

SDSN Germany discusses sustainable development in the EU

On January 17th 2017, experts from different policy fields, scientists as well as civil society and business representatives gathered at the DIW in Berlin for the 5th meeting of the extended leadership council of SDSN Germany. After **Claudia Kemfert** had welcomed the participants to the DIW, SDSN Germany co-chairs **Dirk Messner** and **Gesine Schwan** opened the meeting by summarizing the relevance of sustainability in the EU for SDSN Germany.

Over the past two years, SDSN has been promoting the EU's domestic and external implementation of the 2030 Agenda with its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Just recently, on November 22nd 2016, the European Commission has taken a step forward and issued two Communications¹ on the topic. Against this background, SDSN Germany invited four experts on sustainable development at the EU level to shed light on the role of the communications, next steps to take as well as potentials and shortcomings.

Christine Hackenesch (German Development Institute) presented the key messages of the European Commission's communications. She argued that both Communications could be more ambitious in outlining a strategy how the EU intends to implement the SDGs. This is not least important for the EU's engagement with its partners: without having an ambitious both domestic and external European strategy, the EU has limited credibility to engage with China, Brazil and others on SDG implementation. Moreover, the process to implement the SDGs in the EU's development policy is more advanced than for the EU's domestic policies or other fields of external action. This bears the risk of shedding a wrong light on the SDGs. Their encompassing global outreach and relevance for all parts of the world, including so-called "developed" nations, is diminished, if the EU predominantly frames SDG-implementation as a development cooperation approach.

Karl Falkenberg (St Antony's College, University of Oxford) continued to present potential ways forward in the EU. Agreeing with Hackenesch that more efforts of domestic implementation of the SDGs within the EU would be desirable, he still stressed the EU's role as an international forerunner. Even though the EU has not issued a "grand strategy" on sustainable development, concrete implementing policies are being developed, such as on the circular economy, energy saving and linking the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) to the SDGs. Nevertheless, tackling negative social trends, such as growing inequalities within the EU, remain an urgent topic to be addressed. Falkenberg emphasized that especially against the background of Brexit and nationalist movements within the EU, a counter-narrative of an inclusive, sustainable society is crucial as an idea inspiring cohesion. Sustainability could and should become a European brand. He also called on member states' leaders to call on the European Commission at the highest level for an ambitious implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

Teresa Ribera (IDDRI) picked up the notion of the 2030 Agenda as a positive narrative - an inclusive and holistic vision of shaping globalization that inspires confidence in times of nationalist tendencies. She pointed out that many topics taken up in the 2030 Agenda are

¹ European Commission (2016): [Proposal for a new European Consensus on Development: Our World, our Dignity, our Future](#) and [Communication on the next steps for a sustainable European Future](#)

indeed fundamental concerns of European societies – even though people might not have termed them SDGs so far. In view of the EU's role as a forerunner, she argued that while some good efforts are made, the trends are not positive enough. Ribera questioned the sole focus on politicians and called for the inclusion of other actors like business and think tanks. She suggested to take the 60th anniversary on the Treaty of Rome as an opportunity to give new energy to the European dream and to link it to the concept of sustainable development.

Based on a recent UBA publication on EU-policies for sustainable development, **Kora Kristof** (German Environmental Agency, UBA) commented on the interlinked and encompassing nature of the SDGs, which present a window of opportunity for new initiatives and impetus. Additionally, she pointed at the importance of mirroring the interconnected nature of the SDGs on the policy level, by interlinking different political strategies, such as Europe 2020, with the SDGs in a coherent political frame. Kristof argued that such an umbrella framework at EU level is needed as a background for national implementation.

In the following discussion, Messner described the populist and nationalist tendencies in Europe and beyond as “counter-transformative”. He underlined the crucial importance both of political leadership at the highest level and of reaching out to the citizens instead of the usual policy circles. According to Messner, strategic thinking needs to link good narratives and smart communication. Schwan called attention to the fact that there is no power source in Europe for national leaders. Therefore the existing interest in sustainability issues that exists at the bottom e.g. with cities should be leveraged.

Members of the Extended Leadership Council described the substance of the communication as “disappointing” in view of domestic implementation. The EU's credibility is seen at stake and the European Commission should avoid giving a wrong impression (“outsourcing of the implementation to development cooperation”). They stressed the difficulties of bridging policies at national and EU level, while ensuring that all policy levels take responsibility of implementing SDGs. Discussants called for a policy coherence approach that focuses on win-win situations (nexus) without avoiding hard choices. There were strong calls for an overarching strategy on the 2030 Agenda at EU level including the pragmatic suggestion to set up a DG-level council on sustainability with the European Commission. The call to build new alliances between actors like cities and business was widely echoed since sustainability is an essentially political issue, requiring substantial transformation. During the transformation process we will likely face contradictions, barriers and challenges. For concepts of sustainable development to be as successful and credible as nationalist and populist ideas, the participants deemed notions of solidarity and justice as crucial. “Selfishness is not sustainable”, Falkenberg concluded. Ribera added that people need to be the pivotal point of sustainability, not the GDP. In a new approach to international cooperation, a role for Europe could be to share the experience on its way to sustainable development with others, not only with developing countries but with other so called developed nations.

Messner closed the discussion by proposing to prepare for a meeting of European think tanks in early 2018 - in order to reassess the state of sustainable development affairs in the EU after the Brexit trigger, the two European presidencies of G7 and G20, and the upcoming elections in several EU member states.