



The 18th SDG. Sustainable Development in a Changing World: A Changing Perspective on Sustainability.

Günther Bachmann, Secretary General
German Council for Sustainable Development

Think Piece

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I thank the UN Office for Sustainable Development for, once again, inviting me to contribute to the worldwide learning process around the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Once again, your meeting is timely; once again, it raises quite some important questions, but, above all, once again you bring together expertise, capacity, and dedication: which is why the OSD's Sustainable Development Transition Forum is a meaningful gathering that needs fostering and strengthening.

So many "once agains"! Continuation and coherence are important. Saying that is all well and good. So, it may come as a surprise that my talk leans a little more towards disruption and rethinking.

My talk is about the 18th SDG.

As we all know, there are 17 Sustainable Development Goals. They are the grand result of a negotiation process amongst the states, coupled with the significant participation of major groups. They cover important technical issues, and also cater to culture and belief systems. They strive to change mindsets, values, and motivation. In the national context, adapting and implementing SDGs is a great challenge.

I don't advocate reopening negotiation. I don't advocate an amendment. I am not introducing a basket of left-over issues that did not make it into the 17 SDGs.

And, still, I advocate an 18th SDG:

- Because something is missing.
- Because there is more to the SDGs than just the task of implementation.
- Because the 17 SDGs implicate an understanding of how to define sustainability that is adding aspects to the 1987 definition they SDGs are built on.

Here is what this idea is about¹.

1. The No 18 is about fanning the flames of defining sustainability as a living concept.
2. The No 18 is about options to prevent sustainable policies from wearing off.
3. The No 18 is about the governance needed to address the intermediary action.

I

The underlying concept of sustainability - Understanding the seeds of change

The Brundtland definition for the concept of sustainability, as of 1987, really was a game changer. It catalyzed valuable action in all areas of modern society. There is no doubt about that.

But, in a prospective view on sustainable development, wouldn't we have to rethink the 1987 definition in the light of the content and meaning of the 2030 Agenda? That is a key question.

If I was being asked to name the one thing on Earth that is always there and will continue to exist for all time, the concept of change would be it. We often seem not to grasp the shift of baselines when this change is actually happening to us. But this world is constantly changing, be it for the better or for the worse. In a non-sustainable world that is also true as regards the understanding of the concept of sustainability.

Looking back, we can observe the long line of change.

- In the 50^s and 60^s WWII prompted a seemingly unlimited belief in progress and functionality. That was both enthusiastic and naïve. Take, for example, the claim that nuclear energy would basically free mankind, or the idea of adapting cities to cars instead of to people.
Rachel Carson's book on the "Silent Spring" in the 60^s reminded the industrialized world of the damage linear progress can potentially and unwillingly unleash on the environment and the long-term economy.
- The 70^s saw the rise of environmentalism in the industrialized world. The Club of Rome challenged the then understanding of growth. The idea of political change boomed. But reforming policies ended in dissolution. Enthusiasm was replaced by gloom and doom predictions. The development euphoria increasingly gave way to gridlocks of underfunding and overdefinition.

¹ I owe thanks to Alexander Müller, Imme Scholz, Cletus I. Springer, Jan-Gustav Strandenaes, Darren Swanson, and Verónica Tomei for their support during the development of this paper. All failures or shortcomings are my own.

- In the decades that followed, nihilism and mistrust piled up into the enormous ensemble that is neoliberalism. Neoliberalism started out as an economic concept, but quickly grew into something that penetrated societies and political culture. Selfishness dominated human relations, and the emphatic sense of the “whole” degraded. But, in the 80° and 90° as well, we find seeds of change for the better. Willy Brandt led the North-South Commission that provided a lesson on how unhealthy and unpeaceful a development can be that creates and widens the gap between countries. Gro Harlem Brundtland, with the World Commission on Environment and Development, suggested bridging those two aspects using a new policy concept. That was in 1987. The idea was to establish a political practice that would satisfy the needs of the present without compromising the needs that will arise in the future. That definition for sustainable development started the Rio process, and, since 1992, we have been a part of it².

Granted, this is a sketchy picture. It follows my Western perspective. For other countries and regions, the story is quite different. There was war in Vietnam and in many other countries. There was apartheid in South Africa. There was the Soviet bloc. Other nations were being hit by economic decline and natural disaster. Military conflicts and disaster still prevail in parts of the world and make the notion of sustainable development quite pointless.

