

Stakeholder-Policy Cooperation in the Age of the SDGs: What new approaches are required to be successful?

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Key note

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The cooperation we need

We all here share a tremendous collective hope. We hope for the concept of sustainable development to keep its promise. It strives to help humanity move forward towards economic, social and cultural progress while recognizing the planetary boundaries of nature. We have actually made progress, worldwide. Human rights have spread, more people share prosperity, poverty has been reduced. But the score card is clear: More leaves to be done than is achieved. And in addition, today, earlier achievements are under increasing threat of deconstruction or of being bypassed. The foundations of the universality of human rights and values is being called into question by nationalists and cultural relativism.

Thus, we need a clear head and some fresh views on the deep crisis our world order is in, economically, financially, in terms of the environment and the social connectedness. There are big failures and derailments, and there are also tasks and efforts we have not satisfactorily resolved.

That is where the issue of cooperation comes in, with all sorts of pitfalls and all sorts of great experiences.

Let us remember the early days of environmentalism when we started out with three principles. Number one is on the idea of making the polluter pay for the damage. The second is on the principle of precaution. And the third principle is the one on cooperation. While environmental policies made some progress in implementing the first two, the cooperation principle went into oblivion. Which basically means that we do not use our collective capacity to respond to crises at full scale.

For *The Future We Want* we do not yet have *the cooperation we need*.

Stakeholders and policy makers do not yet work in the effective cooperation mode¹. However, the *The Future We Want* as postulated by the 2030 Agenda marks an important shift in priorities and the SDGs can make a difference. It asks for XXXL co-operation between unlikely partners.

¹ ECOSOC (2016) Dialogue on longer-term positioning of UN Development System in the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development: Findings and Conclusions (Klaus Töpfer and Juan Somavia paper) 2016; <https://www.un.org/ecosoc/sites/www.un.org.ecosoc/files/files/en/qcpr/ita-findings-and-conclusions-16-jun-2016.pdf>

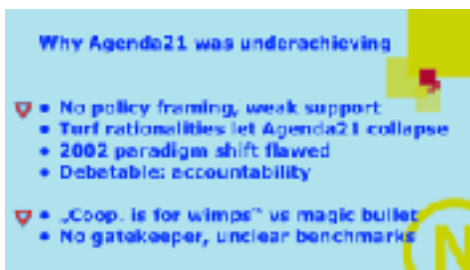
As of now, I think it is fair to say, the 2030 Agenda is not yet delivering. Lately, political chauvinism distorts geopolitics and bypasses the Agenda. That miserably adds to the fact that the 2030 Agenda missed some important windows of opportunity that could have strengthened the momentum. In the official language we are still stuck with ODA, official development aid, as opposed to ODC, as in official development cooperation. The symbolic kick off of such a reframing cannot be overestimated. The Agenda has not prompted national governments to invite frontrunner alliances that would strive to deliver SDG sub targets faster than 2030, and so pocketing first mover advantages. To illustrate this: The African Union recently agreed on establishing a free trade zone under the SDG umbrella that would foster the internal African market. This is a long shot, of course. The European Union should offer a fair free trade support to the African continent, based on sustainable finance instruments, and give clear signals of co-operation. What we hear from Brussels in that respect is still missing the grand triggers. Unfortunately, the United Nation's High Level Political Forum, as the one and only collective anchor point we have, is far too weak to push things. But I am convinced it can be structured and redesigned in such a way that it keeps the 2030 Agenda momentum.²

A serious business

For „decision maker“ and „the stakeholder“ cooperation is a mutual challenge. It lays with politics and policies as well as with the stakeholder communities on all levels. And, it is worth keeping in mind that everyone is a stakeholder at some stage, as the concept of stakeholder results from a positioning rather than from a profession or behavior. In terms of the One Planet, there is not anyone without stakes.

Against all odds, cooperation is a serious business. I suggest even considering it the most hard-nosed part of politics. Cooperation deals with both mutuality and confrontation. Every consensus that I am aware of builds on a previous conflict, and so does cooperation. After all, co-operation is an old ecological principle. As we know from lots of species sharing mutual benefits is part of strategies in competitiveness. In wildlife co-operative behaviors are at the core of surviving strategies.

