



Parliamentary Advisory Council on Sustainable Development discussion paper on the German Sustainable Development Strategy – 2020 version

1. Introduction

Following the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were applied in a national context by the 2016 version of the German Sustainable Development Strategy. The Parliamentary Advisory Council on Sustainable Development emphasises that Germany was one of the first countries in the world to take this step and thus has a pioneering role in this respect. With this paper, the Advisory Council outlines its position on the further development of the German Sustainable Development Strategy since its most recent update in 2018.

The Advisory Council reiterates its assessment that Germany can do more in terms of sustainability than has been the case to date, and that the core challenge here is providing the 2030 Agenda with political impetus. The new version of the Sustainable Development Strategy for 2020 cannot therefore be merely one government strategy among many. The Advisory Council calls upon the Federal Government to develop the new version of the national strategy as an overarching strategy, the principles and objectives of which are implemented consistently and coherently in numerous individual strategies and programmes – across a variety of areas such as digital transformation, research and innovation, demographics, industrial policy, the future of work, the supply of raw materials, climate policy and biodiversity.

2. Sustainable development: The central political challenge of our time

2.1. National challenges

The commitment in the current coalition agreement that *“the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the promotion of sustainable development are a measure of the government’s actions”*, needs to be better translated into specific ongoing action by the Federal Government. In the opinion of the Advisory Council, this means that every law, every strategy, every report and every decision made by the Federal Government at international and European level must consciously support the target of achieving all 17 SDGs on time.

In the view of the Advisory Council, too seldom do members of the Federal Government use the opportunity to place their actions in the context of the UN SDGs and make these better known to the public. In future, the Federal Government should explain to citizens to a greater extent than before that their actions are in support of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.



In order to provide the new version of the strategy with the necessary political weight, the Advisory Council calls upon the Federal Government to position its publication as prominently as possible in the media and to combine it with a government policy statement in the German Bundestag.

2.2. Sustainable development at international level

The Advisory Council shares the conclusion drawn in the 2018 strategy that multilateralism can no longer be taken for granted today, and thus affirms the conclusion that international consensus on the 2030 Agenda is all the more important in order to solve global challenges.

The Advisory Council welcomes the fact that the Federal Government has anchored the “triple approach” in the strategy, in other words the implementation of the 2030 Agenda through measures in, with and by Germany. The Advisory Council calls upon the Federal Government to observe this approach to a greater degree and to expand upon it, both in daily government activities, such as legislation impact assessment and decisions at European and international level, as well as when monitoring the strategy’s progress.

The SDG Summit which took place during the UN General Assembly in summer 2019 should have sent out a strong political signal on the part of the heads of state and government in support of an accelerated implementation of the necessary economic and societal changes. The Advisory Council supports the statement made by the State Secretaries’ Committee on Sustainable Development at the summit, “that the summit appeals to the global public to recognise the necessity of an accelerated implementation of the 2030 Agenda, as the goals cannot be achieved by 2030 at the current pace [...]”. The Advisory Council notes, however, that this political signal did not reach the international and German public. Likewise, the Advisory Council observes that the annual meetings of the High Level Political Forum (HLPF) at United Nations level result in signals being sent out to the German public only to a very limited extent.

That is why the Advisory Council calls upon the Federal Government to develop an “activating communication strategy” to accompany the HLPF, as recommended by the Council for Sustainable Development in its paper of 24 August 2018 entitled “Steering global sustainability away from a dead end”.

In order to increase the relevance of the HLPF among the German public, the Advisory Council calls upon the Federal Government to provide its upcoming voluntary reports on the HLPF to the German Bundestag in good time before these are submitted to the United Nations.

In order to strengthen the political relevance of the HLPF, the Advisory Council calls upon the Federal Government to continue its active involvement in the current HLPF reform process. In this respect, the Advisory Council supports the recommendation by the Council for Sustainable Development to introduce stakeholder-based peer reviews as an instrument in the HLPF process and to strengthen stakeholder rights.



