

GERMANY AND THE  
GLOBAL SUSTAINABILITY AGENDA

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**That's how sustainability works!**

## That's how sustainability works!

### Civil society initiatives and proposals for sustainable policies

AN OVERVIEW FROM THE EDITORS

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The 2030 Agenda that was unanimously adopted by all member states of the United Nations in September 2015 with its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is an ambitious framework for sustainable development that should be fleshed out and implemented. The German government took an active part in formulating the 2030 Agenda. The revised German Sustainable Development Strategy is to form the framework for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs in, with and by Germany. The coalition agreement of the new German government also designates the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the promotion of sustainable development as a touchstone and guiding principle of the government's actions.

Despite these commitments, the policies of the German government are not yet sustainable by far. This applies to the situation in Germany and affects the people in the country in social (e.g. growing inequality and poverty), in economic (e.g. outdated infrastructure and departure from the energy transition) and in ecological respects (e.g. particulate pollution and drinking water quality). Our way of production and consumption, which is not sustainable, acquiesces in human rights violations and is oriented towards excessive resource consumption, as well as our unfair agricultural and trade policy have a massive impact on the living situation of the people in other countries, including in particular the poorest ones. In the two civil society reports *Germany and the Global Sustainability Agenda* (Deutschland und die globale Nachhaltigkeitsagenda) published in 2016 and 2017, the authors made clear that there is still much to do in all policy areas. A critical reflection and analysis of the government's actions with respect to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda is still necessary,

and in view of the counterproductive policy e.g. with respect to climate protection, it is more urgently required than ever.

Beyond government policies and sometimes against strong resistance from the political sphere and business, civil society initiatives and organisations are increasingly taking sustainability into their own hands. They point out problems, develop alternative approaches and convince people with innovative ideas, commitment to others and a lifestyle that is not or at least less detrimental to nature and humans. They make major contributions to environmental protection and contribute to social justice. Good examples of the latter are afforded by the many initiatives and organisations that have been making efforts in cities and communities towards providing for and integrating refugees since 2015.

Civil society action for sustainable development is visibly and actively implemented mainly on the ground – but it is also directed at “big” politics beyond local contexts. It does not always explicitly refer to the global sustainability goals agreed on by the governments. Civil society action has diverse motivations: Initiatives and organisations strive to concretely improve the living conditions of people on the ground. They see the sluggishness, which they perceive as a failure, or sometimes (in contexts marked by conflict) even harmful actions by governments and the influence of obstructing and inhibiting actors, which they perceive as excessive, as an occasion to become active themselves. It is especially the experience of self-efficacy that is contributing to the fact that civil society action overall, but also for sustainable development, has been consistently strong for years and is also increasingly being taken by those who had not



participated before. Often, the ideas and approaches of initiatives and organisations are so good that they can be transferred to a broader context and set an example for policies at the regional or national level. Many of the changes in society – from the energy transition to alternative transport policies to fair procurement in the public administrations and increased international cooperation – would not have been possible in this way without civil society action.

For this reason, the present report focuses on which civil society (but also governmental) approaches for concretely implementing the sustainability goals in Germany and other countries already exist, where they were able to achieve success on a small scale despite inadequate political conditions, and which difficulties they are contending with in implementing their goals. They were selected because they exemplify civil society, municipal and governmental approaches to sustainable development and because they can potentially be transferred to a larger societal context – in our case, Germany.

Of course, there are innumerable further examples that we were not able to mention in the report. Our goal is not a representative analysis of civil society action for sustainability. Rather, we wanted to show by examples who is moving what, and how – and what is impeding these efforts. The examples are meant to provide civil society initiatives and organisations with ideas and concepts that they can use for their own work. But they are also meant to provide a motivation to actively pursue good ideas for sustainability, even under adverse conditions. The people in each of the initiatives presented succeeded in mobilising much political energy and thereby making the world a bit more just and sustainable.

To be sure: The main responsibility for implementing the 2030 Agenda and achieving the SDGs lies with the governments. They adopted them, and they are responsible for setting the political course towards sustainable development in all political, societal and economic sectors at all levels. In order for civil society action for sustainable development to be able to develop and prosper, obstacles must be removed, better conditions must be created, and in particular the structural impediments to sustainable development must

finally be addressed in the political arena. The projects, initiatives and activities presented are meant to hold up a mirror to the political sphere in Germany. They are meant to point out where and how concrete political alternatives to a policy of “business as usual” already exist. In this sense: “That’s how sustainability works!”