Thus, surprisingly, cooperation is not highly esteemed in most of the sociotops we are living in. The outcome of partnerships or other cooperative efforts is seldom satisfactory and keeps meandering³. Cooperation does not score. In fact, cooperation even has enemies, acting mainly behind curtains. Everybody wants cooperation when this is for others, and everybody hates to be loose control and resources if this is exactly what cooperation means. Cooperation is regularly put on the back burner when non-cooperative behavior is likely to win a good old turf fight, or



² The German SD Council therefore recommends some fast action designed to steer the HLPF away from a dead end, see: https://www.nachhaltigkeitsrat.de/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/RNE_statement_HLPF_Governance.pdf

³ According to a check run by Marianne Beisheim (2018) on the official listing of UN related SDG MSP only 409 reported on progress and transparency. Out of a total of 3,834 partnerships/commitments 84% are non reporters. (cited according to Felix Dodds' blog <http://blog.felixdodds.net/2018/07/zombie-partnerships-are-we-about-to-see.html>, see also Minu Hemmati and Felix Dodds (2016) High-quality Multi-stakeholder Partnerships for Implementing the SDGs; http://newfrontierspublishing.com/images/MSP-Workshop_Blog_GRICatalySD.pdf; Beisheim, Marianne and Anne Ellersiek (2017) Partnerships for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Transformative, Inclusive and Accountable? SWP Research Paper 2017/RP 14, December 2017, 28 Pages; https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/research_papers/2017RP14_bsh_elk_01.pdf

when campaigning draws full media attention and increases spending. In those cases, the USP, unique selling point, wins over cooperation. The inflation of processes and strategies does not particularly help either. The social media allows for great resonance in silo-ed peer groups which are otherwise unconnected and unchallenged. Paralleled internet-universes create echo chambers. Meaningful engagement might deteriorate or it might go into duck-and-hide mode.

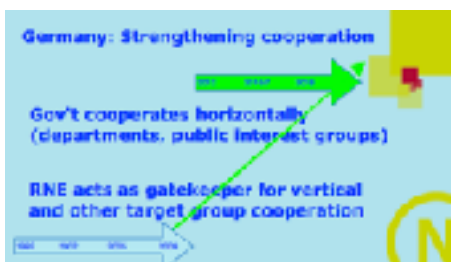
The reasons, even if there divers and difficult to compare, are rooted in institutional, economic and social structures. The internal rationality of turfs and silos is outruling out-of-the-box-cooperation. In 2002, the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, South Africa, tried to re-enforce the notion of partnerships, but basically flawed. The Achilles heel of cooperation does not exactly help either: The issues of who is accountable or of who has the legitimacy to speak and act in favor of third party constituencies are ongoing challenges. Those problems but could be solved in principle and we all know some good examples. But basic misconceptions are more complicated to deal with. I often hear people denouncing cooperation as something for wimps or for those who do not dare a good fight and a robust elbowing. Correspondingly, cooperation is misconceived as nice-but-harmless-peoples-attitude as opposed to what is understood as real world competition and achievements.

Unfortunately, this misconception is being matched on the other hand side. Here, we have the notion of cooperation as a silver bullet to each and every problem. No matter what the problem is, cooperation is suggested as solution. Neither the wimp-part nor this overestimation do match realities. They are myth.



It is therefore fair to say that cooperation can provide benefits and pitfalls at the same time, as shown in the slide with the plus and minus.

The German case



Over the last couple of years, the German government has clearly increased its cooperation efforts. The Chancellery with its top level responsibility for the German Sustainability Strategy provides institutional frames for cooperation among the federal departments. The recently renewed strategy also invites public interest groups to provide input into the preparation of high level decision making in terms of the sustainability strategies, its goals, targets and indicators. The

Rio-plus-20 Summit in 2012 earmarked this change in attitude and working profile.

