathways and innovation options. For Germany, we advocate a new approach that empowers the leverage for sustainability solutions (a) at home, (b) in global responsibility by German development assistance, (c) in respect to solutions that can be leveraged domestically and then are able to make a significant difference when used globally (leverage through upscaling solutions).

Germany has recently undergone significant changes and transformations: The peaceful reunification in 1990, the change in domestic economic policies in 2005 and referring to the European fiscal crisis since 2008. The German Energiewende, of course, is part of the transformation towards a sustainable development. From our neighbors and friends throughout Europe we receive praise and criticism in equal measure. This holds true both for Germany's response to the recent surge of refugees and for its handling of the euro crisis. And I also notice this when it comes to the question of how to implement best the SDGs into national approaches.

Thus, disruptive development and transformative action are not new. With the sustainability agenda, however, comes a new element. For Germany, the interlinkage between national leverage and global responsibility is a quite new feature. 2016 is not just the year of simple implementation of SDGs. The Future We Want (as the UN titled the World Summit 2012 in Rio) is not where we live in right now.

Implementation is never simple in the first place. There will be hard choices, no doubt. Hard choices require deliberation not hard words and a way of responsible, restrained, and reflective leadership. Sustainability is not a safe heaven. Saving the future has never been about playing it safe. That is why stakeholder bodies such as the SDAC and the RNE are of high value for both encouraging bold political decision making as well as for catalyzing success.

I thank you for your attention.