

GERMANY

Sustainable Germany – a long way to go

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This article is the introduction to a 166 page report published by a broad coalition from German civil society organizations with articles and contributions by 40 authors from NGOs, trade unions, social welfare organizations, environmental groups, critical farmer associations, peace activists and journalists. The full report in German is available at www.2030report.de and contains articles on each of the SDGs and more.

The 2030 Agenda and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) comprises a number of goals which concern the internal situation in Germany. Among these are goals which derive from the human rights obligations, such as in the areas of education, health and social security. Examples include reducing the proportion of poor people in Germany by half and increasing the proportion of young people who complete secondary education.

Other goals address the external effects of German politics and economy. They demand domestic measures which also have immediate impacts for people in the countries of the South. These include goals for reducing resource use, for changing unsustainable consumption and production patterns, but also for the relationship to migrants and refugees.

Still other goals go to Germany's international responsibility and solidarity. Besides the traditional development policy obligations the corresponding targets concern all areas of structural policies, particularly trade, investment and finance.

In September 2015, when the United Nations, personified by the heads of state and government of its Member States, solemnly adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development under the heading Transforming our World during a special session of the General Assembly, there was much acclaim from the ranks of civil society. Hardly anybody would have thought that the decision by the Rio+20 Conference 2012 to start a negotiation process on sustainability goals would result in an ambitious list of objectives. There was ample opposition, but it did not

prevail.

Experienced observers increasingly had a sense of “déjà vu”. Hadn't we been here before? Back then, the Earth Summit in Rio in 1992, the Agenda 21? An agenda for the 21st century for sustainable development was the size of a phone book, but not much of it was implemented. Or what about the Millennium Development Goals from 2000, less ambitious and yet only very incompletely implemented? It is understandable that the solemn adoption of the sustainability goals caused a lot less public enthusiasm or even euphoria than the Agenda 21 in Rio did. “Governments make lots of promises, but most of it is just a public relations move” – voices like this were frequently heard, if any notice at all was taken of the sustainability agenda.

However, sober political realism demands taking the governments at their word without illusions and using the 2030 Agenda as one more argument in the political debate in order to call for outstanding measures for more sustainability and to push them through politically even against opposition. Civil society is now doing this all over the world. We are, too.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are at the centre of the new development agenda. They consist of 17 goals and 169 targets. The SDGs are based on universal human rights and cover the social, ecological and economic dimensions of sustainable development as well as the areas of peace and international

cooperation.

The novelty of the SDGs consists in their universal validity. They stress the necessity of changes in one's own country, but at the same time they do not lose sight of the international responsibility of the rich countries, especially with respect to fighting poverty and hunger. Thus, the SDGs also affect German politics in three ways:

1) Goals which concern the internal situation in Germany, such as those that derive from human rights obligations, as in the areas of education, health and social security. Examples include reducing the proportion of poor people in Germany by half and increasing the proportion of young people who complete secondary education.

2) Goals that address the external effects of German politics and economy. They demand domestic measures which also have immediate impacts for people in the countries of the South. These include goals for reducing resource use, for changing unsustainable consumption and production patterns, as well as for the relationship to migrants and refugees.

3) Goals concerning Germany's international responsibility and solidarity. Besides the traditional development policy obligations (catchword 0.7% ODA target), the corresponding targets concern all areas of global structural policies (trade, investment, finance, tax governance etc.).

The SDGs are not maximal goals. They are the partly contradictory compromise of a process of diplomatic negotiation between the 193 UN Member States. Of course, every country is free to define additional goals or more ambitious targets beyond the SDGs. This also applies to Germany.

But the 2030 Agenda is more than just a list of sustainable development goals. The governments generally agreed that they could not merely define the common goals for the next 15 years in the new agenda without at the same time also describing the means and ways of achieving these goals. Until the very end, there were controversies about what these means should be and who is responsible for providing them.

Whether the sustainability strategies at the federal and regional level in Germany will also systematically reflect the means for implementing the agenda and its goals will determine the political relevance of the 2030 Agenda. Just as the SDGs with their multi-dimensional approach concern all policy fields, all departments must be tasked with their implementation to achieve a coherent overarching strategy. Whether this succeeds will depend on the extent to which civil society and the media use the SDGs as a frame of reference, make them known to the German public and demand their implementation from policy-makers.

