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Political parties: weak point in the sustainability architecture

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Bonn, 29 May 2017. A tragedy is looming. While the German Government and federal state governments are beginning to implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the political parties behind them appear conspicuously unconcerned and are lagging perceptibly behind the dynamics in business and society. This does not bode well for coalition negotiations following the German parliamentary elections or for the next four years. After this legislative period, there are only nine years left until 2030!

What is going wrong?

The manifestos published to date only mention Agenda 2030 and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a frame of reference for development policy and other foreign affairs, rather than as an overarching narrative for economic and social policy within Germany. Incidentally, the same thing can be seen in the manifestos of the British Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat parties ahead of the UK general election. In Berlin, it has so far been civil society organisations with an international focus that have put on public events on the role of Agenda 2030 involving party representatives. Even though organisers have sought to give consideration to the societal dimension for people in Germany, these events have largely revolved around party spokespersons debating development policy issues. Under the heading “What does ‘sustainable development’ mean to the political parties?”, the German Council for Sustainable Development put six questions to the chairpersons of seven parties. The five responses received to date link party manifestos in general terms with Agenda 2030 and Germany’s Sustainable Development Strategy, and, rather pleasingly, give some consideration to domestic implementation. However, there is no specific or explicit reference to the SDGs in individual policy areas and no commitment to giving sustainability constitutional status or, as advocated by SDSN Germany, anchoring Agenda 2030 as an overarching issue in the manifestos.

Politics behind the scenes of sustainability

It is true that Agenda 2030 was adopted by governments. Germany’s Sustainable Development Strategy was also drawn up by the German Government, not the parties, something smugly pointed out on occasions. Nevertheless, the strategy speaks of sustainable development as a joint effort, acknowledging and encouraging the involvement of actors from civil society, business, academia, the arts

and culture. Absent from this list, however, are the parties, who, according to Article 21 of Germany’s Basic Law, participate in the formation of the political will of the people. This is not changed by the Parliamentary Advisory Council on Sustainable Development, which uses the SDGs as impetus for work in the parliamentary groups. The Council has so far failed to establish itself as a permanent body within the German Bundestag and gain a proper hearing on a day-to-day basis from the parliamentary group leaders. As the parties’ parliamentary representatives, the parliamentary groups need to be mobilised primarily from party level to implement the SDGs. However, the parties play host to a wide range of regional and personal interests, and the issues of different streams and interest groups. The daily wrangling over power and influence is short term in focus. It is not least for this reason that the sustainability movement has primarily organised itself on an extra-parliamentary basis and outside of party confines. It is almost considered improper to talk about parties in public discourse on sustainable development for fear of descending into party politics and being accused of misusing the discussion for party political purposes. There is a need to overcome this reticence if we are to put sustainability at the heart of political debate. Shouldn’t the parties also get involved in the new Forum Sustainability, answering questions and moving forward with clear voluntary commitments?

Public debate on the best ways to achieve the SDGs

Sustainability advocates also need to re-think their approach and no longer leave the parties out in the cold. Civil society must challenge the parties as much as it does the government and private sector. Sustainability researchers should also stop neglecting the parties and instead make their role the subject of political science analysis and recommendations.

Election campaigns thrive on differences and differentiation. Sustainable development is a joint task requiring public commitment. Both are vital to our democracy. It is now time for the party leaders to step forward. The same politicians who have recognised the universal nature of Agenda 2030 in the forewords to sustainability strategies, in the German and European Parliaments, at the United Nations and at G7 and G20 summits now need to commit to doing the same at their party conferences and in their manifestos.