



## Making transformation happen - Outlook for German Sustainable Development Policy

*State Secretaries' Committee for Sustainable Development*

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On 10 March 2021, the Federal Government adopted an update to the German Sustainable Development Strategy (GSDS) and announced this political declaration on the outlook for sustainable development policy.

### **The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development – shared responsibility**

The adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in 2015 signalled a clear commitment to the **shared responsibility of all countries** to improve prospects for present and future generations around the globe.

The 2030 Agenda marks a **paradigm change** in global, European and national sustainable development policy and calls for the **sustainable transformation of our world**. The 2030 Agenda is based on universal human rights obligations and aims to secure the social, economic and ecological foundations for lasting peaceful co-existence. For this to happen, an **integrated, systemic strategy** is needed that connects policy fields and takes a holistic approach.

**More marked progress is urgently needed** to implement the 2030 Agenda, in particular the global Sustainable Development Goals contained therein. This holds true for all five areas of the 2030 Agenda – People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace, Partnership (**5 Ps**).

In a liberal society, this progress can only be made in a joint endeavour involving all stakeholders. Key here is the 2030 Agenda principle to **leave no one behind**.

### **COVID-19 pandemic – lessons for sustainable development**

The COVID-19 pandemic did not only have a dramatic impact on health – and indeed continues to do so – but also **drastic consequences** for many other areas of life and policy.

The pandemic makes plain **how susceptible our ways of life and economies and thus our prosperity** are to shocks and global crises. It

The **Global Sustainable Development Report** published by the United Nations in 2019 shows clearly that the world has made progress in many fields. However, there is a risk that the 17 Goals laid down in the 2030 Agenda will not be met in many areas. Negative, non-sustainable trends such as climate change, species loss and resource consumption continue to worsen, meaning that we are reaching the boundaries of our planet. The report issued by the United Nations Environment Programme in 2021 furthermore notes that the cost of not acting is increasingly exceeding the cost of taking action to protect the climate and resources.

The Federal Government is committed to its responsibility to implement the 2030 Agenda on three levels: in Germany, with international partners and within international organisations and bodies. There are now **less than nine years** for us to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals laid down in the 2030 Agenda.

The current decade must therefore urgently become a **Decade of Action** – as called for by the United Nations. Only if we clearly increase the speed and ambition of implementation will we be able to meet the SDGs in the stipulated period.

shows that our prosperity and co-existence are not to be taken for granted and cannot be preserved in the long term unless we make fundamental changes. All around the globe, the pandemic **increased pressure to take action, as well as awareness of the need for change**.

Alleviating individual symptoms is not enough. What we need are fundamental changes if we are to enhance **crisis prevention and**

**strengthen resilience and adaptability.** For this, a systemic and comprehensive assessment is needed, just like the one that forms the foundation of the sustainable development agenda. Resilience and sustainable development are inextricably linked.

The pandemic has furthermore increased the awareness that global challenges can only be tackled **if we work globally and together.** In many fields, we need to embark on the path towards truly demanding **transformation.** Examples include climate and environmental protection, education, social justice, business and financial markets, the respect of human rights, trade, mobility and private consumption. This lays the foundations to ensure we better understand future shocks caused for example by pandemics and other (natural) disasters and can work resolutely to counter and tackle them.

### **German Sustainable Development Strategy – where we stand**

The German Sustainable Development Strategy (GSDS) provides the central framework for German sustainable development policy. The 2016 edition of the Strategy is geared to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in, by and with Germany. With the GSDS, the Federal Government is implementing sustainable development as a **guiding principle** for political action with targets and measures in all 17 SDG fields. In July 2021, Germany will report to the United Nations High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (**HLPF**) on its national activities to implement the 2030 Agenda based on the GSDS.

After the 2016 edition of the GSDS, the Federal Government **updated** the **Sustainable Development Strategy** in 2018 taking into consideration a review performed by international experts (Peer Review). New **principles of sustainable development** were laid down through this process to help explain how the guiding principle of sustainable development can materialise in concrete political action. As called for in the **Peer Review**, the GSDS then focused on implementation and by the end of 2019 identified actions for the Strategy targets where current developments are not yet on track (**off-track indicators**). This was done through a comprehensive process involving social stakeholders.