Germany is not a pioneer in sustainability

Indeed, there is an enormous need for action. The full report shows that the much-quoted image of Germany as a "pioneer in sustainability" is largely wishful thinking and does not withstand critical examination – not even with respect to environmental policy. This is not only about progress being too slow. In many policy areas, Government policies continue to go in the wrong direction. The design of German transport policy has always been decoupled from environmental and climate policy criteria, and it will continue to rely unwaveringly on the development of road and air traffic and thus on more greenhouse gas emissions. German agricultural policy unflinchingly insists on an even greater concentration and orientation towards global markets, even though the consumers ever more clearly demand more agro-environmental protection, more animal protection, more regional production, more small-scale farming.

The dismantling of the Renewable Energy Sources Act actively slows down the energy transition, which in any case has only grudgingly been accepted by large parts of business and the political class. The obsession with a balanced budget was accorded constitutional status – but ecologically speaking the Federal Republic of Germany is living well beyond its means, at the expense of the rest of the world and future generations. The "ecological footprint" of Germans is enormous. Just two examples: Germany occupies more than 2 million hectares of agricultural land abroad in order to produce its enormous feedstuff imports. The

average per-capita CO2 emissions of Germans amount to 10 tonnes per year – at best 2 tonnes would be sustainable. It does not require many calculations to come to the conclusion that resource use such as that in Germany cannot be globalized, as it is not sustainable. It remains an unresolvable contradiction that the Government commits to sustainability but at the same time goes to any lengths in order to further increase this oversized resource use with more economic growth or, at least, not to allow it to shrink.

There is also a big gap between the demands for sustainability and the actions of the federal Government with respect to economic and social policy. For more and more people, the German model of a social market economy is a thing of the past. The politically intended low-wage sector now comprises a third of society, with few opportunities for education and upward mobility and with pre-programmed poverty amongst the elderly. The share of the affluent and of companies in tax revenue in this country has been in decline since the neo-liberally inspired reforms that began in 1998. For years, there have been laments about growing inequality: the richest parts of society become richer and richer, the middle class is shrinking, the working class is left behind. Most people do not have access to education as an opportunity for upward mobility. There is hardly any other European country where educational opportunities are as dependent on social background as in Germany.

However you look at it: we live in a world where significant economic growth hardly occurs anymore, no matter how hard policy-makers try; even where there is still growth, it does not result in less inequality. The latter can only be countered by active redistribution, with limitations and cuts also at the upper end of the income and wealth distribution. Less poverty inevitably means less wealth for the upper 10 percent. German policy-makers have still not warmed to an active policy of redistribution. If they take the 2030 Agenda seriously, they will have to come up with something.

Opposition to trade agreements is also about sustainability

The fierce controversies in Germany, in Europe, in the
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USA on free trade agreements such as the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) or the EU-Canada Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) are, fundamentally, debates about sustainability. Discussions about food standards, about protecting services of public interest from commercialization, about the transparency and democracy deficits of trade policy are ultimately an attempt by a critical public to prevent ecological and social backsliding and preserve room for political action in favour of sustainability.

But Germany's sustainability can also be questioned economically. Germany is piling up export surpluses like no other country – in 2015, these amounted to 247.8 billion euros. Statistically, every person living in Germany has generated 2,750 euros of export surplus vis-à-vis the rest of the world. This is not something for this country to be proud of. Unfortunately, one country's export surplus is inevitably the trade balance deficit of another. It does not take much to understand that it cannot be sustainable if one country year after year increases its export surpluses to ever higher levels, at the expense of the rest of the world and now also to the detriment of cohesion in the EU. The contribution to the full German report from Greece makes this clear: Germany's economic mercantilism also comes at the expense of other countries' capacity to implement the 2030 Agenda. For German policy-makers, however, the continued increase of the export surplus remains an uncontested *raison d'état*. This is not sustainable.

