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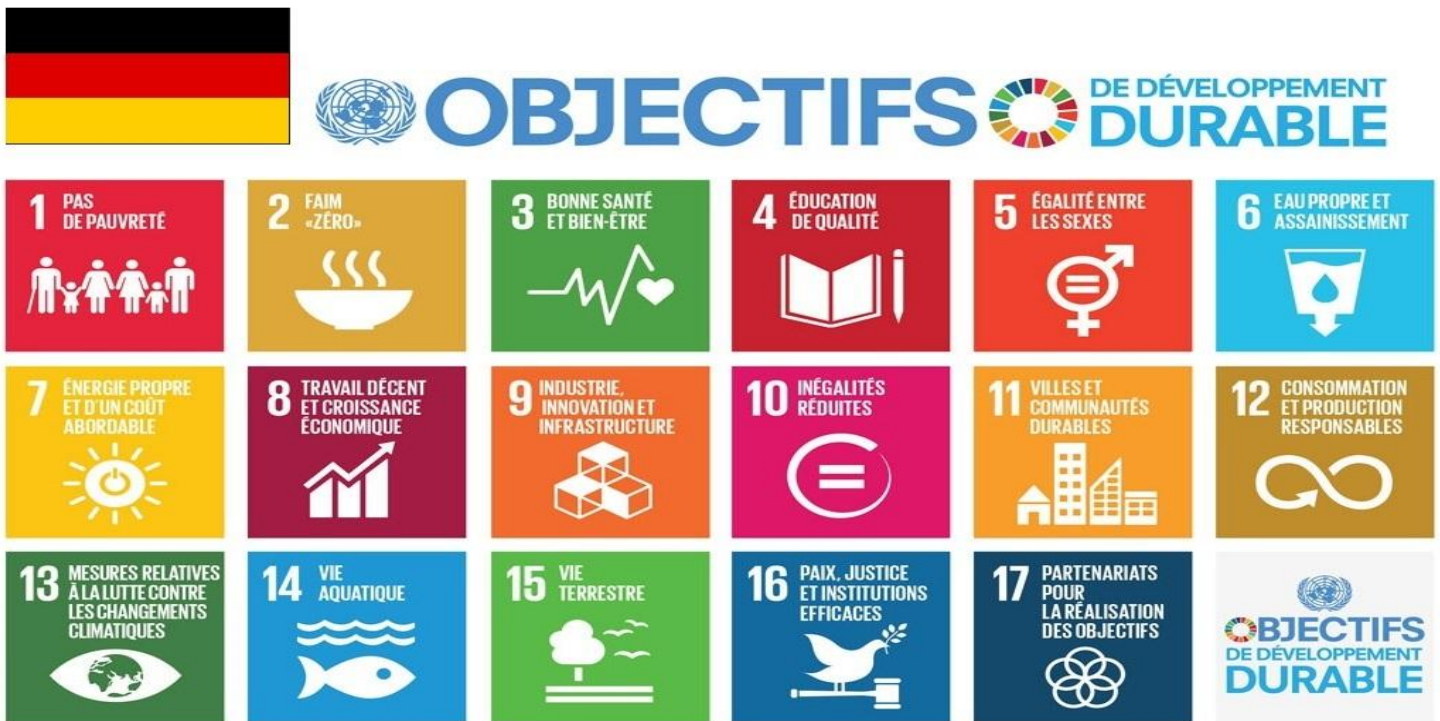
Making SDGs a national agenda: what can we learn from the German example?

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In preparation for the [High-Level Political Forum \(HLPF\)](#) in July 2017 at the United Nations in New York, countries are advancing in their Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) implementation processes. In France, the Ministry of the Environment invited civil society to a collaborative day on April 18, providing the opportunity to discuss the French action plan, governance and tools for civil society participation, the monitoring of indicators and reporting at the international level. This type of collective approach is essential to encourage countries to take ownership of SDGs, and also to benefit from collective learning and exchanges between pioneer countries. The following analysis, based on feedback from the German example, provides some initial lessons to be learned in terms of good practice and pitfalls to avoid.

Strong political support that drives actors

By placing the SDGs under the direct responsibility of the Chancellor, Germany has shown its determination to make SDGs a political priority. The Sustainable Development Strategy, the latest version of which was adopted on 11 January 2017 following a rewriting process involving all ministries (in order to broaden the strategy to include all 17 objectives), was chosen as the main mechanism for SDG implementation. This clear choice made it possible to structure the debate around a credible process, while support for the SDGs at the highest level has attracted the interest of a large number of actors. This is particularly the case for regional actors. Several Länders have also developed (Nordrhein-Westfalen) or revised (Baden-Württemberg, Rheinland-Pfalz)[1] their sustainable development strategies, and local authorities are also embracing the SDGs: launching a [dialogue between mayors on SDG implementation](#), emergence of local 2030 Agendas.