The changing world also brings with it certain benefits and achievements. We are learning how to deal with risks, damage and emergencies. We are also learning about resilience, how to make use of opportunities. We have learned that setting quantitative goals is a modern policy tool. We have learned about the benefits of a sustainable economy and business case.

SDGs tell a story about the possibility of a better future, and about the universality of this idea. This story runs counter to the atmosphere of fear and conflict in today’s world.

But the story is neither blind idealism, nor naïve. SDGs are middle of the road. Their implementation opens our eyes to the subsidiarity of action in a multi-level and multi-actor playing field. It may sound like awkward political phraseology, but it is actually simple: It means that we have neighbors all over the world. Through the notion of universal neighborhood, the concept of globalization may survive in a changing world; with nationalism and protectionism, it probably won’t.

We have yet to learn how to combat terror and war without eroding the best sides of human liberalism. We have yet to learn how to disprove right-wing populism and how to integrate refugees without eroding democracy. We have yet to learn how to prevent the 2030 Agenda from being disconnected from ongoing political priorities.

The reasons for this are manifold. Communication is reluctant and slow; mindsets are locked-in into ‘business as usual’. Thus, it is an important sign that the recent G20 summit under Chinese

² Hauff, Volker (2007) Brundtland Report: A 20 Years Update. Keynote speech European Sustainability, Berlin 07 (ESB07) “Linking Policies, Implementation, and Civil Society Action”, Berlin, June 3rd – 5th, 2007; http://www.nachhaltigkeitsrat.de/fileadmin/_migrated/media/ESB07_Keynote_speech_Hauff_07-06-04.pdf

leadership adopted the G20 Action Plan on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development³ and emphasized the positive framing of the SDG. The German G20 presidency will now follow suit in 2017.

The notion of sustainability is our common key to a common future. But how does it open the lock?

This definition started by addressing three dimensions: ecology, economy, social aspects. The 1987 Brundtland gatekeeper definition inserted the long-term perspective of how generations interact. The Commission molded the challenge of meeting the needs of present generations without running the risk of compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs into the concept of sustainable development. 20 years ago, this was totally new. Under prevailing circumstances, this message continues to challenge the ignorance and inadequacy of mainstream politics. Almost thirty years into the post-Brundtland age, still,

- the needs of the present are not being met,
- the dependence on finite resources prevails and negligence of ecological and social aspects are anti-growth politics,
- the dominant growth patterns remain unchanged,
- the link between the price of oil and the pricing of food is damaging the food-water-soil nexus,
- the importance of soil is being underestimated, which, in turn, permits urban sprawl to consume the very land resource that people are relying on.

In addition, since 1987, many things have changed. At the time of the Brundtland report, a couple of things were unknown to political leaders and thinkers.

- Globalization gained unforeseen momentum and the linking of supply chains and markets took off only after 1987.
- Overstepping the ecosystem-carrying capacity is more concrete and more urgent than any time before.
- Conflicts between ecological interests, all of them vested and very legitimate, are fiercely adding to the conventional juxtaposition between economy and ecology – a new post-Brundtland feature.
- Best practices have increased and have developed options for benefit sharing.
- Emerging market economies dramatically reduced poverty and added new problems to the socio-ecologic agenda.
- Tools and instruments for transparently managing sustainable solutions have been developed and tested to a degree that could not have been expected.

This has to be taken into account when we refresh the concept of sustainability and make it a living definition.

³ G20 Action Plan on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development; see: https://www.bundesregierung.de/Content/DE/Anlagen/G7_G20/2016-09-08-g20-agenda-action-plan.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=3

II

In order to prevent the agenda from wearing off we should use the momentum of science and the arts.

Policies in modern information-driven societies, over time, often display a tendency to be watered down. Policy cycles display short term rules, and the next cycle might try to “forget” about what was key in the former one. Keeping the long perspective and bridging policy cycles is one of the major challenges in real sustainability politics.

Science and the arts are the two resources that may keep the sustainability policies from fading away. They both connect to young people and thinkers. They both create telling pictures able to communicate the issues to a wider audience - theoretically.

Science and the arts can be instrumental in refreshing and tuning up sustainability thinking. They can keep policy circles lively and meaningful. Science and the arts proceed with independence, diligence, and autonomous creativity, provided, of course, that there is proper funding, communication and an interface to society.

In terms of the arts, I notice a substantial gap. We do not yet have a grip on the esthetics of sustainability. We do not really address the deep roots of cultural diversity, cultural connectedness, and religious beliefs – although history tells us that this is at the very heart of the survival of human societies.