The German Government sets up and mandates the Council as a stakeholder-policy cooperation. Since 2001, its work profile (see Rules of Procedure⁴) is both in-bound (conversation with the

⁴ RNE Rules of Procedure (as of 2016), see: https://www.nachhaltigkeitsrat.de/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/RNE_Rules_of_Procedure_english.pdf „a. The Council shall develop contributions to refine and implement the German Sustainability Strategy and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). To do so, it shall propose specific projects and support mutual learning, particularly through peer reviews, b. The Council shall issue statements on matters submitted to the Council by the State Secretaries' Committee for Sustainable Development. (...) the Council may comment on topics relating to sustainable development (...), .c. The Council shall promote dialogue within society on sustainable development at national and international level. It shall implement projects to establish the idea of sustainability effectively within society and business, and shall foster the international exchange of experience.“

Government to give advice contributing to the national SD strategy) and out-bound (suggesting, promoting and strengthening dialogue in society and for cooperative attitudes). Every three years, the process of selecting Members and mandating a new Council turns out as a practical reality check on how the sustainability narrative attracts stakeholder. By the way, our most recent recommendation asks for strengthening the Governments approach to multilateralism in general and cooperation in particular.⁵

The German Almanac on sustainable action 2018 will be published soon. Written for interested groups abroad and introduced by our Minister for Foreign Affairs it will showcase the way Germany is tackling the great transition towards sustainable development.



The Council’s most prominent projects and initiatives build on stakeholder involvement, and thus policy-stakeholder cooperation. Details on those initiatives can be retrieved from www.nachhaltigkeitsrat.de/en/ In a way we navigate through the universe of possible forms of cooperation. They may come as targeted invitation e.g. to

Lord Majors or in an open form (open to all interested parties in the sustainable finance sector including stakeholder). They might be focused on certain areas of competence and functionality as e.g. in the case of corporate reporting or universities doing sustainability reports. Or, they might include multi-stakeholder from different areas of action, and in this way are „open“. The choice of bottom up or top down processes is subject to effectiveness and adequateness. For the purpose of reviewing sustainability politics and policies, the concept of the Peer Review itself is made part of a stakeholder approach.

Lessons



There is a number of good reads about stakeholder cooperation and modern forms of governance⁶, for anyone who is even thinking about stakeholder - policy cooperation surely a good help and food for thought.

In the following, I will refer to the practical experience

⁵ https://www.nachhaltigkeitsrat.de/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/RNE_statement_HLPF_Governance.pdf

⁶ Brouwer, H. et al (2016) The MSP Guide: How to Design and Facilitate Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships, 188 pages; <https://doi.org/10.3362/9781780446691> <http://developmentbookshop.com/the-msp-guide>; Meuleman, L. (ed.) (2012) Transgovernance: Advancing Sustainability Governance. Heidelberg: Springer: Berlin; Meuleman, L. (2018), Metagovernance for Sustainability: A Framework for Implementing the SDGs; Routledge: London; Hemmati, Minu (2002) Multi-stakeholder Processes for Governance and Sustainability. Beyond Deadlock and Conflict, with contributions from Felix Dodds, Jasmin Enayati and Jan McHarry, Earthscan: London; Schmitz-Hoffmann, C., Schmidt, M., Hansmann, B., Palekhov, D. (Eds.) (2014) Voluntary Standard Systems. A Contribution to Sustainable Development; Springer: Berlin

of the German Sustainable Development Council. I suggest a couple of essentials that should be taken into account. First, there are some important technicalities. Or even more to the point: What appears to be a mere technical question often turns out as some crucial roadmarks.

- Timing is essential: Every policy has a special policy cycle, sometimes open, sometimes hidden or tacit. If access to a pre-existing policy cycle is no option, creating one from scratch might be.
- Cooperation is for everyone, but must never sideline parliaments and parliamentary democracy.
- Build on competence, commitment, and capacity, the three big C.
- Fatigue can be counteracted by design and impact.
- Start with the audacity of hope⁷: Big hairy ideas are the more useful than analyzing the acceptable.
- Tolerate failures and flops, but never repeat the same ones.
- Hear what is not being said - the single most important issue for moderating any cooperation
- Work out what really matters for stakeholder as opposed to what is said and fought for.
- Make it personal, e.g. by using clear language and avoiding passive idioms.
- Silos: In principle, silos are part of the problem: But never waste a good one.
- Addressing a certain group of stakeholder must not delegitimize others.