The German Sustainable Development Strategy was then updated in the period from autumn 2019 to March 2021. Here, the public was involved in the form of a comprehensive, two-

The pandemic has created the option of **identifying and overcoming non-sustainable systems and structures.**

Thus from the outset, the **Federal Government's COVID-19 policy** had the goal not just of reacting to the crisis but at the same time of providing strong **momentum for sustainable business practices and ways of life.** That is why the process of social and economic recovery has to focus increasingly on **investing in the future**, whether when it comes to environmental protection, key technologies, innovation and the digital transformation, the healthcare sector or social cohesion – in line with the 2030 Agenda and the Paris climate agreement. Or in other words, decisions we take today have to create resilient systems for the future.

stage **dialogue process.** Many institutions, organisations as well as individual citizens fed key proposals into this process.

The ambitious update of the **GSDS in 2021** adopted by the Federal Government is an **important step** for German sustainable development policy, in particular as it clearly defines priority spheres of action in six **areas of transformation.**

The many **measures of all ministries** outlined in the **GSDS 2021** show that sustainable development has never before been as broadly and deeply anchored in the Federal Government as it is today. **Ministry Coordinators** for Sustainable Development are working with their staff in all ministries to increase the coherence of political action and tackle sustainability challenges in ministry policy.

As part of **regulatory impact assessment** for all bills and regulations, a **sustainability impact assessment** is drawn up across the board based on the content of the GSDS and Sustainable Development Goals. And with an ambitious updated **programme for sustainable federal administration** due to be adopted before the end of the current legislative term, the Federation is assuming its function as a role model and demonstrating how sustainability can also be practised in the administration.

Many stakeholders are involved in further developing, shaping and implementing German sustainable development policy. This includes first and foremost the **Council for Sustainable**

**Development** with its 15 members appointed by the Federal Chancellor to provide impetus for the Government, as actors and as agents of change in society. In the case of the German Bundestag, the **Parliamentary Advisory Council**

is an important driving force for the topic. The **Scientific Platform for Sustainability 2030** lends weight to the topic in and with the scientific sphere.

### The next legislative term – challenges for sustainable development policy

Germany has an **internationally recognised system of sustainable development policy** that has been constantly used and extended since the adoption of the national Sustainable Development Strategy in 2002.

Key progress has been made and yet **an urgent need to act** remains in many fields, as shown by the Federal Statistical Office's most recent analysis of the sustainability indicators in January 2021.

The next Federal Government should tackle the GSDS in timely fashion and adopt a **decision in 2022** outlining the next steps based on what is laid down in the next coalition agreement. **By late 2023/early 2024** the Strategy should be **comprehensively updated** in a process involving all stakeholders in society.

#### *Ruling by the Federal Constitutional Court*

In all decisions, it is crucial to also bear in mind the interests of **future generations**. As early as 1987, the Brundtland Commission penned the following definition of sustainable development: *“Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”* In its pioneering ruling on climate protection legislation in Germany on 24 March 2021, the Federal Constitutional Court emphasised the importance of **intergenerational equity**. Referring to the national objective of environmental protection as laid down in Article 20a of the Basic Law, the Court underscored the duty of the state to ensure burden-sharing between generations is not solely to the detriment of future generations.

Following this ruling, the Federal Government resolved to **step up its climate change targets** to comprise inter alia a 65% reduction of greenhouse gas emissions by 2030.

#### *Levers*

With a view to making further progress, the focus is to be on the **overarching levers** (governance, social mobilisation and participation, funding, research, and international responsibility and cooperation).

#### *1. Sustainable development as a yardstick and compass for policy*

To meet the challenge of sustainable transformation in line with the 2030 Agenda, the next Federal Government will also face the task of **resolutely gearing its action to the guiding principle of sustainable development and of achieving the targets of the 2030 Agenda on time**. For this to happen, the course has to be set in the next legislative term. The focus will be on breathing more life into the guiding principle of sustainable development as anchored in the GSDS in all policy fields.

