Implementing the Sustainable Development Goals at the Local Level
Strategies and Mechanisms

In September 2015, the UN General Assembly adopted global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as part of the 2030 Agenda. The SDGs follow on from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) but also take account of the outcomes of the 2012 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20). The new 2030 Agenda thus captures all aspects of sustainable development—i.e. its environmental, economic and social dimensions—for the first time and applies to developing, emerging and industrialised countries alike. For all the world’s countries, this raises the question of how to implement the new Goals. The SDGs’ success will be determined, above all, in towns and cities where people live and work. Which opportunities and challenges will this create for the local level, and what kind of supportive role can local sustainability strategies play in this context? These questions were explored at the Bonn Symposium 2015, which took place at Deutsche Welle from 17-18 November 2015.

“World society is in a crisis state,” said Claudia Roth, Vice-President of the German Bundestag, at the start of her keynote speech in the wake of the terror attacks in Paris a few days earlier. Armed conflict, ongoing climate change, widening social inequalities and, as a result, new refugee flows call for solutions and the assumption of responsibility, she said—especially by developed countries like Germany. Unlike the MDGs, the SDGs are “not an abstract concept, and they are not just for the so-called developing countries”; on the contrary, they oblige each and every one of us to work at the local level for change. Our meat consumption, our throw-away mentality, our subsidies on fossil fuels—all these place Germany firmly in the “developing country” category in matters of sustainability. Gratifyingly, said Claudia Roth, the German Development and Environment Ministers are now willing to acknowledge this publicly, although the message does not appear to have reached the rest of the German Government. Trade, finance and fisheries policy often directly contradict our desire for sustainability, unfortunately. The German Government’s lack of a firm commitment, at the Addis Ababa International Conference on Financing for Development in spring 2015, to support the establishment of a new global tax body was further proof of this failing. That Conference’s lack of success was
also a concern for the second keynote speaker, Kgositso Ramokgopa, Executive Mayor of Tshwane, a metropolitan municipality in South Africa with a population of around three million. In his view, the developed countries clearly have an obligation, based on the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities (CBDR), to provide the major share of funding for SDG implementation. Alongside the issue of financing, he also urged the Global North to rethink its consumption patterns, as this could do much to promote a shift to sustainable production in the developing countries as well.

**Down from the ivory tower**

After these introductory reflections on the 2030 Agenda, the two keynote speakers then discussed the important role of the local level. According to Claudia Roth, not only the ministries and parliaments at the national level but also Germany’s federal states (Länder) must step up their engagement for sustainability and achieve more coherence between their own and national policies in future. A national plan of action would be helpful here – but it should not become mired in technical detail. Instead, integration into the political mainstream is essential if the SDGs are to be successful. “The sustainability debate must come down from its ivory tower,” said the Vice-President of the Bundestag. Policy-makers must lead the way and put the issue right at the top of the agenda. Without genuine leadership, sustainability cannot be achieved, said the Ghanaian MP Stephen Nana Ato Arthur, to resounding applause. It is also helpful, in this context, if the relevant units of the administration report directly to the Mayor, according to Mercedes Mathebula, Tshwane’s Sustainability Specialist.

Unfortunately, politics tends to be preoccupied with day-to-day business – a complaint heard from a number of participants. What’s more, the frequent elections that are a feature of political life in a country with a federal system of government, like Germany, mean that ad hoc solutions are often the preferred option. But as many African speakers pointed out, it’s no different in other parts of the world. Acute problems demand instant solutions, but these should dovetail, rather than conflict, with sustainable development policies. Given the major challenges currently on the agenda, such as the refugee crisis, this is no easy task, as Felicitas Kubala, Vice-Mayor of the City of Mannheim, pointed out with reference to her own political work. For example, fair procurement and the urgent need for new housing are sometimes difficult to reconcile.

The refugee issue also demonstrates the need to think more broadly about sustainable development instead of simply focusing on, say, environmental aspects, as often happened in the past. Dr Gerd Landsberg, President of the German Association of Towns and Municipalities, emphasised that more support is required for the integration of the social dimension into sustainability policy. This is already happening at national and Land level in Germany, according to Dr Marc Pahl from North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) and Monika Frieling from the German Federal Chancellery – and they went on to explain how.

**Sustainability strategies in focus**

Most German federal states already have, or are in the processing of developing, a sustainability strategy. North Rhine-Westphalia falls into the latter group: its state government adopted a draft sustainability strategy for NRW in late September 2015. Besides focusing on topics such as climate change and environmental protection, the strategy places great emphasis on “social cohesion and inclusion”, said Dr Pahl, who is responsible for coordinating the project. The process in NRW ran more or less concurrently with the global negotiations on the SDGs. Although not aligned to the 2030 Agenda, there is, broadly speaking, “a thematic overlap of around 95 per cent”. Numerous and diverse interest groups were consulted in order to achieve “as much ownership for the strategy as possible”. An online consultation is now also under way and has received a great deal of support. However, it has also revealed that there is considerable scope for improvement, for example in the electromobility sector. A major challenge is not so much developing indicators but deciding which goals and targets should be achieved by 2030. Very good progress is being made on this issue in the climate and environment sectors, but indicators such as income parity are “more politically sensitive”.