In terms of science, I observe quite some miscellaneous action. There is no SDG for science, but the situation is far more positive compared to the arts. The need for a ‘science for SDGs’ is basically not being contested.

- There is unquestionably the occasional good example of scientific solutions to sustainability, but a systematic process is yet to be seen. The main point is that there is no governance “architecture” for science-policy interfaces for sustainability - neither for implementing results nor for debating the scope and agenda.
- The Scientific Advisory Board to the UN Secretary-General elevates the relevance of science for sustainability⁴ as do research programs such as Future Earth⁵. In the science community, quite a lot of work is actually done that is related to SDGs. Since 2012, the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network has mobilized global scientific and technological expertise to support the implementation of the SDGs⁶. Policy guidance documents, however, only marginally refer to science, if at all⁷. The 2030 Agenda mentions the establishment of a UN

⁴ UN SAB (2016) The Future of Scientific Advice to the UN. Report to the UN Secretary General <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0024/002458/245801e.pdf>

⁵ <http://www.nature.com/news/policy-map-the-interactions-between-sustainable-development-goals-1.20075>

⁶ see: <http://unsdsn.org/>

⁷ United Nations Development Group (2015) Mainstreaming the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Interim Reference Guide to UN Country Teams, 7 October 2015; <http://www.un.org/esa/cdo/wp->

Interagency Task Force on Science, Technology and Innovation to promote coherence and cooperation within the UN system as well as a multi-stakeholder forum that meets annually.

But all this is not enough. The soft power of science for sustainable is not yet released. The immanent driver of science, the freedom of scientific research for the benefit of worldwide challenges, is not yet functioning in full swing. The transformative character of science for sustainable development – the way science itself adapt and change itself in order to deliver against the challenges of sustainable development – is neither rolled out nor is it accepted throughout the academic community and their stakeholder.

This is an issue for the 18th SDG.

III

Who are my peers? - The governance of intermediary action

In the 22 voluntary national reviews presented at the 2016 High Level Political Forum, governments are reviewing their own work, in part with the inclusion of input from civil society. This is an important new stepping stone in the architecture of the UN HLPF. But those reports are not reviews in the full sense of peer reviews. Reviewing the case of sustainable development is a task that involves society and the private sector.

The SDG implementation process requires making broad use of blended learning, reporting and peer reviewing. In a way, adapting SDGs to national circumstances is asking for nationally determined contributions to the global goals. Constant accountability is crucial for making things happen, in government as well as in the other sectors that are intended to be mobilized by goals and processes. In the case of climate mitigation, however, reporting efforts form part of a formal metrics system. For SDGs in general, there is no similar verifiable global “accounting standard”. All the more important is the informal solution, plus the use of peer reviewing.

Peer reviews are a tested and well-grounded way of sharing experiences, assessing the state of the art, calibrating strengths and weaknesses, swapping solutions, or scaling up projects. Reviews are meant to go beyond the status quo and be more analytical and evaluative when assessing gaps and options. Compared with reviews on the economy or environmental policies, reviewing the case of sustainable development has to canvas a much wider field of action. It is not only about administrative and regulatory approaches. Instead, peer reviews have to assess self-organization in society and the private sector using the appropriate due diligence. They have to work in a multi-stakeholder and multi-level environment. To accomplish this task, peers and facilitators need to be particularly well equipped.

[content/uploads/2015/10/Mainstreaming-the-2030-Agenda-UNDG-Interim-Reference-Guide-to-UNCTs-7-October-20151.pdf](https://www.un.org/content/uploads/2015/10/Mainstreaming-the-2030-Agenda-UNDG-Interim-Reference-Guide-to-UNCTs-7-October-20151.pdf)

The questions on the table are: Who takes over the leadership role as the convener, norm- and standard-setter, information broker, partnership broker and as a body that supervises, safeguards and plays a role in mediating the verification processes? Who are my Peers?

Germany has twice already invited eminent persons and experts from abroad to scrutinize the German approach to sustainability. We have tried to learn from review processes known within the OECD and the DAC. But for peer reviewing sustainability politics, we found that those processes must change. The selection of peers and working modality must ensure a multi-stakeholder perspective. This provides for serious debate on governance and mindsets during this selection process. How could governance support inter-linkages and integration and discourage fragmentation and bilateralism, double-structures and ineffectiveness?