Making positive use of the disruptive force of the COVID-19 pandemic is central. The period of restrictions needs to be **followed by recovery in the sense of a better, that is a sustainable, upswing**. It is a matter of using the opportunity to secure progress made, for example in the field of digitalisation, mobile working, in medical research or in healthcare, and exploring new avenues to **make our country sustainable and thus stronger, more resilient and more just**.

Achieving the 2030 Agenda goals is a **defining task of the highest priority**. This is the task that will determine whether politics can tackle critical developments effectively and as early as possible while upholding the principle of sustainable development – with the spectrum stretching from climate change and resource consumption to social imbalances and polarisation, from time to time paired with scepticism about the democratic and social state based on the rule of law. The same holds true for the goal of ensuring equal living conditions in all regions of Germany.

**The potential and need for change is huge in all political spheres**. The key to modernisation and a fresh start after the COVID-19 pandemic is an **ambitious implementation of the sustainable development agenda** in every single department and in the Federal Government as a whole. The Sustainable Development Goals are to be the yardstick and compass in every political sphere.

Progress in the six **areas of transformation** identified in the GSDS 2021 is central:

(1) human well-being and capabilities, social justice, (2) energy transition and climate action, (3) circular economy, (4) sustainable building and transformation of transportation, (5) sustainable agriculture and food systems and (6) pollutant-free environment.

The areas of transformation clearly highlight synergies and conflicts within the SDGs and focus on concrete needs for change. They are therefore to be used as a basis to **strengthen and further develop inter-ministerial cooperation** – also in the **State Secretaries' Committee** for Sustainable Development chaired by the Head of the Federal Chancellery as a central steering body for the GSDS.

## 2. Coordination and steering (governance)

Even though – due to the political importance of the Strategy – it is the **Federal Chancellery** that is directly responsible for leading and coordinating the German Sustainable Development Strategy, **it is first and foremost the ministries that have the task of making an ambitious contribution to implement** the Strategy and to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. All ministries **bear responsibility** not just for their respective portfolio but also **share responsibility for the aim** of building a sustainable Germany, in all spheres, taking in all targets.

The questions the next Federal Government need to tackle include: What can be done to improve the **steering** of the Strategy and the interaction of the ministries to make them more effective? How can we make achieving the targets more binding and more clearly attribute responsibility? How can the role of the **State Secretaries' Committee** for Sustainable Development be strengthened, for instance by enabling it to react with more flexibility to national and international challenges? How can the current **sustainability impact assessment** be improved and sustainability questions and possible conflicts of interest be integrated into the legislative process – with a view to ensuring that sustainability aspects are included in legislative drafts from the very outset? How can the **German Bundestag** systematically include the guiding principle of sustainable development in its work? How can the Federation better support sustainable development activities in the **municipalities** while respecting federal competences? How can we ensure that we realise the aim of making the **federal administration climate neutral by 2030**, thereby paving the way for achieving

Germany's goal of being greenhouse gas neutral by 2045?

## 3. Social mobilisation and participation

Where possible, the Federal Government relies on voluntary approaches and positive incentives. Progress on the path towards sustainable development all across society can only be achieved if **everyone** does their bit in line with their interests, opportunities, talents and skills. Education, which equips future generations with the **capabilities and skills** they need in all spheres for sustainable action, plays a decisive role.

In line with the multi-stakeholder approach of the 2030 Agenda, the **public** is to be closely involved in implementing and further developing sustainable development policy. The principle of leaving no one behind on the path to sustainable transformation makes sustainable development an important **task to be performed on the basis of dialogue and communication**. More than to date, politics should provide a platform on which social groups can discuss how to further develop the Strategy, a platform which needs to be more permeable than the exclusive or even closed discussion channels on social media. Greater use needs to be made of the contribution of **culture, science and the media** to sustainable development and to the promotion and communication of the Sustainable Development Goals. The same holds true for the key role played by **economic actors** in achieving the SDGs, a role which – although some activities are underway – needs to become stronger.