A wealth of information was also provided on how these issues are being dealt with at the national level in Germany. Unlike the approach adopted in North Rhine-Westphalia, the revision of Germany’s national Sustainability Strategy in 2016 will be aligned to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development,
said Monika Frieling from the Federal Chancellery, the lead organisation in this context. The 17 Goals will provide the structure for the revised Strategy, and its international dimension will also be strengthened, as recommended by the German Council for Sustainable Development (RNE). Imme Scholz is a member of the RNE. As she explained, the Council believes it is important to broaden the focus away from the longstanding preoccupation with domestic policy and achieve better linkage with international commitments and agreements. The Federal Government should do justice to the pioneering role often ascribed to it in the international negotiations on the 2030 Agenda. For that, it is essential to gain the support of the other government departments besides the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and the Federal Environment Ministry (BMU), both of which took the lead for Germany in the negotiations. Gaining this support is a task which should now be tackled with vigour, said Imme Scholz. The RNE also called for a stronger role for Parliament and its committees, perhaps with a requirement for the Federal Government to report every two years, rather than every four as at present. Both Imme Scholz and Monika Frieling highlighted the need to prioritise some of the Goals, although it is important “to strike the right balance” here. For Imme Scholz, energy policy, climate policy and the promotion of sustainable consumption patterns are all likely to have a positive impact both internally and externally and therefore deserve particular support. Like Dr Pahl and Dr Landsberg, she called for a stronger focus on sustainability’s social dimension, which has not received sufficient attention in German policy-making to date. She pointed out that it is helpful, in this context, for stakeholders such as the Paritätischer Wohlfahrtsverband, Germany’s voluntary welfare association, to refer explicitly to the SDGs in their demands. It is also important to strengthen vertical integration beyond the UN level, and here, key reference points are the EU’s Sustainable Development Strategy, as the overarching level, the German Länder strategies and finally the local strategies/Agenda 21 as the lowest tier. For the first time, a broad participatory process has been established at the national level in Germany, which Monika Frieling encouraged the Bonn Symposium participants to join, as many of them have been actively engaged at the local level for many years. “The linkage between solutions to the global challenges facing humankind and practical policy-making at the local level is already embedded in many municipalities’ DNA,” State Secretary Marc Jan Eumann had said in his words of welcome during the opening session. For Bonn, as a UN City, this is particularly relevant, said Rüdiger Wagner, Head of Bonn’s Department for Environment, Health and Law, providing numerous practical examples.

Urbanisation, Habitat III and city networks

This is not only the case in Germany, as Kgosientso Ramokgopa from South Africa pointed out. Above all, ongoing urbanisation in many parts of the continent is constantly confronting local authorities with new challenges. For that reason, 22 African cities this year established the African Capital Cities Sustainability Forum as a platform for driving sustainable development. The question of how the SDGs can be achieved in cities will also be addressed at the Habitat III Conference in Ecuador in 2016. At the Bonn Symposium, information about this event was provided by Priscilla Arhin, Mayor of the city of Cape Coast in Ghana, and Franz-Birger Marré, Head of the Water, Urban Development and Mobility Division at the BMZ. The German Government has three main issues for the New Urban Agenda: firstly, cities should be officially recognised as development actors, with appropriate capacity building; secondly, they should be designed to offer better quality of life; and thirdly, integrated solutions rather than stand-alone projects should be developed. Away from the major UN conferences, various platforms – associations, forums and networks – are available in which cities and municipalities can engage in dialogue and share experience. One of the best-known examples at the international level is ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability, represented at the Bonn Symposium by its Deputy Secretary General Monika Zimmermann. ICLEI has a wealth of experience in sustainable development at the local level. Monika Zimmermann urged the municipal representatives to consider exactly what form of strategic development they want for their cities, based on specific local needs, available resources and challenges. As she pointed out, not everyone can be a pioneer in every area, and no municipality will be able to implement all 17 SDGs – it is important
to recognise that. In order to inspire the public, it is essential to speak their language, Kgosientso Ramokgopa added. As with the preparation of the sustainability strategies in Germany, South Africa too relies on broad-based consultation and dialogue processes with the general public. Albrecht W. Hoffmann, Head of Ideenschmiede für Nachhaltigkeit in Bonn, had previously summed this up during the discussions in one of the break-out groups, saying that: “In a more complex world, we need more thinking”. By emphasising the specific benefits of individual initiatives, it is possible to build ownership of these processes. In the sustainable mobility sector, for example, a better local public transport strategy can protect the climate and reduce stress levels for urban dwellers, who are tired of being caught up in gridlock. Awards for municipalities whose engagement stands out would also encourage broad commitment, according to Habraham Shamumoyo, Secretary General of the Association of Local Authorities in Tanzania. However, he cautioned against shifting the responsibility for SDG implementation to the local level unless new funding is provided. He was not the only participant to make this point during the two days of discussions.

### The private sector’s role

For Felicitas Kubala, Vice-Mayor of Mannheim, that goes without saying: “Negotiations about resources are part of the business of politics – not only in the context of sustainability.” However, the SDGs are not achievable using public funding alone. For that reason, the majority of participants at the Bonn Symposium wanted to see more engagement by the private sector. In his keynote, Kgosientso Ramokgopa had already called for more – and new – forms of mixed financing from public and private sources. However, companies should not only make a financial contribution to sustainable development; they should also lead the way and demonstrate good practice. Rüdiger Wagner reported that the hospitality industry in Bonn is developing its own sustainability criteria, while companies in other sectors are participating in energy-saving, environmentally friendly business projects. Sustainability can be both an incentive and an investment opportunity for companies. Dr Gerd Landsberg gave a real-world example: rather than buying low-cost containers from Ukraine to accommodate refugees, local timber-built housing modules could be used instead. He also called for a more positive mindset: “Germans are great ones for spotting a crisis lurking in every opportunity,” he said, tongue-in-cheek.

The German Government, Länder, municipalities and civil society are all committed to sustainable development, and more and more firms are taking the lead and setting a good example. Even so, most of the participants agreed that it will not be possible to dispense entirely with binding rules in future. “The topic is too important to rely on voluntary commitments,” said Dr Pahl at the end of his input. “What is at stake is our ability to cope with the future.”