Future labs

All over the world, we need more future labs that would encourage people in their efforts to shape the reality around ideas and positions and to take responsibility and to pursue multi-level action. A future lab is a strategy boutique. It helps to develop and test-proof compelling new value propositions and chances for a sustainable world.

In the global context, Germany is often perceived as well advanced when it comes to sustainability. Also, in the case of the digital agenda of “industry 4.0” Germany is seen as moving ahead. Mostly, this is based only selective pieces of information. The domestic context, however, shows a more realistic picture.

Germany set up specific processes and institutions dealing with sustainable development. With top level leadership on the part of parliament and the government, the Sustainability Strategy is being refocused and will be relaunched in autumn 2016.

But still, we have blind spots. We have deficits and shortcomings, some of them quite serious. From my point of view, our domestic to-do-list is essential and urgent. Germany is a long way away from achieving sustainability in the way we live, the way we do business, and the way we manage natural resources. We need to transform core elements of our conventional production and consumption patterns. We are overconsuming land and arable soil, our life styles do not promote sustainability, energy efficiency and carbon mitigation targets are not being met, growth patterns lack sustainability dimensions. How can we make the financial system fit-for-purpose? How do we fight silo thinking? How would we encourage comprehensive and pro-democracy political thinking towards sustainability? How do we really release the power of coherence and coordination? How do we design a vision for sustainability_4.0?

In many countries there are bodies and institutional arrangements that drive the respective initiatives and processes for sustainable development. The governance for sustainability is a crucial point, almost everywhere. Administrative capacities, legal liability, political leadership, and funding schemes are of great importance. But, otherwise, governance thinking often has a blind spot. Social systems are essentially reflexive in nature. They need to get used to transgovernance in order to deal with all of the dynamic tensions onto the pathway to sustainability, while at the same

time keeping to reflexivity itself. Conventional interventions e.g. via legal regulations and economic funding must be supplemented by intraventions that would enable the self-organising capacity within society. This is an approach rather than a recipe.⁸

The challenges for sustainability governance leadership go way beyond just designing theoretical solutions. Following a long-term orientation, working the complexity of our time, and changing real-world configurations with the impact of intraventions rather by exerting external pressure – that are some of the basics of transgovernance.

In that sense, one of drivers of sustainable development in Germany is the Council for Sustainable Development. It has worked as a multi-stakeholder body since 2001. The Council addresses intermediary action via advising the government and independently conducting projects and engagement initiatives and engaging them in a vivid debate on sustainability and the future, from visionary thinking towards societal utopias to the business case in the environmentally enlightened modernity⁹. Some of the most important features are:

- Awarding schemes are building constituencies beyond the limits of special interest groups. The prestigious German Sustainability Award brings together people from the public and private sector, urban politics and housing, academia and science.
- The European Sustainability Action Week is displaying broad outreach while running on a low-budget.
- The Sustainability Code, a reporting tool for non-financial aspects, challenges the private and public sector, provides for entrepreneurial opportunities and fosters the sustainable business case
- Vertical integration is crucial. The establishment of four regional network hubs for sustainability strategies is strengthening sustainability initiatives and actors within civil society. The hubs will become fully operational in 2017.

Also on the international level the UN Development System recently triggered a most relevant debate on the future of its own institutional standards. *The Future We Want – the UN We Need* is the title of a major and intravention-style contribution to the required new positioning of the UN development system. Juan Somavia (former Director General of ILO) and Prof. Dr. Klaus Töpfer (former Executive Director of UNEP) co-chaired a team of advisors¹⁰.

⁸ in 't Veld, Roeland J. (lead author), Günther Bachmann, Klaus Töpfer, Louis Meuleman, Stefan Jungcurt, Jamel Napolitano, Alexander Perez-Carmona und Falk Schmidt (2011), *TransGovernance. The Quest for Governance of Sustainable Development*. Project Report *Science for Sustainable TRANSformations: Towards Effective GOVERNance*; IASS Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies, Potsdam, http://www.iass-potsdam.de/sites/default/files/transgovernance_-_the_quest_-_nov_2011_0.pdf

⁹ Bachmann, Günther and Lutz Engelke (Ed.) (2013) *future lab germany. Innovations for tomorrow's world*. Murmann Verlag Hamburg, 288 pl

¹⁰ ITA (Juan Somavia and Klaus Töpfer as co-chairs) (2016) *The Future We Want – The United Nations We Need*, report as part of the dialogue on longer-term positioning of the UN Development System in the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, submitted as working paper at the ECOSOC Dialogue Workshop No. 8, 22-23 June; <https://www.un.org/ecosoc/sites/www.un.org.ecosoc/files/files/en/qcpr/ita-findings-and-conclusions-16-jun-2016.pdf>