The Federal Government expects the **Joint Effort for Sustainability**, currently being set up by the Council for Sustainable Development and due to be launched in spring 2022, to play a major role. The Joint Effort for Sustainability is designed to highlight existing commitment to sustainable development, nurture further commitment, win over new actors and encourage the various stakeholders to engage in new cooperation. It can **trigger new social momentum** for sustainable development.

## 4. Funding

**Robust and future-oriented public finances** make a valuable contribution to sustainable policy and lay the foundation on which to implement the Sustainable Development Goals also in other policy fields. **Intergenerational equity** needs sustainable financial policy which above all does justice to the consolidation

efforts required following the COVID-19 pandemic.

**More transparency** on the connection between the targets of the Sustainable Development Strategy and budgetary measures – in line with the assessment task laid down in the GSDS – can help make more intensive use of **financial and budgetary policy as a strategic lever** for sustainable development. When the most recent Green Bonds were issued, a sustainability-related labelling of federal budget components had already been performed.

On 5 May 2021, the Federal Government adopted a **Sustainable Finance Strategy** designed to build on Germany's status as a leading location for sustainable finance and thus to mobilise urgently needed investment in climate protection and sustainable development. Furthermore, it addresses the increasing climate risks for the financial system with a view to enhancing financial market stability. Now it is a matter of resolutely implementing the adopted measures and analysing their impact also with a view to retaining our ability to act in this sphere in the next legislative term.

#### *5. Research, innovation and digitalisation*

Due to the systemic, comprehensive nature of the 2030 Agenda, we must be **guided by scientifically sound facts and options for action**. Inter-disciplinary cooperation as well as the exchange and transfer of knowledge are key here. That is why, while upholding scientific freedom, we need new forms of interaction between the research community, politics and society.

**Research for sustainable development** therefore needs to be further strengthened so that it generates concrete technical and social innovation for the sustainable transformation, for example to protect the climate and biodiversity or to improve global health. At the same time, sustainable development requirements need to be seen more as **opportunities to innovate and tap new markets** to enable Germany to establish itself in international competition. This is also the way in which the **digital transformation** should be used and shaped so as to ensure that it does not run contrary to sustainable development (for example through energy and resource consumption) but actively supports sustainable action and the achieving of the Sustainable Development Goals, for example through

innovative technologies, applications, business models and approaches.

The central questions the next Federal Government will face include: How can we better use the **transfer from science** for practical action in society, business, municipalities and politics to make even better progress on the Sustainable Development Goals? How can we strengthen the interface between science and **education for sustainable development**? How can the SDGs be translated into mission-led research approaches? What **innovation potential** for research and development, as well as the digital transformation, emerges from the sustainability transformation?

#### *6. International responsibility and cooperation*

##### **Global challenges can only be tackled globally.**

It is hugely important that Germany continues to work resolutely to promote multilateral action and multilateral approaches – in close dialogue with partners in a shared community of values and interests in order to make global progress towards sustainability. Peace, stability and sustainable development are mutually dependent. Germany's work to promote peace and security is also sustainability policy – whether in the United Nations, other international organisations and alliances or at project level. As the world's second-largest bilateral donor to development cooperation, Germany should continue to make key contributions to achieving SDGs in partner countries. The Federal Government should bear in mind the goal of a green and better recovery and, just like the EU, take account of what impact or consequences their action can have in other countries.

Germany's work as a member of the European Union should be continued to ensure **consistent implementation of the 2030 Agenda in the EU**. Sustainable development needs to be seen as a pan-European task. Europe should be regarded internationally as an advocate of an order of justice, of innovation and sustainability. With the **European Green Deal** which the Federal Government supports, the European Commission presented a new European model for the future which is to make Europe into a **climate-neutral, resource-conserving continent** with a fair and prosperous **society** and a modern, resource-efficient and competitive **economy** while bearing in mind the social acceptability of change.

**Launch of a Decade of Action**

The task for the coming years is clear: policy as a whole has to be geared to sustainability.

Despite all the current challenges, there has been a rethink and **a sense of new beginning** in society, business and politics.

We have to grasp the opportunities this brings. The principle of sustainable development provides a **positive vision for the future** for a healthy planet underpinned by social cohesion and prosperity for all.