In order to highlight the significance of multilateralism for sustainable development, the Advisory Council appeals for the UN Secretary-General to be invited to give a keynote speech in the German Bundestag.

2.3. Sustainable development at European level

Sustainable development is anchored in the Treaty on European Union as a guiding principle. However, the Advisory Council shares the conclusion drawn in the 2018 strategy that how the 2030 Agenda is brought into EU policy needs to be made more specific. Little has changed in this respect to date.

The Advisory Council recognises that with the Green Deal, the EU Commission has granted prominent status within its work programme to the environmental aspects of the 2030 Agenda. A comprehensive EU sustainable development strategy must also, however, ensure multi-level and cross-departmental coherence in European and global sustainability policy beyond the scope of the Green Deal. In concrete terms, this means that political processes within the EU, such as CAP reform, budget debates, along with trade and taxation agreements, are negotiated in line with the SDGs.

The Advisory Council welcomes the debate regarding the development and implementation of a new EU sustainability strategy, initiated with the European Commission's reflection paper 'Towards a Sustainable Europe by 2030' of 30 January 2019. In Scenario 1, "An overarching EU SDGs strategy guiding the actions of the EU and its Member States", the Advisory Council sees a constructive framework for sustainability policy at EU level, in which the involvement of the Member States and a coherent approach across multiple departments and levels is guaranteed.

On the whole, the Advisory Council regrets that the EU Commission has not yet met the demands of the Council and the EU Parliament in terms of developing an independent strategy for the implementation of the SDGs. The Advisory Council calls upon the Federal Government to use Germany's Presidency of the Council of the EU to push such a strategy forward. This should ensure that all policy areas are shaped in line with the SDGs.

A strategy for a sustainable Europe by 2030 should replace the current Europe 2020 strategy and serve as a compass for all EU policies, programmes, governance structures and instruments, to ensure policy coherence for sustainable development.

2.4. Cooperation between the Federation, Länder and municipalities

Cooperation between the Federation and the Länder on sustainable development topics is strengthened by the decision on Federation-Länder cooperation on sustainable development of 10 December 2018. In particular, the decision promotes an ongoing exchange between the Federation and the Länder within the framework of the Federation-Länder exchange of experiences on sustainable development. This has also resulted in the proposal from both levels to communicate to society at large the importance of sustainability through more intensive communication, to accompany the economic and societal changes called for in the 2030 Agenda.



The Advisory Council shares the conclusion drawn in the 2018 strategy that the Länder play a key role in implementing the Agenda, as under Germany's federal structure the Länder and municipalities have legislative and administrative powers in important areas of sustainable development. Municipalities also play a significant role, in many instances working within their remit on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Strategy and the 2030 Agenda with huge commitment.

The Advisory Council appreciates the work of the Regional Hubs for Sustainability Strategies (RENN) to support the implementation of pioneering regional and municipal initiatives, and sees an essential foundation here for improved and more coherent goal achievement.

For this reason, the Advisory Council calls for sustainable development policy to be granted appropriate status in the exchange between the Federation, the Länder and the municipalities, and to intensify common sustainable development policy, by holding a "Conference of Sustainable Development Ministers" twice a year in future, in the same format as the Conference of Environmental Ministers, and involving representatives from national local-authority associations. At these regular conferences, concrete decisions should be taken across multiple levels with the aim of achieving implementation of the SDGs on time.

3. Implementation status of the German Sustainable Development Strategy

3.1. Strengthening policy coherence

In order to strengthen coherence in sustainable development policy – in other words, align all Federal Government policy with achieving the goals of the German Sustainable Development Strategy on time – the Advisory Council recommends that in future the Federal Ministries coordinate the sustainability aspects of departmental projects, programmes and action plans early on in the drafting phase. This has been described in detail in the German Sustainable Development Strategy since the 2016 version in the section "Procedures within the Federal Government for the implementation of the Strategy". However, to date these processes have not really been implemented.

