

Conference Report

Bonn Symposium 2018

sef:

Rethinking Local Development. How to make sustainability a success?

Michèle Roth

The “transformation of our world” onto the sustainable path to which the UN member states made a commitment in Agenda 2030 requires more than one-off projects. It can only be realised through radical social, political and economic change. What kind of contribution can cities and municipalities make? How can the business and academic communities facilitate the process? And what can be done to win over the higher political levels? Local-level practitioners from various world regions discussed these questions with representatives of civil society organisations, associations and academia at the Bonn Symposium on 28-29 November 2018. The event was hosted by the Development and Peace Foundation (sef:) in cooperation with Service Agency Communities in One World (SKEW)/Engagement Global, the State of North Rhine-Westphalia and other partners.



Bonn Symposium 2018: Namhla Mniki-Mangaliso

The shift to sustainability: top-down or bottom-up?

We cannot be satisfied with what has been achieved so far in relation to sustainable development, as Renate Hendricks, Chairperson of the Executive Committee of the Development and Peace Foundation (sef:), emphasised in her welcome speech. Indeed, a glance at “big politics” shows that there is good reason at present to be concerned about possible setbacks, a notable example being the US President talking down the threat of climate change. By contrast, municipalities have made good progress in recent years, as Dr Jens Kreuter, Managing Director of Engagement Global – Service for Development Initiatives, underlined during the opening session. However, implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) requires new decision-making structures at the local level. Synergies need to be created and impacts upscaled by escalating local efforts to higher levels.

Namhla Mniki-Mangaliso, Executive Director of African Monitor in Cape Town and a member of the International Peer Review Group for the German Sustainable Development Strategy, adopted a clear position in her keynote during the opening session of the Bonn Symposium: “People-led approaches are the only way to realise the new vision.” In a world in upheaval, they are the only sustainable option. In order to fulfil Agenda 2030’s pledge to “leave no one behind”, it is essential to involve the people whose voices have often gone unheard in the past.

Governments fail at problem-solving

Above all, the transition to sustainability requires individual effort and a change of culture. However, governments are steadily losing the public's trust and



Bonn Symposium 2018: Professor Ulli Vilsmaier

confidence and are therefore incapable of initiating this cultural change. Namhla Mniki-Mangaliso predicted that “very soon, governments will become irrelevant” due to their inability to keep pace with the changes happening in the world. And yet governments should be playing a key role in redistributing society's resources and establishing policy frameworks.

She recommended focusing on the local level in order to find effective solutions. Poor communities in particular must be flexible and innovative in order to survive – and this generates remarkable wisdom. It is a question of finding out what works in local communities and upscaling these approaches.

Recognising and unlocking society's potential

How do we arrive at people-centred solutions? Namhla Mniki-Mangaliso had an answer to this question: we should stop seeing issues through a poverty lens and focus instead on people's capabilities. Ending poverty is not something that the powerful should do for the poor – that is a paternalistic approach. Instead of presenting solutions, it is about initiating dialogue and understanding the solutions that people are proposing. All over the world, people are developing alternative wealth creation systems and new markets, for example through online platforms for innovative forms of learning. Everyone has innate abilities, which must be recognised.

When asked about her sceptical attitude to governments, Namhla Mniki-Mangaliso explained that the

type of government that currently prevails does not enjoy the public's trust and confidence and is therefore not suitable as a means of achieving the SDGs. The days when governments were controlled by big business or select elites are over, she said. What is needed instead is more transparent, value-based governance that focuses on people's needs. However, one of the German mayors disagreed: change can be brought about much more quickly if it is initiated from the top down. SDG 16 recognises strong institutions as an important prerequisite for the implementation of the Goals. His advice to highly motivated young people was to go into politics and introduce legislation aimed at effecting change. However, Namhla Mniki-Mangaliso remained sceptical. Her maxim, she said, is: “If you want to go fast, do it alone. But if you want to go far, do it with other people.” Top-down policies that are not embedded at the grassroots will not work, although political engagement is important.

From knowledge production to transformative research

Individual knowledge has long been underrated in research as well. Professor Ulli Vilsmaier from Leuphana University of Lüneburg called for new alliances for the research community to counter fragmentation in knowledge production and within society at large. What kind of knowledge is regarded

Outcomes of Break-out Group A

“Transformation research for local sustainable development”

- The academic community has rarely seen itself as a provider of services for society – this involves a major paradigm shift from theory-led pure research to a focus on problem-solving.
- Transformative research aims to draw its findings from real life. However, this raises many questions, e.g. how to reconcile diverse interests.
- “Learning research” formats should be integrated into university curricula in order to develop cooperative research skills early on. From a practical policy-maker's perspective, academic expertise is urgently required to support transformation processes at the grassroots; society has questions, and researchers have methodologies that facilitate the process of finding answers.
- Academics are often reluctant to engage with practitioners and vice versa, so this challenge must be addressed and overcome. To that end, research must be communicated more effectively.
- The human right to conduct research should be incorporated into the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; research is not elitist; everyone has this capability.

as legitimate? Whose voices are heard? These are key political questions with emancipatory potential, Professor Vilsmaier said. Yes, specialisation is necessary, but it results in a lack of direction in some areas. Like politics, research should open up to other experiential contexts in order to grasp complexities. Everyone has experience to contribute.

