



12 SDGs: Requirements for a more innovative and interdisciplinary promotion approach at the local level

In 2016, all 193 UN member states signed the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), also named “Transformation Agenda 2030”. In contrast to its forerunner, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the SDGs not only focus on providing targets for developing countries but also for industrialised countries. Without the support of the latter, the impact of the SDGs will be very low.

In general, we at Mesopartner regard the SDGs as having real potential to contribute to more innovative and balanced economic development locally and globally. But to make a real practical contribution, the SDGs need to be adjusted to the local circumstances. Promoting

SDGs in Germany as opposed to doing so in a developing country requires different parameters. However, in both cases they need to become part of key decision-making processes and analysis frameworks. This article reflects on the key challenges and requirements of the SDGs to make them truly relevant for practice in industrialised countries, taking some German experience as a reference point.

Germany’s reaction to the SDGs at first glance

At first glance, it appears that Germany has taken a practical approach to the SDGs. The National Sustainability Strategy, which was updated in 2018, provides concrete indicators for Germany to contribute to the SDGs. At the same time a Council for Sustainable Development was established with experts from science and civil society playing an advisory role to the German Chancellor. To ensure participation, the Council has created four NGO sustainability networks (called RENN) with 20 supporting NGOs in the whole of Germany to promote awareness events, information and sustainable



action at the regional and local levels (see <https://www.renn-netzwerk.de>). Most of these NGOs had already been involved in the UN Local Agenda 21 participatory process, which was inaugurated by the UN in 1992 with its renowned slogan “Think global, act local”.

Looking at these German institutionalisation processes, many positive trends can be observed:

- The SDGs at the national level gain importance.
- A movement has emerged and has been strengthened.
- The process has gained relevance at the municipal level, becoming visible through the design of local sustainability strategies in some cities and the creation of a national sustainable city network.

Challenges to promoting the SDGs at the local level

However, there are challenges hindering the integration of the SDG perspective into good practice to use its

framework to initiate innovative processes. These challenges include:

- **SDG implementation requires more interdisciplinary knowledge sources.** The SDG implementation requires the integration and merging of different expertise. There are many trends at present contributing to reflections on sustainable municipal and regional solutions. These reflections are often covered by buzzwords such as “Smart City”, “Sustainable City”, “Intelligent City”, “Resilient City” “Post-Growth City”. They all entail very different perspectives on how to promote more sustainable and inclusive ways in spaces. The SDG debate in Germany does not tap into the richness of thinking in a more interdisciplinary way and is not sufficiently connected to the current ongoing search for innovative city solutions. Additionally, SDG work in practice seems to be mainly promoted by actors who were involved in the local agenda process in the 1990s, with a strong emphasis on raising social and



ecological values, but without considering digital and more knowledge and science-based approaches. What is needed is to strengthen the diversity of actors (see also Article 2, Targeting resilience, not growth) and to come up with a more innovation and creativity-driven orientation. This requires the promotion and linkage of more social, ecological and economic innovations in a proactive way. It also requires the involvement of knowledge organisations, applied science institutes as well as digital and innovation expertise.

- **The SDG implementation is caught in planning thinking and lacks real implementation orientation.** The different national and local sustainability strategies are all designed as planning documents. Although they are based on public debates with different stakeholders, they ultimately resemble strategy plans: “Once written with many

others and published with great media acclaim, they are put to one side, never to be seen again.” We know from our own practice that the implementation of ambitious strategies requires concrete incentives as well as group and network dynamics. Nonetheless, the strategies often lack feasible project design and concrete initiatives.

- **Insufficient thrust and experimentation focus in the search for innovative SDG solutions.** Germany is promoting the energy revolution with the objective of turning renewable energy into the main source of energy supply. Local SDG agenda activities seem to be playing a rather marginal role in contributing substantially to this debate. Instead, initiatives are focusing more on youth and public awareness events and less on continuous research and innovation development.
- **Lack of involvement of the private sector.** In Germany the process of strengthening sustainability strategies and action is promoted by the public sector or by social and environmental organisations.



The private sector is not strongly involved as a driving actor, although it has the potential to promote knowledge transfer, technological capabilities and more sustainable business models. Although the private sector is invited to participate in public reflections, companies and their associations have not become driving forces. Without getting the private sector on board to a greater extent, real transformation will be less of a driving force. We have published a discussion paper on this reflection (Wältring, F. & Cunningham, S. 2017. Germany´s potential contribution to knowledge and innovation transfer to developing countries. Bremen 2017, paper commissioned by the GIZ).

- **Lack of coordination and cooperation between ministries at the national level and municipality departments at the local level.** The 2018 National Sustainability Strategy emphasises the need for stronger coordination and cooperation between the ministries and more comprehensive efforts by each ministry to design their own sustainability criteria and actions. The same requirements are necessary

at the local level. Attempts to define a local SDG strategy are often guided by the department of the environment, but coordination with the social and economic departments is lacking. Promoting more creative coordination at this level might open the door to cross-over innovations.

The need to promote interdisciplinary learning initiatives

From our professional LRED perspective, there is a strong need to make use of existing LRED and innovation system tools and the use of learning initiatives, and safe-to-fail experiments. This requires the promotion of ecological, social and economic innovations to strengthen SDG requirements at local, national and global level, otherwise the SDGs remain global goals without any actual local action.

We will continue to strive towards contributing to a more interdisciplinary and innovation-driven search for SDG learning initiatives in the coming years.

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