The Advisory Council welcomes the fact that the Federal Government already took the decision to continue the German Sustainable Development Strategy in 2018, earlier than originally planned. The Advisory Council supports keeping these shorter intervals for renewal.

The Advisory Council calls upon the Federal Government to carry out a comprehensive review of the implementation and achievement of the German Sustainable Development Strategy. This can take place as part of the strategy updates carried out every two years.

Based on this review, the Federal Government should in future set interim targets that it wishes to achieve over the course of an electoral term for each sustainability goal. A catalogue of measures should be proposed for these. The interim targets and the catalogue of measures will be adopted by the Bundestag. Progress on these targets will be reviewed and commented on by the German Bundestag in future as part of an



annual plenary week focussing on sustainable development and climate (Bundestag printed paper 19/15128).

3.1.1. Implementation in the ministries

Despite the guiding principles of the Sustainable Development Strategy being to consider sustainable development in all policy areas, the programmes and action plans developed by the ministries often do not demonstrate any explicit connection to the strategy. A clear indication of which goals an initiative specifically serves, including consideration of potential target conflicts, should be part of all programmes and action plans.

Ministry coordinators

The Advisory Council welcomes the appointment of ministry coordinators for sustainable development, as introduced in 2017. However, the Advisory Council notes a lack of internal and external visibility of the activities of these coordinators. In concrete terms, this concerns the appraisal of Sustainability Impact Assessment and the departmental reports (see below).

The Advisory Council agrees with the assessment contained in the Peer Review Report, and made by the German Advisory Council on the Environment, that appropriate resources should be provided to the ministry coordinators, also using individual departmental budgets, to ensure consistent implementation of sustainable development policy. The Parliamentary Advisory Council calls upon the Federal Government to define a catalogue of measures for how sustainable development can be better anchored and implemented in the respective ministries. The sustainable development coordinators should be equipped with additional powers to this end. They should examine the respective measures within their ministries in terms of sustainable development relevance and be able to raise objections internally should they detect any infringements, and suggest further measures or appropriate additions for the ministry.

Furthermore, the Advisory Council suggests establishing working meetings or workshops for all those in positions of responsibility at the various ministries, the Bundestag and other authorities involved, such as the Federal Statistical Office and the Bundesrechnungshof (the German SAI) in order to facilitate an improved exchange and the use of working synergies. The Advisory Council stresses the necessity of a constant exchange between the various actors in order to ensure more coherence in the work.

Departmental reports

The Advisory Council supports the fact that nearly all ministries have drafted a report on the implementation of the sustainable development goals within their remit and calls upon those ministries yet to do so to follow suit. In addition, the Advisory Council calls upon the ministries to make this a permanent practice and to agree on a uniform format for the sustainability reports. Key to an improved quality of the reports is that all departments consider the full spectrum of all 17 SDGs in their reports on their own organisation's behaviour. The Advisory Council is committed to the departmental



reports being provided to Parliament in future and debated on an annual basis during the plenary week focusing on sustainable development and climate.

Sustainable administrative activities

The Advisory Council welcomes the fact that the Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety and the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development have set a good example and implemented the Eco-Management and Audit Scheme (EMAS). The Advisory Council reiterates its call from its statement on the Peer Review Report for the other ministries and the subordinate federal authorities to follow this example. A corresponding roadmap should, in the view of the Advisory Council, be part of Germany's new National Sustainable Development Strategy.

3.1.2. Sustainability Impact Assessment

The change in management rules for the guiding principles undertaken in the last update to the strategy is expedient, however it has not resulted in any tangible improvement of the Sustainability Impact Assessment under Rule 44(1) of the Joint Rules of Procedure of the Federal Ministries (*Gemeinsame Geschäftsordnung der Bundesministerien* - GGO), an obligation which is monitored by the Advisory Council. It is clear that the ministries are working on Sustainability Impact Assessment with varying degrees of quality. The Advisory Council therefore supports the more consistent use of programmes for electronic sustainability assessment adopted by the State Secretaries' Committee. Likewise, the Advisory Council encourages the ministry coordinators to ensure that sustainability impact assessment within the ministries is consistent and comparable.