Instead, German and European trade policies promote a further opening of markets everywhere in the world, with very harmful consequences from a development policy perspective. The example of Africa makes obvious how the complete liberalization of trade essentially benefits European exporters but thwarts development there, and particularly sustainable development. It is not European agro-business that must feed Africa, but African farmers, and those who ruin their markets create the root causes of flight. Blackmailing poor countries by threatening to cut development aid if they do not open their markets to European products, services and investment, as was

recently practiced towards Kenya, is simply unacceptable and recalls practices from the colonial era. Development Minister Gerd Müller is right in saying that it is erroneous to believe that Germany could permanently maintain its prosperity at the expense of others. The demand for global redistribution put forward by Minister Müller on the sidelines of the UN Conference on Financing for Development in Addis Ababa in 2015 needs to be transformed into concrete policies, and this applies especially to trade policy. However, so far neither the German federal Government nor the European Commission is willing to reorient European trade policy – an essential obstacle for a more sustainable global economy.

Alternatives to globalization must be implemented

In discussions on globalization, people are quick to cite the dogma “There is no alternative”. There are always alternatives, and this is also true for the question of how to shape globalization. Of course it is also possible to shape it in a way that does not open all markets to the strongest, but applies careful measures which will ideally allow everyone to enjoy the benefits.

Maybe we should move away from the notion that Germany is a “pioneer” regarding sustainability. In large areas, this country is not a pioneer, but is severely lagging behind. The world does not expect Germany to be a pioneer, but it expects that we finally acknowledge the urgent need for action that exists with respect to our agricultural policies, trade policies and transport policies and in many other areas. And that we draw consequences from this.

Another frequently cited thought pattern is that the sustainability agenda only stands a chance if it is communicated to the population in a controlled manner, as the population should not be overwhelmed. Behind this lies the idea that the “common people” do not hold things like sustainability in high esteem, that such things place excessive demands that cost votes. However, this argument does not withstand closer examination. No-one wants cars that actually consume more fuel and have more emissions than specified. No-one wants meat contaminated with antibiotics from factory farming that is cruel to animals, no-one wants glyphosate in their

beer. We also do not know anyone who believes that this country needs even more agricultural exports, even at the expense that more farmers are being ruined economically, not only in Germany but also in Africa. More and more globalization, more and more deregulation are not demands by the people, but by the business lobbies. Even where big conflicts were made much of in past efforts, such as the introduction of the deposit on cans, in hindsight they turn out to be not a conflict of policy-makers with “the people” but a conflict of policy-makers with retail business. There is no consumer movement to reintroduce beverage cans, but there are still persistent attempts by retail business to sabotage sustainable multi-cycle systems.

Current election results across Europe send a clear message: Voters are fed up with business as usual!

Societies in Germany and in many other countries are at a crossroads. We can no longer sit out problems that have long been suppressed: the ecological crisis is escalating; poverty and conflicts in the Global South – some of them fuelled or even caused by (in) action in the North – have led to a massive increase of refugee and migration flows; social polarization jeopardizes Europe’s stability. “Business as usual” cannot be the name of the game.

At the same time, the dissatisfaction of the population with the established patterns in politics and the rampant loss of confidence in the ability of political elites to solve problems are striking. Around the world, governments resort to more repression if critical public pressure becomes too uncomfortable. This is especially felt by human rights defenders who stand up for access to land and environmental protection. Under the impact of their numerous crises, the EU states have shifted more and more decisions to the executive; parliaments have suffered a massive loss of influence. But those who decide on policies behind closed doors amongst their peers eliminate democratic checks and balances and make more mistakes.

Election results across Europe and Germany reflect this. The many losers of a neoliberal economic policy who are declared to lack alternatives are fighting back and pushing through alternatives – unfortunately not

always in the interest of social, economic or ecological sustainability and human rights.

The sustainability goals of the UN are a good template for what practicable alternatives can actually look like that don't require the human rights achievements of the past decades to be sacrificed. They are not a list of demands by protest movements, not a programme by non-governmental organizations, but (at least in theory) official government policy of all Member States of the UN. Many are only now starting to realize that they will have to completely overhaul large policy areas if they want to take the 2030 Agenda seriously. The 2030 Agenda is also an opportunity to regain lost and further dwindling societal cohesion.

Thus, we are talking about nothing less than a fundamental policy shift towards more sustainability. To this there is indeed no alternative. More social justice, economic activity in harmony with the ecological limits of the planet, a life in dignity for all humans everywhere. In a nutshell: another world is possible. To this end, German policy-makers must finally tackle the numerous contradictions in their policies instead of continuing to wait them out. That the implementation of the UN sustainability goals might fail just like the implementation of the Agenda 21 – this is an alternative that we do not even want to imagine.