Unlike academia in the classic sense, which distinguishes between the production of knowledge and its practical application, transformative research aspires to be creative and integrate other forms of knowledge and understanding. Knowledge production and social development should therefore be more closely aligned. This fundamental principle – already embedded in Agenda 21 – requires new approaches to research, but it also poses challenges at an individual and institutional level. For example, if a municipal administration is also regarded as a



Bonn Symposium 2018 (l.t.r.): Dr Simon Bujanowski, Claire Gillette, Nick Ngatia and Dr Merjam Wakili (Chair)

research community, this may raise concerns about the additional workload that this creates. However, seeing oneself not just as an administrator or caring professional but as an administrator/researcher or carer/researcher has a liberating effect. The transformative research pathway is a long one, but it can be approached experimentally, particularly at the local level. The SDGs offer an appropriate framework for this process.

Closed doors or lack of interest?

Young people should have a particularly strong interest in actively contributing to sustainable development. They are engaged in various ways that are often innovative and creative. An initial study on engagement by youth organisations in Europe revealed that all the organisations involved contribute to

SDG implementation in one way or another, without necessarily being aware of it. Practical projects and measures to raise awareness are the main focus, according to Claire Gillette, a freelance researcher who conducted the study for the European Youth Forum. There is no need to search for young decision-makers – they are already on hand. As one example, she mentioned the CoopColoc project, initiated by students so that empty apartments could be rented to their peers at affordable prices.

Younger people are rarely to be found in established political institutions and processes, however, even if the topics being addressed are of relevance to their daily lives. Dr Simon Bujanowski, Chair of the SPD group, Köln-Porz District Council, Cologne, mentioned cycling as an example. In his view, this is primarily due to our changing society and the associated expectation that everything should be instantly accessible and easy to communicate. However, this cannot apply to political processes – for good reason: they should be inclusive and properly prepared. However, Claire Gillette saw it rather differently: in her view, young people are denied access to political office, so they look for other ways of engaging.

Wanted: new approaches to policy-making

To encourage more young people to go into politics, both sides need to shift their positions, said Dr Bujanowski. Political institutions need to refocus and improve their outreach to young people. As an example, he mentioned plans to set up a local youth assembly with decision-making powers. Another option is to increase cooperation with schools in order to provide information or even prepare citizens' proposals. And of course, young people themselves need to show a greater willingness to advocate for their interests in formal political processes.

Outcomes of Break-out Group B

“Young people and innovation for sustainable development”

- Outreach to young people in schools is essential, e.g. with support from youth organisations that can provide suitable materials.
- The option of setting a youth quota in institutions should be considered.
- Young people would like to engage creatively, effectively and for a limited time; this requires appropriate structures.
- Established institutions should not only invite young people to come to them; they should also engage in outreach at youth meeting places.

This is precisely the aim of the work being done by Nick Ngatia. In order to give young people an opportunity to participate formally in the implementation of the New Urban Agenda in Kenya, he set up Nairobi Urban Creators. This youth platform is represented in the Agenda's national implementing committee, where it took the lead on developing an accessible version of the New Urban Agenda for the wider public. As the next step, Nairobi Urban Creators is working on plans for the Agenda's practical implementation. Through its participation in the national implementing committee, the platform lobbied successfully for a separate budget line for youth organisation activities.

But perhaps it is the existing democratic systems that require fundamental reform? This was one of the questions raised during the discussion. After all, young people are not the only ones creating parallel spaces because they feel there is no place for them in the established institutions and parliaments as a whole are not representative. However, Dr Bujanowski was sceptical about the concept of parallel spaces, as they do not change the composition of formal institutions. He urged the political parties to become more open and called for intra-party alliances to take good ideas forward.

Businesses: pioneers of change?

The business community is another key player in a successful transition to sustainable development. Municipal enterprises – whose specific purpose is to serve the public interest – can take the lead here. As Miriam Danne from the German Association of Local Utilities (VKU) reported, municipal enterprises are already actively engaged in a variety of areas, such as e-mobility and waste avoidance. However, they need

Outcomes of Break-out Group C

“A sustainable regional economy”

- It is essential to provide a target group-specific interpretation of what a sustainable economy means.
- Areas where the economy is not yet sustainable should be identified and analysed.
- Sustainability should be seen as a service.
- Raising awareness of best practice examples is more effective than pointing the finger.
- Tenders for public-private partnerships should be transparent.
- Regular meetings of chambers of commerce/export etc. should be used as an opportunity to promote sustainability.
- Municipalities must create incentives that reward green business.

to think and act like businesses, too.