Contextualizing SDGs without losing ambition

To make the 17 SDGs (with their 169 targets and 230 indicators) more understandable and operational, Germany has made a selection and adapted SDGs to the national context. The result is a strategic dashboard with 63 priority indicators, most of which are accompanied by quantified targets: for example, stopping the increase in obesity by 2030 is one of these objectives; it is an important health issue (SDG 3) for a country like Germany, although not mentioned in the SDGs. The process of selection and adaptation to the national context must not, however, lead to a weakening of the level of ambition. This is sometimes the case in the German strategy, as noted by the [German Council for Sustainable Development](#) as well as some [environmental NGOs](#). For example, while Agenda 2030 aims to achieve a 50% reduction in poverty in each country, the German strategy aims to maintain the proportion of the population afflicted by material deprivation at below that of the average EU member country. Moreover, not all the objectives of the German strategy have the same level of precision. Some have a numerical threshold while others remain vague. This is the case, for example, for the objective of “reducing the loss of green space per inhabitant” (SDG 11). Finally, the purpose of a contextualization of the SDGs is to identify the priority issues for countries and their room for improvement. It is therefore regrettable that the German strategy does not directly mention an issue that is as central as the phase out of coal.

Going further in monitoring commitments

Monitoring commitments is also crucial. However, the German Sustainable Development Strategy, which has existed since 2002, is a relatively weak mechanism: while the Federal Statistical Office monitors the indicators and publishes a report every two years, there is often no consequence for failing to achieve a target. To make this mechanism more binding, parliamentary control could be reinforced by linking the monitoring of SDGs to the budget vote, as is the case in Norway.[2] To this end, the Sustainable Development Council is calling for the integration of sustainable development into the Constitution in order to accelerate SDG implementation.[3]

Reinforcing dialogue with civil society

SDGs are the result of an unprecedented inclusive negotiation process. As such, Germany has recognized the importance of civil society, in particular by giving it a voice at the United Nations after the presentation of its voluntary national report at the HLPF in 2016. Furthermore, the participatory process to establish the new sustainable development strategy has enabled the involvement of a large number of stakeholders. Between autumn 2015 and

spring 2016, five public conferences were held in several German regions; an initial version of the document was submitted in May 2016 to an online consultation with broad participation of NGOs from different sectors, as well as trade unions (e.g. teachers) and chambers of commerce; and some forty NGOs were invited to give their opinions during a direct consultation with the Chancery. However, German NGOs, which have called for this reinforcement of the civil society dialogue, are disappointed that the impact of these consultations on the final strategy remains opaque. The advancement of SDG implementation will be accompanied by regular dialogues with civil society. In parallel, the sustainable development strategy is scheduled for review every four years, with a first milestone in 2018; this process will be supported by a scientific platform.

Conclusion

The political support of the SDGs by the Chancellor is not merely lip service. Germany has made good progress in integrating the objectives and indicators into its sustainable development strategy. This example shows the importance of a clear definition of the mechanism (strategy, action plan, etc.) and an inclusive and credible process for the development of this mechanism, as well as for the subsequent steps, the monitoring and reporting. Nevertheless, dialogue with civil society remains incomplete so long as the impact of consultations is not transparent. The German experience shows that country ownership of SDGs requires effort to adapt objectives and indicators to the national context, without, however, leading to a reduction in ambition. On the contrary, a contextualized dashboard must be based on a critical assessment of the priority issues, without omitting any area of policy. Since SDGs bring sustainable development to a new level of ambition, national ownership must do the same.

[1] Kerkow, U. (2017). Ländersache Nachhaltigkeit. Die Umsetzung der 2030-Agenda für nachhaltige Entwicklung durch die Bundesländer. *Global Policy Forum*

[2] Brimont, L., Demailly, D. Vaillé, J. (2016). Mise en œuvre des ODD : que font les pays ? Une revue des rapports volontaires présentés au Forum politique de haut niveau. Iddri *Issue Briefs*, n°17.

[3] Rat für nachhaltige Entwicklung (Mars 2017). RNE Zur Deutschen Nachhaltigkeitsstrategie vom 11.1.2017. Stellungnahme des Rates für nachhaltige Entwicklung an die Bundesregierung.

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