### Sustainability crosses borders

Policies that aspire to being transformative in the interest of sustainability must encompass all its dimensions (social, economic, ecological and societal). They must take into account structural, global and concrete local challenges. They must be pushed on and between all levels and by a variety of actors, and they must use diverse instruments and strategies for implementation.

A central aim of transformative policies is to overcome social inequality, and thus poverty as its most extreme manifestation – but this requires a multi-dimensional approach that is strategic and creative. According to one of the core principles of the 2030 Agenda, “leave no one behind”, those who are most affected by poverty, conflicts and destruction of the environment must be reached first and foremost. These are usually women, children and young people, people with disabilities, refugees and displaced persons, migrants, indigenous populations and other marginalised groups.

### Taking into account the dimensions of sustainability

Civil society initiatives and organisations have been pursuing corresponding approaches for much longer than the 2030 Agenda has existed. They aspired to achieve societal changes in the sense of a comprehensive transformation of our way of life. Our report offers good examples of how projects that are oriented towards the common good and that take into account their impacts on the various sectors of society can sustainably tackle social challenges.

For instance, the “Streetwear” campaign, which wants to enable young people from families affected by poverty to take part in leisure activities, bases its clothing brand on eco-fair fabrics and local produc-

tion (Chapter 1). For the “food councils”, the changes towards sustainability in the production of agricultural products and in consumption behaviour go hand in hand. The goal of food sovereignty can only be achieved if as many actors of the food system as possible advocate together for ecologically sustainable, socially compatible and economically viable patterns of production and consumption – and for the political conditions these patterns require. To this end, they bring producers and consumers together (Chapter 2). The civil society peasant initiative “Towards Sustainable Use of Resources Organisation” (TSURO) from Zimbabwe aims for collective management of the scarce water resources in order to improve the social and economic situation of the peasants and to ensure the environmental protection required for agriculture. The self-responsibility and self-efficacy of the water users in sustainably managing the public good is particularly important in this context (Chapter 6). The coastal sea protection project “Friends of Marine Life” in the Indian federal state of Kerala works both to preserve small-scale fishery as an economic basis for the local people and to change the way in which all – particularly state – authorities deal with the public good coastal sea (Chapter 14). And finally, in addition to environmental protection, the association “UferLeben e.V.” also aims to secure jobs in the region Leipziger Neuseenland – for instance in demanding a sustainable tourism concept for the region from local businesses and municipalities.

Peace is an essential prerequisite for sustainable societal development. The peace dimension is crucial in view of the severe social and ecological impacts of the rapid globalisation(s) and the concomitant societal conflicts – and this applies not only to states marked by violent conflicts or restrictions of liberties and participation rights. In this volume, the peace dimension is primarily taken into account by initiatives dedicated to conflict management in the (post)-war contexts in the Philippines and Colombia (Chapter 16). But the “Alliance Future Education” (“Bündnis Zukunftsbildung”) also promotes tolerant and peaceful coexistence. It pushes for the implementation of education for sustainable development in all educational institutions from child-care centres to vocational training and universities (Chapter 4). The continuing importance of this subject in Germany is

currently on display in the debate on refugees and migration, in which democracy and human rights are exposed to a populist discourse and xenophobic ideas.

### Overcoming poverty and social inequality

The gap between rich and poor continues to grow in most countries. Globally, too, the inequality among the countries is still very high. Worldwide, 783 million people are affected by extreme poverty, which means that they have to make do with less than 1.90 US dollars per day.<sup>1</sup> The vast majority of these people live in the countries of Africa and South Asia. In Germany, 15.7 percent of people are considered to be at risk of poverty. Among children and young people, this proportion is even 19.7 percent.<sup>2</sup> Our report includes good examples of projects that work towards reducing poverty and overcoming social inequality: A project for improving health care for mothers and children in Nepal intends to reach primarily women affected by poverty (Chapter 3). The initiative “Exchange Education for Housing” (“Tausche Bildung für Wohnen”) from Duisburg-Marxloh provides educational offers to children from families affected by poverty (Chapter 10). The “Tenement Syndicate” (“Mietshäuser Syndikat”) creates affordable housing also for people with low income: It pools self-organizing housing projects in order to offer an alternative to the current housing market’s profit-oriented logic of utility (Chapter 11).