The state of the art of the UN organizational arrangement and capacity is analysed as not fit for purpose, and ITA suggests some major repositioning. A reform of the UN Development System is needed, and existing institutions such as ECOSOC must undergo a major transition in order to deliver in accordance with their task. The positioning of sustainable development in the UN is far too weak and marginal, they criticize, and rightly so. The reform they are advocating must go beyond the logic of operational activities. Complementary to the focus on Least Developed Countries (LDC), the UN also has a role to play in addressing the new uncertainties, resilience, and vulnerabilities faced by middle-income countries. And, even for developed countries, the UN must find a new role. The concept of development is no longer a concept for developing countries only. The new role model is challenging old mindsets. Here is an arena where a peer review system is urgently needed. This system should scrutinize the UN vis-à-vis the SDGs and include new multi-level and multi-actor action towards SDGs.

I see the need to broker partnerships and blended learning. The UN focuses on developing countries, which must continue as a priority. It must expand to cover relevant policies of developed countries together with an understanding of the way overall global development is moving in the direction of the 2030 Agenda.

The SDG-in-practice is an antidote against fragmentation and silo-thinking. In particular, the sometimes odd modalities of funding and organizing still induce unwanted fragmentation. That there is the need (and possibility) to prevent the UN from failing or faltering is the message of the report, UN 2030: Rebuilding Order in a Fragmenting World, by Kevin Rudd¹¹. It is another example of the fact that the UN we need is not the UN we have right now.

The 18th SDG

Updating our understanding of sustainability, transgovernance, and empathy are the SDG gaps. The 2030 Agenda already incorporates some elements. It pledges to foster inter-cultural understanding, tolerance, mutual respect and an ethic of global citizenship and shared responsibility and it acknowledges the natural and cultural diversity of the world. This is the carrying idea of the Agenda 2030. However, it seems that its rhetoric is not connected to real-world decision-making. Nor has it been made an essential for the system of monitoring and blended learning. All the evidence suggests that social conflicts are a powerful stumbling block to the SDG delivery. This seems bizarre as those conflicts are regularly seen as being most important in virtually every aspect of sustainability transition.

Hence, I often hear people say, what is in it for me? A fair point, I think, because it may help create ownership. But the question is a little on the utilitarian and functional side. It fails to value empathy and it fails to express the assumption that people will grow into the competences to deliver against the (17) SDGs.

¹¹ ICM (Kevin Rudd as chair) (2016) UN 2030: Rebuilding Order in a Fragmenting World. Chair's Report to the Independent Commission on Multilateralism; Downloaded from <https://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/IPI-ICM-UN-2030-Chairs-Report2FINAL.pdf>

I suggest approaching it more fundamentally. It is not about what is in it for us. Instead, it is about what the 2030 Agenda is by us – in times of overshooting the planetary boundaries, in times when globalization is writing the inequity gap into more or less every nation’s domestic agenda; in times when our collective ability to deliver sustainable solutions has never been greater; in times when never before have so many people and world leaders united under one basic idea, that of sustainable development.

The 18th SDG is people’s business. It would build on interventions by entrepreneurial action and civil society self-organizing. It would be led by pragmatic idealism. It is a moving target expressing the change we want to see happening “by us”.

It’s not primarily a choice between parties or policies, between left and right. This is a more fundamental choice about who we are as a people. The young generation, as I observe it, is full of courage, optimism, and ingenuity. Most of them are decent and generous. Sure, people have real anxieties about paying their bills and protecting kids, caring for a sick partner. We get frustrated with political gridlock and worry about racial divisions. I see people working hard and starting businesses, and taking politics seriously. I see a generation full of energy and new ideas, not constrained by the status quo and ready to seize what ought to be.

Sustainability strategies and policies have to better prepare for this. New approaches are needed to bring stakeholders together. The national and the international levels of stakeholder engagement need to be rethought. Neither one alone is good enough. Business as unusual is what we need. This is the way I see the claim “no one left behind”.

Hope is always good, but, in the face of difficulties and monstrous challenges, hope is essential. In the face of uncertainty, hope will reject cynicism and fear. In the face of planetary boundaries and species losses, hope will guide us to finding and exploring sustainable solutions. This is what the audacity of hope today is about. This is what we have to make sustainability about. This is what may create the 18th SDG.