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The corona virus and its consequences for national, European and global sustainability and climate policy as well as international cooperation

Report on the virtual meeting of SDSN Germany on April 3, 2020

In view of the current Covid-19 pandemic, the secretariat of SDSN Germany initiated a virtual meeting among the member and partner organisations of the network and its Extended Leadership Council to advise on the current situation and the impact on climate and sustainability policy and possible joint activities. At the meeting on April 3, more than 35 participants from politics / federal and state ministries, the municipal sector, business, science and civil society took part and contributed their assessments and expectations of the current crisis.

Adolf Kloke-Lesch (Executive Director of SDSN Germany) initially emphasised that the discussion is against the background and in the common awareness of a dramatic health and humanitarian crisis, catastrophe in many places, and its considerable immediate consequences, as well as with deep respect and full recognition for everyone who is directly involved in containing this crisis during these weeks. Due to the crisis, significant changes in the framework conditions for sustainable development and its design were to be expected. At the same time, however, there was also a question of what the guiding principles of sustainable development and the 2030 Agenda could contribute to overcoming the crisis. An interruption or postponement of an abundance of important sustainability and climate processes, both large and small, nationally, European and international, was immediately apparent. It would take a lot of time and energy to take up these threads again. At the same time, we also encountered an enormous wave of opinions and new processes that deal with the relationship between the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences and sustainable development. In times of isolation, this meeting should offer space, at least listening to and perhaps being able to respond a little to one another.

The following report follows the key questions of the discussion. In view of the approximately 30 word contributions, it can and should neither be comprehensive nor give the impression of an emerging common picture, but rather serve as the basis for further discussions.

Flashlights: How is the corona crisis changing the view of sustainable development? What influence does the corona crisis have on the framework conditions for shaping sustainable development? Which new questions arise, which questions arise new or different?

The future perspective on sustainable development remained open. There was an enormous danger of a relapse in sustainability and climate policy, the tendency to "throw off the ballast of sustainability now". On the other hand, the crisis also casted a clearer light on the need for sustainable development. The vulnerability of people, societies and civilization were becoming more conscious. In the light of the crisis, sustainable development also had to be told differently and more closely linked to terms such as resilience and services of general interest ("*Daseinsvorsorge*"). The corona crisis as a "peak situation" ("*Spitzensituation*") showed systemic weaknesses of our societies like in a magnifying glass and, like other global crises, challenged our understanding and handling of global public goods. These 'weak' points were revealing structures and conflicts that were also present in "everyday situations", but were less visible. It also showed how crises were reinforcing each other. However, the hasty equation of Covid-19 with the climate crisis was worrying. Here objectivity was required instead of a quick shot. With a view to developing and emerging countries, the economic and social consequences of the pandemic were likely to be enormous, especially where countries were heavily involved in international supply chains. At the same time, the crisis clarified and reinforced existing inequalities in access (e.g. to health care, social security or digitalisation).



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Overall, the crisis had made the interdependencies between the various Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the need for systemic approaches more apparent. It was therefore of little use to return to old 'camp struggles' during the crisis, such as between the "three dimensions" of sustainable development or the relationship between democracy / freedom and sustainability. Rather, common terms and narratives would have to be found that, firstly, could bring people together and, secondly, could address the integral, holistic nature of sustainable development. It was not a question of one-sided prioritisation of the economy, but of concentrating on it in the sense of differentiating 'the' economy – also in terms of value creation and system relevance. Such an approach could provide important hints to lead a fundamental economic debate about sustainability in the current situation: How could sustainable development be used as a long-term strategy for the restart and the future viability of the economy? In this context, the relationship between efficiency and resilience should also be questioned and renegotiated. In addition, concepts such as disaster risk reduction, disaster preparedness and protection or the relationship between urgency and resilience needed to be given more attention in the discourse on sustainable development. Moreover, the pandemic illustrated the relevant connections between these lines of discourse and their importance for sustainable development as a whole.

Against the background of the pandemic, the topic of digitalisation as a central element of the recent sustainability discourse was also gaining in importance. Digital formats were becoming more relevant, opened up new possibilities for collaboration and were received enthusiastically in some cases. At the same time, however, the limits of these virtual options and the inequalities in access to them would become apparent, too, which was particularly important for the context of international cooperation.

Developments in various countries also showed that the crisis was already being used, for example, to soften measures against climate change and to withdraw from commitments that have already been negotiated. It was therefore all the more important to underline that sustainability policy had to be continued and the right course had to be set so that it did not come to a standstill for years – even if a lot of political capital was currently tied up for the acute management of the crisis and a deterioration of the baseline for reaching the SDGs was expected. It was also to be feared that although transformations would continue in principle, these processes would now be implemented more slowly due to limited 'problem-processing capacity' in politics and companies. Sustainability policy had to assert itself in the crisis as more than 'fair weather policy' and was not only important, but in particular important now. At the European level, too, it had to be avoided that crisis management weakened the implementation of the European Green Deals. This 'adaptation strategy' had to be clearly counteracted in any case. From a global, European and national perspective, there was a risk of exhaustion of social, financial and emotional capital. This could result in insufficient resources being available for other tasks such as sustainability transformations. At the same time, the crisis could also release forces and allow the exit from existing patterns of path dependency.

In international and European cooperation, the reaction to the crisis had been politically inadequate, but at the same time it was also encouraging to see what had nevertheless been achieved. On the one hand, the virus had been responded to in a very similar way worldwide at a high speed and in cooperation between international organisations (WHO), science and national policies. On the other hand, in terms of fiscal policy, national governments and international financial institutions responded to the crisis on a scale that had never been seen before. However, there was a lack of 'cross-border' coordination and solidarity, for example within Europe and with a view to developing and emerging countries. More German leadership was also required here.



