

d·i·e

Deutsches Institut für
Entwicklungspolitik



German Development
Institute

Taking stock of 2030 Agenda: are we making progress with integrated implementation?

By Hannah Janetschek & Imme Scholz,
*German Development Institute /
Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE)*

The Current Column

of 24 July 2017

Taking stock of 2030 Agenda: are we making progress with integrated implementation?

There is no planet B. Humanity needs to acknowledge this and work together to implement the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted in 2015, in a relatively short space of time. Agenda 2030 is a unique vision for the future of humanity on this planet. The challenge lies in combining climate change mitigation and environmental protection with social and economic development. This involves synergies and trade-offs, with dialogue at an early stage across policy areas being essential. The annual High Level Political Forum (HLPF) is the UN platform for discussing progress and current challenges in implementation.

This year saw the second HLPF take place, and the all-round optimistic mood still appeared to be alive and well. This was also reflected in the common position by all the G20 states at the Hamburg summit with regard to commit to the importance of the United Nations and the HLPF in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The HLPF meets annually in New York, with countries reporting on a voluntary basis and making themselves available to answer critical questions from the other participating countries and a large number of civil society actors. The reports generally consist of a 15-minute presentation on progress and deficits with subsequent discussion. This year saw the number of national progress reports double to 44. The countries in attendance, which, among others, included India, Denmark, Ethiopia and the Maldives, could not have been more different in terms of their respective challenges and levels of progress.

The two weeks of reporting on the 2030 Agenda provided the conclusion to an intensive preparatory phase at national level involving supporting publications, multi-stakeholder dialogue and panels of civil society experts. These preparations represent the actual contribution to implementing the 2030 Agenda. 2017 was the first time that national reporting was supplemented by the 'thematic reviews' of seven selected SDGs. Under the heading of 'Eradicating poverty and promoting prosperity', the HLPF took an in-depth look at the topics of poverty, hunger, health, gender equality, infrastructure, marine ecosystems and global partnerships. Less developed countries could set their own priorities in their reports or concentrate on the seven selected SDGs. As a result of this narrower thematic approach, the discussions developed a strong focus on the social and economic dimensions of the 2030 Agenda, with the environmental dimension fading into the background.

Given the short amount of time available for each country, narrowing down the discussion to a smaller range of topics proved helpful from a practical perspective. This enabled the poorest nations in particular, as well as small island states with limited implementation capacity, to share the reporting burden and, where relevant, form thematic partnerships with other countries. At the same time, thematic reviews are a very useful way of moving the discussion beyond the national level. As such, they have the potential to place the focus on particularly critical trade-offs between development, growth and environmental protection and to facilitate information-sharing on experiences and challenges in systemic change processes. A side event on food at the Global Soil Week in Berlin highlighted that it is precisely this cross-cutting approach that needs to be taken by thematic reviews in order to account for the complex challenges involved in implementing the 2030 Agenda.

However, the first thematic reviews at the HLPF gave rise to in-depth analysis of individual SDG themes and lost sight in the process of the interactions between individual policy areas. This raises the question of how to design thematic reviews so that they take account of the integrated nature of the 2030 Agenda. We must stop looking for isolated approaches in individual policy areas and instead find mechanisms that forge links between social, economic, environmental and political matters. Only then can we talk about trade-offs and synergies, winners and losers, and the sticking points in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The thematic reviews have the potential to promote this dialogue across policy sectors and the associated mutual learning process at global level. In this context, the agreements concluded by the G20 states in Hamburg on setting up a voluntary G20 learning platform for the 2030 Agenda in which countries outside of the G20 can also participate, and on consolidating dialogue with social actors, are also a positive step.

It is now necessary to push ahead with dialogue on improving the design of thematic reviews. Progress in this area must be measured against the complex challenges in the individual countries and the aspiration of gaining systemic knowledge and translate it into recommendations for policy action. Thematic reviews which take on the cross-cutting character of the SDGs can encourage recommendations for systemic action and promote understanding across policy sectors.