Further developing sustainability impact assessment into comprehensive legislative sustainability impact assessment

The Advisory Council calls for the timely and comprehensive representation of sustainability aspects in the legislative process. In future, ministries should adhere to a greater extent to the wording of Rule 44(1) of the Joint Rules of Procedure of the Federal Ministries and indicate in detail and transparently whether the impact of a proposal complies with sustainable development principles, and in particular which long-term impacts the proposal has. In doing so, it should be examined and indicated for each of the UN SDGs whether the legislation in question benefits the achievement of this goal, hinders it or has a neutral impact. In this way, greater transparency is to be created regarding the full impact of legislation on the sustainable development goals.

Legislative sustainability impact assessment should also extend to the impact of legislation on the achievement of the SDGs in, by and with Germany (triple approach), in order to also incorporate the international dimension.



In the event of any target conflicts in the achievement of individual SDGs, the Federal Government should, within the framework of sustainability impact assessment, provide reasons why it nonetheless upholds the proposed provision and what additional measures it is planning to resolve the target conflicts and to counteract negative developments in individual areas.

Not only the result of the assessment, but also the path taken to arrive at this result should be described, by publishing all assessment criteria and stages. In addition to this qualitative and substantive assessment, the impact of the legislation on the SDGs should be represented within a system of key figures and published alongside the compliance costs in the covering note of the legislation. The key figures should serve to present both the positive and any negative impact of legislation on the achievement of the SDGs in an easily graspable way.

Legislative sustainability impact assessment should be documented and communicated early on in the legislative process, in order to allow it to be examined by interested stakeholders within society or by the German Bundestag. Timely impact assessment allows possible alternative provisions to be discussed, with the aim of ensuring that the final draft legislation corresponds as far as possible to the UN SDGs and Germany's National Sustainable Development Strategy.

3.2. Involvement of social stakeholders – greater exchange and transparency

The Advisory Council welcomes the fact that with the most recent update to the strategy, the Federal Government has placed a strong emphasis on increasing the involvement of social stakeholders. Additional initiatives have created sustainability structures at various levels to support this.

Sustainability Forum

The Advisory Council supports the Sustainability Forum being held regularly, as it has been annually since 2017 at the Federal Chancellery. This is also in the interests of the exchange between a variety of sustainability stakeholders from society, research and politics. At the most recent forum in 2019, some stakeholders suggested bringing greater transparency to the application of the results of the consultation process. The Advisory Council expressly supports this call.

Science Platform Sustainability 2030

The Advisory Council emphasises the importance of the Science Platform Sustainability in developing scientific solutions. However, the exchange of knowledge is not yet sufficiently well established to allow findings to be communicated widely to all relevant stakeholders and institutions. As a participant in the Science Platform's broader steering committee, the Advisory Council is in favour of the targeted support for closer cooperation between all stakeholders, also extending outside the platform.

3.3. Work by the institutions

State Secretaries' Committee for Sustainable Development

The Advisory Council welcomes the State Secretaries' Committee's longer-term agenda-setting and planning, as suggested by the Peer Review Report. The Advisory



Council will continue to adopt position papers on the respective topics. However, the Advisory Council is not currently involved in the stakeholder process that precedes each meeting and resolution of the State Secretaries' Committee. The Advisory Council calls upon the State Secretaries' Committee for Sustainable Development to make the background documents sent to civil society representatives prior to its meetings also available to the Parliamentary Advisory Council.

At meetings of the Advisory Council attended by the Federal Government following up on the activities of the State Secretaries' Committee, the Council will pay greater attention to which of the points specifically called for by the Council have been incorporated into updates and resolutions and how the individual points of the final decision are discussed substantively.