### Realising gender equality

We are still very far from gender equality – including in Germany. Women are more often affected by poverty, worldwide and in this country. They spend three times as much time on unpaid domestic work as men. And they continue to earn 38 percent less in the global average than their male colleagues.<sup>3</sup> But women and girls are also affected by societal taboos and the resulting discriminations. This applies in particular to

1 United Nations (2018).

2 Der Paritätische Gesamtverband (2017). A person or a household is considered to be at risk of poverty if they have to make do with 60 percent of the median income of the population overall.

3 United Nations (2018). In this country, for instance, the pay gap is still 21 percent. Whereas men earn 20.71 Euros on average, women only get 16.25 Euros per hour on average (cf. Federal Statistical Office (2017).

their reproductive rights. Our report contains some good examples of how the situation of women and girls can be improved and the goal of gender equality can be approached. The #freeperiods campaign aims to overcome period poverty of girls and women. It openly addresses the societal taboo surrounding menstruation, an essential aspect of the societal discrimination of women and girls (Chapter 5). But fair municipal procurement of work clothes also makes an important contribution to gender equality. Especially in the textile industry, women often have to work under exploitative conditions. Fair buying and respect for human rights in production contribute to improving their situation.

### **Small initiative – great effect: But how, exactly?**

The civil society initiatives and organisations presented in our report pursue time-tested approaches, but sometimes also new approaches, to achieve sustainable development. With the campaign, the “project on the ground” and the “lived alternative”, the approaches include three “classics” of civil society work. An example of a new approach is to pursue legal avenues. All initiatives and organisations we present consistently make use of all political, legal and administrative options in order to pursue their concerns. In doing so, they rely on cooperation with very different societal actors and with business, but also with governmental and municipal institutions. Moreover, some of them switch roles in that the boundary between a civil society initiative and business activity is crossed.

#### **The campaign: pointing out societal problems, calling for action**

A campaign serves to draw attention to a societal problem or an undesirable political development. While it is limited in time, it aims for long-term societal and political changes. For instance, the #freeperiods campaign draws attention to the discrimination of girls. But with its demand for free menstruation products, it is primarily directed at the political sphere, at members of parliament and the British government. The Streetwear campaign points out a societal problem, namely that most young people from families affected by poverty cannot go on vacation.

Instead of simply asking the municipality to provide more funds for youth work, the campaign is directed at people who are economically better off and asks for funds through purchases of the Streetwear brand “arm<sup>TM</sup>” (“poor<sup>TM</sup>”).

#### **The project: bringing about concrete changes on the ground**

Many of the projects presented in our report emerged from grassroots initiatives or were developed by civil society organisations or social enterprises that aim for concrete improvements in the environmental and living conditions of people “on the ground”. The initiative for a “bicycle referendum” (“Volksentscheid Fahrrad”) in Berlin advocated for a more sustainable transport policy in the capital and is now being continued in other cities (Chapter 9). “Exchange Education for Housing” is improving the educational situation in Duisburg-Marxloh through its project. “UferLeben e.V.” wants to make the use of the Leipziger Neuseenland more sustainable and preserve the environment and create jobs particularly for the people living in the region.

#### **The alternative: just doing it differently**

Our economic system, which is designed for unfettered growth and an unregulated market, needs to be overcome and reoriented towards sufficiency. From the political sphere, we often hear that a sustainable regulation of the private sector would come with cuts in the social sector. Many civil society initiatives and organisations show that changes towards a socially and ecologically sustainable way of doing business are possible even now, under the current conditions. The “Alliance Citizen Energy” (“Bündnis Bürgerenergie”) pushes for sustainable energy production that is decentralized, does not harm the environment or the climate and takes into account the concerns of the citizens (Chapter 7). The members of the “Alliance Citizen Energy” are thus locally putting the energy transition into practice, without taking economic losses. The people at “FairWorldFonds” (Chapter 17) practice applied sustainability by offering a fund for ethical investment.

### Sustainable development through legal struggles

Civil society initiatives and organisations regularly call for legally binding regulations or stricter administrative provisions, for instance in order to protect the human rights of workers and the environment from exploitative companies or to force companies to finally start producing in a climate-friendly way. In some areas there are already binding ecological, social and human rights standards, such as the core labour standards of the International Labour Organization (ILO) or the Paris climate agreement. An example from our report shows that legal avenues exist. The “Climate Litigation Network”, together with local NGOs and private individuals, is taking states to court in order to force them use national regulations to fulfil the international commitments they entered into of reducing the CO<sub>2</sub> emissions by 25 percent by 2020 compared to 1990 ([Chapter 13](#)).