Colisile Tfwala, Local Economic Development Officer at Mbabane Municipal Council, identified partnerships between the business community and municipal agencies as a key factor. She referred to the example of an EU-funded project on waste minimisation which aims to utilise waste for income generation. One of the lessons learned from this process is that a formal governance framework is essential for successful implementation. In this instance, waste separation regulations were the key to the project's success. Policy-makers, administration and business should work together to create an enabling environment for a sustainable economy. It is also important to foster dialogue with the public.

Mbabane Municipal Council is currently working on incorporating the SDGs into the city's development plan. In future, all the city's activities should promote the SDGs. However, the city is not yet raising awareness of the SDGs, so a task for the future is to advise businesses about their role in SDG implementation. In parallel, it is important to demonstrate the benefits of doing business sustainably (cost reduction, enhanced reputation, etc.) to companies and raise consumer awareness so they advocate for a green economy.

Voluntary engagement – a pillar of local sustainable development

Eltville am Rhein has won awards for being one of Germany's most sustainable municipalities. What is its winning formula? As Eltville's mayor Patrick Kunkel explained, there is no need to make a fuss about sustainability; it should be taken as a matter of course. Most people in Eltville are reasonably prosperous, but this does not apply to everyone. For example, some of the longstanding residents are no longer able to afford local property prices. It is the municipality's responsibility to ensure that there is no loss of social cohesion and to maintain a demographic balance while encouraging local citizens to continue to engage on behalf of the community. Among other things, a local volunteering platform has been set up to promote solidarity in Eltville. A screen near the pedestrian zone publicises vacancies for volunteers.

His colleague from Klixbüll in Schleswig-Holstein, Mayor Werner Schweizer, also regarded citizen engagement as a key to success. Bringing people together at the local level is important in initiating engagement, so Klixbüll has introduced a separate budget line for this type of outreach. The less engagement there is, the more functions are lost and the more the state forfeits credibility, ultimately leading to popular disenchantment with government as a whole.

The obstacles: bureaucracy and funding

Mayor Kunkel felt it was regrettable that municipal engagement for sustainability is hindered by a lack of support from higher levels. Municipalities are short of cash, and yet they are punished, not rewarded, for saving money, as their allocations are then reduced. Although there are numerous funding programmes in existence, the funding landscape is extremely



Bonn Symposium 2018 (l.t.r.): Patrick Leusch (Chair), Colisile Tfwala and Miriam Danne

complex and difficult to navigate, with the result that many schemes are rarely used. Procedures need to be simplified and streamlined. What's more, there is not enough networking among mayors and municipalities. It would be sensible to engage in much more shared learning. What is needed is a kind of toolbox with practical guidance and examples showing what municipalities can do to implement Agenda 2030. Mayor Schweizer agreed; he proposed the development of a public interest audit that takes account of the 169 SDG targets.

Reporting on Ghana, Nana Ato Arthur, Head of the Local Government Service, said that national-level

Outcomes of Break-out Group D

“Strengthening local impact at regional and national level”

- The direct connection with Agenda 2030 issues is particularly visible at the local level.
- It is a question of living the Agenda 2030 principles, not following them to the letter.
- Municipalities can lead the way, but awareness at the national level is still important.
- Higher levels find it challenging when the grass-roots makes demands.
- The municipalities should ask themselves where they have critical significance (e.g. urban emissions).

support for local SDG implementation is very good. Ghana's municipalities are encouraged to incorporate successful local solutions into the SDG system. It is important to note that municipalities have worked with citizens to produce local development plans. In general, however, participatory approaches have not been particularly successful. There is no culture of voluntary engagement in Ghana; everyone wants to be paid. Citizen participation only functions effectively at the lowest level, where everyone knows everyone else and a lack of engagement brings discredit on the person concerned.

Renewables instead of oil

Mayor Schweizer had some advice for municipalities: regardless of their size, in order to gain a hearing, they should ensure that they stand out from the crowd with their projects and initiatives. In any community, around 5 per cent of people are interested in new ideas, and this 5 per cent sets the trend. He described Klixbüll as a structurally weak municipality and former military base that must successfully manage the transition to a new future. The SDGs provide a vision to guide this process. In order to bridge the transition until feed-in payments expire, the municipality is investing in renewables following its motto “Electricity from the dyke instead of oil from the desert”, with a particular focus on expanding the local wind energy cooperative. Klixbüll has also gained a name for itself and attracted nationwide attention with Dörpsmobil, Germany's first municipal e-carsharing scheme. As a mayor of a municipality with just 1,000 residents, he is now a regular visitor to the German Environment Ministry, he said. He also uses the German Association of Towns and Municipalities and rural academies as platforms for the dissemination of ideas.