The clearer the purpose, the better is fun part

I suggest differentiating cooperation modes. Getting to know differences helps to run stakeholder processes successfully. I suggest to differentiate along scope and purpose. I make use of both open access processes, targeted invitations, and other structured approaches. The purpose often translates into the type of activity, with all overlaps and crossovers:

- Talking: Sharing insights and disseminating information.
- Empowering: Deliberating agreements and delivering joint action.
- Designing: Setting rules of conduct and initiating processes.
- Partnering: Creating and advancing communities of practitioners.

Co-operation can be fun, and should be made a fun experience in order to ensure viable results. To care about purpose, meeting schedules and paperwork sounds dull and exhausting. The fun part often materializes through a good moderation, through an interesting in mind-opening location, or through surprising processes. The best surprise, of course, is when participants surprise themselves by new ideas. They then almost without taking notes merge into cooperation style attitudes.

Culture is it

The concept of governance is changing, together with some basic attitudes to change, well being and connectedness. Those changes in mindset are not exclusive to young people alone. I suggest those changes are drifting through all parts of society and the private sector. This slide tries to introduce some of those changes. The blue sector is not simply replaced, but still has its meaningful

⁷ Günther Bachmann (2017) The 18th SDG. Sustainable Development in a Changing World: A Changing Perspective on Sustainability. Think Piece presented at the UN Office for Sustainable Development on the occasion of the Sustainable Development; https://www.nachhaltigkeitsrat.de/wp-content/uploads/migration/documents/Bachmann_Think_Piece_SDG_18_UN_OSD_SDTF_2016-10-27.pdf

role to play. However, the dominant behavior and skills morph increasingly into the red field. Interestingly the blue attitude appear as old-style and somewhat nineties.

Change is increasingly perceived as chance (opportunities, choices to choose from). Networking seems to be the new campaigning. The concept of blame and shame is being challenged by new attitudes towards collective leadership and mutual learning. Consequently, we see new actors arise.



They will find themselves new ways for co-operation. Co-working and co-design is only the beginning.

Culture eats strategies for breakfast, said Paul Drucker, a US democrat. Strategies, as in Sustainability Strategies merge into the most important tool of administrative transition governance, with all ingredients such as targets and timetables, actor driven trajectories, and metrics. The exercise of strategizing and planning is the most important

part. However, the cultural changes, once triggered, are much more powerful because they make people see change not as something brought to them (or worse: something they are confronted with), but simply as the new normal.

Gatekeeper

We hopefully will lead the SDG track into a new area of multilateralism and cooperation, with new features of collective leadership, peer reviewing, the politics of commitment, transparency tools. This, of course, does not work without orchestration. Policy-stakeholder cooperation needs an institution that functions as gatekeeper. It needs to muster the calling power, think tank capacity, ethic credibility, and self-reflection.

And the gatekeeper needs funds. Money is not everything, of course. But in order to keep the wheel spinning, money is needed. Germany, on the part of the Ministry for development cooperation, created an example. The 2030 - transformation - fund is available for non governmental stakeholder in partner countries that want to establish stakeholder platforms for the implementation of the 2030 agenda.

I would like to end my talk by posing a question: Don't you think it is time to ask for a similar fund in Europe? Europe's 2030 Transformation Fund should empower stakeholder - policy cooperation and, thus, help implementing the SDG throughout Europe and in relation with other regions.

I believe in universal values. To become a cultural normality, however, those values need gatekeepers. We need to restore a strong multilateral and multi-level, and multi stakeholder system capable of resolving conflicts in a pragmatic manner, and capable also of producing trust and stewardship in a new way.

Thank you for listening.