



Germany's 2017 elections and the SDGs: did we miss something?

Adolf Kloke-Lesch

Executive Director of the Sustainable Development Solutions Network Germany
(SDSN Germany)

You would have expected the universal 2030 Agenda and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to have served as a central point of reference in the 2017 German elections. Angela Merkel (Christian Democratic Union - CDU) had still spoken in May of the “historic significance” of the 2030 Agenda, describing it as a “comprehensive transformation mandate for all states and ultimately for each one of us”ⁱ. Sigmar Gabriel (Social Democratic Party - SPD) saw in the 2030 Agenda the “central frame of reference for a more just and peaceful world order”ⁱⁱ, and Martin Schulz (SPD) called for an ambitious approach to its implementationⁱⁱⁱ. Barbara Hendricks (SPD) referred to it as a “global social contract” and the “most ambitious plan ever to be drawn up against poverty and in favour of our planet”^{iv}. Gerd Müller (Christian Social Union - CSU) spoke of a “global contract of the future” and a “task for all policy areas”^v. While the opposition parties in the German Bundestag did not tone down these ambitions, they rather unsurprisingly warned of the need for greater consistency in the Agenda’s implementation. German left-wing party *Die Linke* tabled a motion calling for the German Sustainable Development Strategy to be adapted to take account of the “need for a global socio-environmental transformation”^{vi}. Germany’s green party, *Bündnis 90/Die Grünen*, had tabled 17 motions^{vii} setting out their ideas for how Germany should implement each of the SDGs. So, you would think everything would be set up for a 2017 election campaign around the issue of sustainability, with the 2030 Agenda becoming tangible “for each one of us” and permeating “all policy areas” – a campaign in which everyone discusses and argues over the best means of achieving the SDGs.

Political parties - the weak point

The reality was quite the opposite, as we are dealing after all with political parties, the weak point in the sustainability architecture.^{viii} Article 21 of the Basic Law for the Federal Republic of Germany stipulates that political parties shall participate in the formation of the political will of the people, yet they appear to be conspicuously unmoved by the 2030 Agenda and are lagging noticeably behind discourses in business and society. The organisation of parties along territorial lines, as stipulated in the German Act on Political Parties, encourages a focus on regional and personal interests. The influential working groups of the parties are structured based on traditional policy areas and ministries, often serving as the gateway for sectoral and industry issues. All of the parties lack an official working group with responsibility across policy areas for the 2030 Agenda in the first place, let alone one that is effective. Top politicians who acknowledge the universal nature of the 2030 Agenda at sustainability conferences, in the German Bundestag and on the international stage hesitate to do so boldly at party conferences and in the marketplace. Consequently, it was no surprise that the first

draft manifestos mentioned the 2030 Agenda at best as a frame of reference for development policy and other foreign relations, but not as an overarching narrative for economic and social policy in Germany itself. Given the path dependencies within the parties, it was almost a case of shutting the stable door after the horse had bolted.

However, a tiny amount of progress was made. Whether it was ultimately down to pressure from civil society, whisperings from the ministries or activism within the parties, the 2030 Agenda was given a slightly higher status in the manifestos as a whole. *Bündnis90/Die Grünen* were the only party to mainstream the 2030 Agenda in their domestic and foreign policy proposals in the introduction to their manifesto before going into greater detail in the international chapter^{ix}. The CDU/CSU placed the 2030 Agenda in the chapter on climate and the environment (“Sustainability as a mandate”) and were the only party to mention the German Sustainable Development Strategy, though without providing any further specifics on either^x. While the SPD addressed the 2030 Agenda in their international chapter, they did insist that Germany “(must) do everything within its power to achieve the SDGs at home by 2030”^{xi}. *Die Linke* mentioned the 2030 Agenda in their international and economic-policy chapters, though they focused primarily on the “responsibility of the North”^{xii}. The FDP referred to the 2030 Agenda in its international chapter as the basis for its development policy activities, calling in this context for a “coherent approach... particularly between economic, foreign and development policy, and one that is coordinated with European development cooperation”^{xiii}. The right-wing populist party *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD - Alternative for Germany) made no mention of the 2030 Agenda^{xiv}. As such, regardless of the specific positioning within their manifestos, all parties apart from the AfD made basic statements on the 2030 Agenda as a guideline for domestic and foreign policy. While these statements may be of a somewhat general and non-binding nature, they are something that we can and should build on.