The Advisory Council notes that the resolutions of the State Secretaries' Committee, published after their meetings, generally do not demonstrate much of a binding nature, and refers to the conclusion drawn in the Peer Review Report that the existence of the State Secretaries' Committee for Sustainable Development is not a sufficient prerequisite for achieving coherent sustainable development concepts. The Advisory Council joins the call made by the peers for the State Secretaries' Committee to develop a stronger programme of measures for implementing the SDGs. To this end, the Advisory Council suggests that the content of the resolutions focus to a greater extent on existing target conflicts of the topic areas at hand. As a cross-departmental, high-ranking body, the State Secretaries' Committee could also significantly strengthen its contribution to achieving the SDGs by tackling those topics in particular that are sources of conflict between the ministries, but which must be urgently dealt with in order to achieve the SDGs.

In the view of the Advisory Council, it would be beneficial for the visibility of sustainable development policy if the content and results of the meetings of the State Secretaries' Committee were followed and communicated to a greater extent by the media. It refers here in particular to the possibilities offered by the Federal Press Office, which in the view of the Council could be further expanded upon.

Parliamentary Advisory Council on Sustainable Development

The Parliamentary Advisory Council will continue in future to closely monitor the work of the Federal Government with respect to the implementation and ongoing development of the Sustainable Development Strategy. Furthermore, the Advisory Council aims to strengthen the position of the SDGs in the legislative process as a whole.

Additionally, starting in 2020, greater attention will be given to German sustainable development policy through an annual plenary week focusing on sustainability and climate, where these topics will be focus of parliamentary debates.

Council for Sustainable Development

The Advisory Council welcomes the fact that the Council was reappointed at the end of the 2019 period of appointment. The Advisory Council recognises the important work carried out by the Council for Sustainable Development, both substantively in its various statements, and for civil society in terms of networking. The Advisory Council is pleased to work closely with the Council for Sustainable Development.



4. Living up to “pioneer” status – improving sustainability indicators

The Advisory Council measures the credibility and the importance of the German Sustainable Development Strategy by its stated intention to achieve the specific goals laid out in the indicators within the strategy. The Advisory Council acknowledges that according to the 2018 Indicator Report, 35 of the 69 indicators have been achieved or are likely to be achieved based on current developments. It therefore follows that, as made clear by the report, Germany is not on track to meet 29 indicators. In order to live up to the claim that the 2030 Agenda is a measure of government activities, concrete action by the government is necessary in order to reverse the trend on these indicators.

A detailed overview of the off-track indicators is provided by the report published by the State Secretaries’ Committee in December 2019. In light of this, the Advisory Council will refrain from taking a position on the content of the individual indicators in this discussion paper. The results of the Peer Review on the 2018 Sustainable Development Strategy have shown that on the whole, Germany is in a good position to achieve an even more intensive implementation of the SDGs. In order for Germany to live up to its pioneer status again in future, it makes sense to readjust certain elements and expand indicators as well as to add new, more informative indicators, especially in an international context.

General observations / observations on multiple indicators

In the view of the Advisory Council, the fact that the goals and wording of the German Sustainable Development Strategy focus on the German context does not meet the triple approach standard of actions in, by and with Germany. The Advisory Council therefore recommends incorporating the triple approach to measures in, by and with Germany to a greater extent in the range of indicators within the Sustainable Development Strategy. The introduction of ambitious international indicators is particularly required in the fields of poverty, hunger, health, education, gender equality, consumption and production and climate protection.

Furthermore, the Advisory Council joins the Science Platform Sustainability 2030 in calling for the prioritisation of the guiding principles along with target areas and indicators that are especially lagging behind. The set target values should not be fixated upon, but these should instead be compared with other reference frameworks and made stricter where necessary.

In addition, it would be helpful for accuracy in the presentation of the target achievements for the existing quantitative indicators if the precise numerical value representing the degree of achievement were provided in addition to the weather symbol.

Adjust indicators for international comparability

In order to better emphasise the shared approach and relevancy of sustainable development, it is recommended that the national sustainability indicators be made more easily comparable. In order for these values to be compared in an international context, the Advisory Council recommends that the Federal Government follow the UN nomenclature more closely in future.