

Sustainability reimagined

What structures does the German government need in order to meet its sustainability targets?

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The range of subjects covered in the TV debates between the leading candidates in the Bundestag elections has shown what the public and the political parties care about: social, economic and environmental issues. However, both the 2030 Agenda and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have been conspicuous by their absence. The SDGs are not seen as a guiding framework for German domestic policy even though they mirror people's concerns about issues such as education, housing and climate action. The public still fails to see the SDGs as anything other than a part of the far-off, abstract universe that is the UN. While they may be seen to apply to developing countries, they are deemed irrelevant to a successful industrialised nation such as Germany – the universal validity of the 2030 Agenda's mission is largely unknown. With the 2030 Agenda being neglected in this way, we are also losing sight of its vision, despite the fact that it is, fundamentally, shared by all democratic parties: a vision of a sustainable, just, safe and secure world in which everyone can live in peace and prosperity, without hunger or poverty, and with respect for planetary boundaries.

In light of this, the coalition agreement that Germany's new government will sign would benefit greatly from a clear focus on the SDGs, not least given that the progress made by the German Sustainable Development Strategy (GSDS) in realising the 2030 Agenda and its 17 goals has been unsatisfactory so far to say the least. The strategy is comprehensively updated every four years, most recently in March 2021. However, in the absence of a central steering function, the implementation of the strategy is stalling, as the various ministries are focusing on disjointed individual measures. This is turning the GSDS into a box-ticking exercise without real impact and, in the eyes of many onlookers, into a nearly 400-page paper tiger.

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The challenge for the next government will be to rethink its sustainability policy and gear it towards success. Although the Sustainable Development Report 2021, published in June this year, places Germany fourth for progress towards achieving the SDGs, this cannot brush over the huge challenges the country faces in areas such as social and educational justice – particularly in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic – the completion of the energy transition as well as unsustainable consumption patterns.

What is more, the SDGs cannot be reduced to an opportunity for international showboating that revolves around being the first to cross a particular finish line every reporting period. Their purpose is rather to incentivise each country to make an ongoing

contribution to achieving the SDGs at global level within the bounds of what is individually possible. The remit of a country's responsibilities does not simply end at its own borders, and Germany, in particular, is accountable for numerous negative spillover effects to other nations. For instance, our export-oriented economy, our outsourcing of 'dirty' manufacturing processes to other countries and our consumption of resources, in particular, leave a sizeable environmental footprint abroad.

During the next legislative period, therefore, the 2030 Agenda must become the guiding principle of German policy. The governance structures of German sustainability policy therefore need to be overhauled in line with the outlook produced by the State Secretaries' Committee for Sustainable Development in June 2021, which must also be reflected in the coalition agreement. To ensure that the SDGs are achieved in an effective and integrated way, the next government should commit to a concise update to the GSDS by mid-2022 that is focusing on implementation and that includes clear objectives and measures for the 20th legislative period. Such an update of the GSDS right at the start of the new legislative period – rather than at the end, as has been the case to date – has the potential to make it much more relevant politically. The update should go hand in hand with a strengthening of the relevant institutional structures at the Federal Chancellery, e.g. by giving responsibility of the GSDS to a Directorate or Ministers of State rather than a specialist unit as it is the case now.

As part of this process, sustainability must also be aligned with Germany's responsibility on the international stage and must contain clear, measurable and ambitious objectives for international climate, biodiversity and development policy, foreign trade policy and financial policy. This means that, next to the Federal Ministry for the Environment, the ministries responsible for foreign policy, particularly the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development and the Federal Foreign Office, will also play a key role moving forward.

A comprehensive stocktake of the GSDS, looking at its implementation and the achievement of its objectives, should be scheduled for the end of the legislative period in early 2025. In light of the next update to the strategy set for 2026, there is an urgent need for broad-based reflection amongst all stakeholders in government, parliament and society – not just a small group of 'sustainability-minded' specialists. Furthermore, in view of the Federal Constitutional Court's ruling on climate action, which puts the rights of future generations front and centre of climate policy measures via Art. 20a of Germany's Basic Law, sustainability policy must also be shaped by the principle of intergenerational justice. Similarly, the everyday lives of everyday people, with their legitimate grievances regarding schools, pensions, rural public transport, etc. need to be taken into account too if the GSDS is to live up to its claim of being a 'joint effort'. It is therefore not inconceivable that the public will be grilling candidates on the government's obligations under the 2030 Agenda in the talk shows during the 2025 Federal elections.