However, the fact that, overall, just two explicit mentions are made of a single SDG shows just how shallow the understanding and incorporation of the 2030 Agenda are. The SPD mentioned SDG 5 (gender equality and women’s and girls’ empowerment) in the context of development cooperation and *Bündnis90/Die Grünen* mentioned SDG 4 (quality education) with reference to the education chain from daycare to adult education within German educational policy. Of course, this is not to say that the comprehensive manifesto statements made by the parties have nothing to do with the SDGs from a content point of view. Quite the opposite is true, as seen on the issue of climate in particular, with all parties except for the AfD committing to the Paris Climate Agreement, the twin sister of the 2030 Agenda and its SDG 13. Nevertheless, the same parties that, as grand coalition partners, had modelled the new version of the German Sustainable Development Strategy on the SDGs or, as an opposition party, had tabled a motion in the Bundestag on each one of the SDGs were unable to find comparable approaches for their manifestos.

How will we achieve the SDGs of the 2030 Agenda and the goals of the German Sustainable Development Strategy if they are not transparently addressed in election manifestos and in campaign debates? This is especially important in the case of those SDGs and objectives for which the German Sustainable Development Strategy itself or independent indicators have identified considerable deficits. Incidentally, had they focused more strongly on the 2030 Agenda, the parties would have addressed the very topics that, according to an Emnid survey,^{xv} more than half of Germans consider important when deciding who to vote for: old-age poverty (SDG 1), families with children (SDGs 1 and 4 in particular), medical and nursing care (SDG 3), equal educational opportunities (SDG 4), unemployment (SDG 8), fairer wealth distribution (SDG 10), affordable

accommodation (SDG 11), environmental protection and climate change mitigation (SDGs 12, 13, 14 and 15 in particular), and crime and terrorism (SDG 16).

Inconsistency among civil society and associations too

Internal party structures and indecisive leadership by top party officials are not the only issues making it difficult to mainstream the 2030 Agenda within the political parties. Clearly, the parties are also responding to their environment, to interest groups, to the public mood and to the positions of competing parties. And the advocates of the 2030 Agenda should also ask themselves whether they always choose the right language, addressees and approaches in their work of translating the Agenda's content for others. In particular, they need to explain how setting specific issues within a 2030 Agenda context adds value to them. All too often, they operate within the echo chambers of their own community, which also includes their contacts within ministries, associations and research institutions. If it is primarily environmental and development associations working to implement the 2030 Agenda, then it becomes associated with only those groups. The fact that the messenger is the message poses a major dilemma for the Agenda's activist proponents. Consequently, it is important and right that environmental and development associations are now working with social and consumer associations, trade unions, and human-rights and peace organisations to implement the 2030 Agenda in Germany and address political leaders^{xvi}. However, looking at the individual electoral position papers of the participating associations, VENRO (the umbrella organisation of development and humanitarian aid NGOs in Germany)^{xvii} and the DNR (German League for Nature and Environment)^{xviii} were the only ones to contain statements on the 2030 Agenda. Neither the DGB (German Trade Union Confederation)^{xix} nor the Deutsche Paritätische Wohlfahrtsverband (DPWV)^{xx} state their positions with regard to the 2030 Agenda. The same is true of the DBJR (German Federal Youth Council)^{xxi} and the Diakonie (social welfare organisation of Germany's protestant churches)^{xxii}. And the situation is no different in the private sector. Over 30 leading global companies and business associations are currently working as part of *econsense*, the Forum for Sustainable Development of German Business, placing their activities explicitly and clearly within the context of the 2030 Agenda. At the same time, BDI (the Federation of German Industries)^{xxiii}, on whose initiative *econsense* was set up, makes no mention of the 2030 Agenda in the recommendations for action that it submitted to the new Bundestag. All in all, then, it is not surprising that politicians have failed to prick up their ears.