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In addition, the crisis was leaving its political and socio-political traces worldwide. The ability of politicians to act, albeit partially delayed, was well received in societies. However, it should be observed with concern how the crisis in some countries (cf. abolishment of all democratic checks-and-balances in Hungary, restrictions on civil society in developing countries or the handling of election dates) was used to restrict democratic freedoms and rights over the long term. It should also be asked whether the possibilities for state restrictions on freedom were being expanded structurally in democratic societies. Right-wing populist and extreme movements in Germany had so far not been able to benefit from the crisis, but in Italy they had tried to make anti-European capital out of the crisis. Worldwide, the crisis initially strengthened the executive powers, but in the medium term the crisis could have very different political consequences worldwide.

Science & politics: How can the guiding principle of sustainable development and the 2030 Agenda contribute to shaping how to deal with the corona crisis and its consequences? How will sustainability and climate policy change (in the light of the crisis)?

The current crisis management could enable collective learning experiences for dealing with sustainability challenges such as climate change. Moreover, the crisis could also provide new approaches for working on the science policy interface, e.g. as sustainability and climate science could learn from virology and epidemiology how to feed scientific evidence into policy advice. Currently, however, it was primarily natural scientific expertise that shapes political decision-making. This had to be supplemented by social science advice, which also dealt with the question of societal prerequisites and effects of measures. The crisis showed that rapid political reactions based on solidarity were possible. Thus, the pandemic could also have a positive impact on global solidarity, the 'leave no one behind' principle of the 2030 Agenda, and sustainability narratives. At the same time, it was emphasised that a political solution such as that currently being practiced for the pandemic was not desirable for the issue of sustainability and climate. If the broad societal discourse was missing, long-term acceptance of transformations would not be achieved. The pandemic also illustrated the need to see and pursue goals such as SDG 3 (health) and SDG 16 (peaceful and inclusive societies, fundamental freedoms and democratic principles) in context.

From a sustainability perspective, the crisis also called for a new balance between private and public responsibility. Prevention required systemic build-up of resilience and resources, including asset generation. This was about health systems, but also about critical physical and non-physical infrastructures or social security systems.

The pandemic was currently encountering sustainability / SDG processes that were struggling for political attention regardless of the crisis and would have to address their existing weaknesses. The Global Sustainable Development Report (GSDR) offered central starting points for the systematic thinking that was now necessary, because its organisation in transformations and levers framed transformation for societies as a whole. This 'organisation' could therefore provide important new elements for the upcoming extensive revision of the German sustainability strategy, which should present relevant impulses for the post-pandemic phase. In politics, companies, science and civil society, given the limited political, human and time resources, there was also the question of the right relationship between the continuation and further refinement of long-term sustainability processes on the one hand and direct interference in the current way of dealing with the crisis and its consequences on the other hand. It was now essential to align the upcoming crisis management programmes with sustainability and climate goals. At the same time, the inevitable delays in the longer-term sustainability processes could and should be used as an opportunity and time for structural considerations for their further advancement.



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Politicians would very quickly expect concrete evidence from science for a sustainability-oriented design of the crisis management programmes. In this context, the discourse on sustainable finance had to apply now to stimulus and recovery programmes, too. Here the Sustainable Finance Committee of the Federal Government was also asked to develop specific recommendations. The forthcoming economic stimulus programmes should not lead to the "lock-in" of old, unsustainable production and consumption patterns, which were usually shaped by strong particular interests or which neglected smaller, innovative actors. It was urged to take into account the very different capacities of municipalities and to create the personnel requirements for the implementation of such programmes. The question was raised with concern how the coal phase-out would now be implemented. It would be fatal if the structural change funds were now not available as planned. Rather, the transformation task of phase-out of coal in the regions and municipalities had to be supported now and promoted under the general conditions changed by the pandemic. The design of the economic stimulus programmes also had to take the effects on developing countries into account and shape them positively. At the European level, Germany should work to strengthen and further advance the Green Deal.

The pandemic should be framed as a global challenge that could only be solved through global cooperation and global solidarity. The international community was currently poorly positioned with regard to global governance and common goods. The role of the United Nations should therefore now be strengthened. In this context, the opportunity could be seized to overcome the crisis of multilateralism and to illustrate the added value of international cooperation. Global formats such as the G20 and others should also take a closer look at the crisis. Cooperation with Italy was particularly important, as it would have a special responsibility in 2021, particularly with its G20 presidency. Policy briefs on the topic were now being created in the T20. Attention was also drawn to various initiatives of the global SDSN in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic: [video recording](#) and [summary](#) of the conference "The Epidemiology and Economics of Coronavirus"; public survey on "[SDG progress and challenges](#)" and add-on survey on "[Impacts of Covid-19 on the SDGs](#)".

Finally, *Adolf Kloeke-Lesch* thanked all participants for the very rich contributions. From his point of view, there are **three areas for further consultations and activities within the scope of SDSN Germany**:

First, it is about a new (self) reflection on the guiding principles of sustainable development in the context of the crisis (changed tone / resilience / exhaustion / democracy, freedom and civil rights in the crisis).

Second, there is the question of how to deal specifically with sustainability and climate processes (such as the German Sustainable Development Strategy, the European Green Deal, the High-Level Political Forum, the Climate and Biodiversity COPs). Where should we now "invest" and how? How should the continuation of the sustainability and climate processes be combined with the immediate focus on bringing sustainability into crisis response? What very specific steps and measures can be recommended?

Third, the European, international and global dimension of the answer to the Corona crisis has so far been largely neglected in Germany. More attention should be paid to this topic.

The Leadership Council of SDSN Germany will deal with the topic at the end of April.

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