Another example of how law can be used to promote sustainable development comes from a neighbouring country: On the initiative of civil society organisations, the French parliament passed a law that compels companies to monitor and curb negative human rights impacts of their business activities – a milestone for the protection of human rights. Many governments, including the German government, have so far opposed such laws. But in the era of globalisation, corporate responsibility does not end at national borders. German companies share responsibility for the business practices of their international suppliers or business partners ([Chapter 8](#)).

However, when new laws create new scope for action, it is also important to make use of it. After the implementation of an EU directive in German law, the federal and state governments could change the public procurement structures such that fair and sustainable procurement becomes the standard. This has yet to happen. But individual municipalities are leading the way. Our report contains a good example of this: the fair procurement of the work clothes of public servants, as practiced e.g. by the cities of Dortmund, Bonn, Cologne and Stuttgart. This is a success of civil society lobbying work ([Chapter 12](#)).

### Sustainable development through cooperation – and switching roles

Many civil society initiatives and organisations cooperate with state or municipal institutions in order to realise sustainable development. Some initiatives and projects direct the demands resulting from their work at municipal and governmental institutions, such as the municipal administration or the federal government and its subordinate authorities. As some examples from our report show, civil society serves different functions in this context: For instance, in the aftermath of the severe earthquake in 2015, the “Johanniter International Assistance” (“Johanniter-Auslandshilfe”), among others, temporarily took over public health care together with its Nepalese partner organisation. The “Naya Health Nepal” works on improving women’s health on behalf of the state. In the Indian state of Kerala, the coastal sea protection initiative “Friends of Marine Life” supports the local authorities with expert advice. But in Germany, too, civil society initiatives and organisations are in close contact with municipalities and advise them e.g. on fair procurement.

Businesses less often play a role as cooperation partners. The ones that do are usually companies that produce sustainably. The Streetwear campaign and the label “arm<sup>TM</sup>” base their clothing on eco-social fabrics and local production, and the “food councils” cooperate with local organic farmers. Especially companies that are currently not sustainable should be held accountable through binding social, ecological and human rights standards.

Sometimes civil society initiatives and organisations have to switch roles. The initiatives for “citizen energy” are at the same time also economic actors in the energy sector. The “Tenement Syndicate” works as an association, but in order to pursue its goals on the housing market, it switches roles and becomes a limited company. The initiators of the “FairWorldFonds” are actors on the financial market due to their fund. Other organisations, e.g. “Exchange Education for Housing”, move in a gray area and see themselves as social enterprises.

## Sustainability – reaching it despite opposition

Civil society initiatives often have to push sustainability projects through against opposition. In many countries of the global South, but also in Europe, it is governments who restrict civil society action for human rights and sustainable development. But economic interests and their political support are also often obstacles for civil society action for sustainability. Moreover, many civil society initiatives and organisations face the challenge of securing sound and stable financing for their projects.

### Preserve and expand scope for civil society

In many countries in the global South – and not only there – civil society action is restricted by autocratic or populist governments or takes place in (post-) conflict situations. Overall, the scope for civil society action for human rights and sustainable development is shrinking more and more. Our report contains examples from countries in which democracy is only just emerging and thus still fragile (Zimbabwe) or in which democratic or civil society participation is significantly impeded by violent conflicts and conservative, populist policies (Colombia, Philippines) or natural disasters (Nepal).

### Overcoming economic power and interest-driven politics

But even generally positive political conditions in no way guarantee that the political will exists to achieve sustainable development. Conflicts of interest between sustainability and economic development, but also societal taboos, lacking or deficient legal frameworks and lack of financial resources are challenges that initiatives and projects confront. Often it is economic interests that stand in the way of sustainable development. However, this does not mean that most companies oppose sustainability in principle. But many take it into account far too little in their business activities or delegate sustainability to part-time positions. Policymakers often listen to companies more than they do to civil society initiatives and organisations that are oriented towards the public good. Companies are potential sources of tax revenues in cash-strapped communities and create jobs or

promise a gain in prestige and (sometimes illegal) income opportunities for politicians.

Of course, there are also companies with social and ecological production. They are often seen as partners for sustainable development by civil society initiatives and organisations. Business and sustainability are not opposites; sustainability does not necessarily lead to lower profits or unemployment. Companies should show much more courage in becoming sustainable.