What matters now

Key strategic decisions are due to be made on sustainable development and climate change mitigation in the **new legislative period, which runs until 2021**. The German Sustainable Development Strategy is due to be amended in 2018 and the next progress report is due out in 2020. The UN will hold a summit in 2019 to review global implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The German Government's Climate Action Plan is due to be updated by 2020 to include new measures on the implementation of the Paris Climate Agreement. The 2019 European Parliament elections offer an opportunity to push ahead to a greater extent with the European implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the Paris agreement, not least under Germany's Presidency of the Council of the European Union in the second half of 2020. The tasks for the next four years can only be carried out successfully if all stakeholders from the worlds of policy-making, civil society, the private sector, research, the arts and culture play an active part in the joint endeavour of sustainable development^{xxiv}.

The new **German Government** should begin by committing in its **coalition agreement** and then in its government declaration to putting the 2030 Agenda and the achievement of its 17 SDGs at the heart of its entire domestic and foreign policy, and sharpening the German Sustainable Development Strategy with a corresponding level of ambition. To this end, it could, for example, call upon all appointed members of advisory councils and advisory boards to gear their recommendations to the German Government towards the 2030 Agenda.

Within the **German Bundestag**, the Parliamentary Advisory Council on Sustainable Development should become a permanent fixture within its standing orders. It would also be beneficial for each of the parliamentary parties to appoint one of its deputy chairs as officer for the 2030 Agenda and the German Sustainable Development Strategy. The Sustainable Development Strategy itself should also be the regular subject of resolutions by the German Bundestag.

The **political parties** need to review in detail their relationship with the 2030 Agenda and work out which means they intend to use to achieve the SDGs in their respective social policy strategies. For example, the electoral programmes for the 2019 European Parliament elections could be used to turn the 2030 Agenda into a civic project for renewing the European Union. A high-ranking official within each party's organisational structures should be entrusted with the task of mainstreaming the 2030 Agenda right across the party's activities.

Civil society organisations and **business associations** must not address the 2030 Agenda only in terms of its respective technical aspects, but also as an overarching narrative for everything they do and communicate this to the public via their top-level representatives. The individual issues gain greater significance when they are placed in the broader context of the 2030 Agenda. Indeed, they rely on the successful implementation of the SDGs as a whole. Why can business associations such as the BDI not follow the example of the many DAX-listed companies that have placed the SDGs prominently on their websites? Alliances of civil-society organisations and business associations could help by casting aside their complacency and begin to engage in transformative *realpolitik*. It is also necessary in this context to systematically address the parties in between election campaigns.

Sustainability scientists must no longer neglect political parties and associations in their research, but instead concentrate in their political science analyses and recommendations on the role of these organisations in sustainable development policy. In so doing, the focus can no longer be only on the right or wrong policies. If we are to understand why what has been recognised as right is still so far from being translated into policy, then researchers and policy advisors need to place the spotlight on the political system and its processes, and the political class itself.

Is 2030 the magic formula for politics?

During the election campaign, both SPD Chancellor candidate Martin Schulz and FDP Chairman Christian Lindner toyed with the idea of the **2030 Agenda as a magic formula** for their electoral programmes. It is questionable whether they were actually aware when doing so of the universal 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development though. But that is precisely what is needed^{xxv}. Perhaps, following the low level of ambition of the 2017 election campaign, the term 2030 can be used as a magic formula for German politics after all - for a comprehensive transformation in which consideration is given to the sustainable future of Germany, Europe and planet earth all at the same time.

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