Bonn Symposium 2018: Thorsten Krüger

Sustainability: winning over rural communities

For rural dwellers, many sustainability issues seem far away, said Thorsten Krüger, Mayor of Geestland. Only around 5% of municipalities are engaging with Agenda 2030. The question that we should be asking ourselves and local communities is this: does something have a monetary cost – or does it cost us our future? He therefore recommended using the phrase “fit for our grandchildren’s future” instead of “sustainable”. It is also important to make it clear that our lifestyle is costing many people in other world regions their livelihoods. Planet Earth is like a balloon: damage any part of it and the balloon bursts.

As Kai Diederich, Head of the Department for Development Education at forum for international development + planning (finep), Esslingen, pointed out, different conditions need to be in place to win rural communities over to sustainability. If 5% of people engage on an issue in an urban area, that is already a critical mass. It is a different situation in rural areas: here, it is essential to link in with local issues, such as public transport cuts. Another good option is to make use of existing rural spaces, such as village festivals, to promote education for sustainable development and discuss issues, e.g. waste disposal, with local communities.

In rural regions, there are many positives that need to be identified and unlocked, according to Elke Selke, Agenda 21 Coordinator for Harz Administrative District. She emphasised the importance of responding positively and supporting local residents’ ideas. As an example, she mentioned Dersheim village shop, which is run by a cooperative and has transformed the community and brought people together. Once again, voluntary engagement is a key element of the project. Mayor Krüger agreed that there is creative potential in rural regions that is unlocked when local people are directly affected. Real-world problems and practical projects can help in identifying linkages; pointing the finger does not work.

Innovations for lasting change

During the final panel discussion, Dr Maja Göpel, Secretary-General of the German Advisory Council on Global Change (WBGU) in Berlin, recommended seeing the SDGs as a compass. It is also important not to cling to existing structures, some of which are part of the problem because they obstruct the necessary change. These structures should be dismantled, while others can be adapted for smarter use. But who is engaged in making our society a better place? “Is it the people who make the rules?” And how can we increase participation from the present figure of 5%?

By contrast, Ahmed AbuLaban, City Director of Ramallah, underlined the importance of strong and effective structures for sustainable cities. This is why Goal 16 is his favourite SDG: the SDGs can only be achieved with effective urban structures.



Bonn Symposium 2018: Ahmed AbuLaban

However, these structures must be dynamic. With reference to Ramallah, which has gained a trans-regional reputation as a model city, he showed how challenging conditions can unlock people’s creativity. He also emphasised the importance of participatory structures in planning processes and of a supportive relationship between policy-makers and the administration. In order to integrate sustainability into municipal administrations, he recommended adopting a broader urban agenda, with sectoral strategies and annual action plans for practical implementation.

Outcomes of Break-out Group E

“Sustainable rural development in practice”

- Confidence-building measures in communities is especially important in rural areas, as is motivating administrative staff.
- Improved networking and new municipal partnerships are needed.
- A clear division of responsibilities is also important, perhaps based around a coordination team/unit.
- The key is to make use of existing structures, not to set up new ones.
- Villages should engage in networking and form regional alliances.

The 21st century's modernisation project

It is also easier to change direction and carry out institutional reform at local than at national level, Dr Göpel added. For example, in Germany, the national democratic system is completely overwhelmed by the task of managing the transition. Politicians are not innovative, even though they have the power to introduce measures such as a carbon tax. For this reason, participatory frameworks are needed to nurture creative ideas.



Bonn Symposium 2018: Dr Maja Göpel

Outcomes of Break-out Group F

“New municipal structures for global sustainable development”

- It is important to think outside established structures, such as party systems, and consider other forms of interest representation.
- Best practice projects and examples should be multiplied and upscaled.
- Shared spaces within society need to be created and defended.
- Sectoral divisions within municipal administrations should be broken down and horizontal thinking encouraged.
- Targeted-oriented thinking is important; it is not about achieving perfection – it is about taking action.

During the discussion, it became apparent that innovative structures require a new entrepreneurial culture within the municipal administrations as well. This cannot be achieved overnight; it requires compromise within the institutions. It is important to explain why things have to change and how performance will improve. In some cases, this can be set in motion by low-key sharing of ideas, with the local administrations then assuming ownership and taking them forward. The transition to sustainability must come to be seen as the 21st century's modernisation project, based on the pledge to “leave no one behind”

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