### Tackling financial challenges

Many civil society initiatives and organisations dedicated to sustainable development work on the basis of volunteers and donations. Our examples also suggest that the funding for good and successful sustainability projects is often not secured in the long term. But many of the projects need some time for their positive effects to unfold. This is why many initiatives and organisations depend on public support. This is also illustrated by some of our examples. As many initiatives contribute to the public good and also often take on governmental services and tasks, they should be supported with sufficient public funds. However, as public funds are not a suitable financial instrument for every project, alternatives should be found in the medium and long term for the financing of civil society initiatives.

As a separate matter, expenditures must be reprioritised within public budgets. More money for education for sustainable development or a more sustainable transport policy can easily be saved elsewhere. Furthermore, tax money must be spent such that negative follow-up costs are minimised.

## What policymakers should do now – demands at the municipal, state and federal level

For this report we selected civil society initiatives and organisations whose projects can be exemplary also for policies in and by Germany. The insights gained lead to five key demands for the federal, state and municipal level:

**1. High time to muster political will!** The policymakers at the federal, state and municipal level must finally muster the will to consistently realise sustainable development. This is possible even against populist and economic inertia and against the convenience of “business as usual”. Policymakers should stop acquiescing in these tendencies. Instead, they should specifically support civil society initiatives and organisations that are already practising sustainability.

**2. Protect and expand the scope of civil society!**

Policymakers at the federal, state and municipal level must protect civil society and universal human rights. This applies in particular to the federal government in its cooperation with autocratic states in which freedom, the rule of law and political participation are threatened. Political measures in trade, foreign trade promotion, migration and security must also not lead to restrictions of human rights. Civil society action for sustainable development is active human rights work!

**3. Take civil society seriously as an innovator and advisor on coherent policies!**

Policies at the federal, state and municipal level must become more coherent in order to achieve the global development goals and realise social justice. Policymakers should therefore do more to draw on the experience of civil society initiatives and organisations. They should take them seriously as innovators and advisors and actively seek their counsel, in particular where they try to compensate for negative effects of political decisions on sustainable development. Political consulting by civil society is efficient and strengthens the citizens’ trust in democracy, policies and the administration.

**4. Enforce the law, create and simplify conditions!**

Sustainable development needs a legally binding framework and corresponding administrative provisions. At the federal, state and municipal level, these must finally be created and then consistently implemented! Voluntary commitments e.g. by companies to fulfil their human rights due diligence obligations and social-ecological standards are not enough.

**5. Secure financial support!** At the federal, state and municipal level, the framework for financial support such as budget lines, funding conditions, own contri-

butions and administrative overhead for civil society sustainability initiatives should be simplified and enhanced. Furthermore, alternative financing models should be discussed in a dialogue with civil society, so that those initiatives that are not eligible for public funding can be financially secured in the long term. Also, civil society initiatives and organisations should be supported at the federal, state and municipal level by expanding voluntary services and systematically promoting active participation in the area of sustainability.

Something else has also become clear in view of the examples presented: Sustainability doesn’t require a master plan or a lecture from above. It is diverse and in the long run coalesces into the great social-ecological transformation. The 2030 Agenda and the Paris climate agreement as well as all national sustainable development strategies can support this development if they are consistently implemented. But mainly, sustainability works like this: Be bold and go ahead! And the political sphere should support civil society in this. It should follow its example or at least not stand in its way.

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# That's how sustainability works!

## Civil society initiatives and proposals for sustainable policies

With the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the world's governments have set the framework for the global sustainability policies of the next twelve years. The agenda and its goals have the potential to shape German policies at the federal, state and municipal levels. They emphasize the need for changes within our country and at the same time Germany's international responsibility. Time and again, we find that the key for the success of the 2030 Agenda lies at the national and subnational levels. Instead of merely updating the results of the previous reports from 2016 and 2017 or getting bogged down in the continuation of processes, in 2018 the publishing organisations, networks and associations decided to draw attention to approaches to the implementation of Sustainable Development Goals in Germany that have already been successfully realised despite inadequate political conditions.

In Germany and the Global Sustainability Agenda: That's how sustainability works! the authors and interviewees show how sustainability policy can be actively shaped or where it has already been put into practice. Initiatives from civil society and labour unions, but also measures at the local level and examples from other countries serve to illustrate this. We use these approaches to hold up a mirror to the political sphere. We show that sustainability is indeed possible – if the political will exists.

