



G20 Themes #10

The plan for a better world: The G20 and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

What is the 2030 Agenda all about?

Over the course of three years, heads of state and government of all UN member states negotiated in the most comprehensive consultation process of the UN's history so far, about the following questions concerning the future: How to fight poverty and hunger? By what means can growing social inequality be overcome? How do we tackle the ongoing and increasing environmental destruction and the intensifying climate change? What consequences does the world community draw from the financial, economic and food crises? In order to address these challenges, 17 goals were agreed that should be implemented by 2030, hence the name "2030 Agenda".

The UN negotiations aimed to identify solutions to the major challenges of our times that take into consideration their social, environmental and economic aspects and formulate concrete goals relevant to all states. The outcome of the negotiations, in which many civil society representatives also participated (e.g., non-governmental organizations and local activists)

was that the member nations adopted a new catalogue of goals for international politics in September 2015. The 2030 Agenda comprises 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), ways and means for their implementation, indicators for measuring progress as well as review mechanisms. The SDGs include a broad spectrum of important policy issues, ranging from the eradication of poverty to health and educational policy, environmental protection as well as the creation and maintenance of peace. To this end, the 17 SDGs are divided into 169 sub-targets, for which concrete indicators and review mechanisms still have to be developed.

How should the SDGs be implemented?

The SDGs replace the Millennium Development Goals, which only applied to developing countries. The SDG paradigm is a transformative shift insofar as the goals apply to all countries, including rich industrial nations such as Germany. To this end, the SDGs should be translated into national goals. This important step is



now due. The nations have to carefully scrutinize their respective national policies in order to assess whether these are in conflict with the SDGs and whether they have to be supplemented by additional policies. The SDGs' greatest handicap is that they are not coherent – that is, economic growth policies may undermine protection of natural resources, such as water, land and climate. Moreover states can focus on certain goals while more or less ignoring others. Finally, the biggest problem is that the 2030 Agenda is not legally binding and its implementation is not enforceable by international law. Although the agenda is based on a wide consensus of the UN member states, each country sets its own priorities for implementation and reports these to a UN forum set up for this purpose.



How does the German Federal Government plan to implement the SDGs?

In December 2014, the Federal Government determined that the [national sustainability strategy](#) should become a fundamental framework for the implementation of the SDGs in Germany. The lead for this process lies with the chancellery. A German sustainability strategy had already been adopted by the Federal Government in 2002, which included key fields of action and indicators for implementing sustainable policies in Germany. Among these are the development of renewable energies; shifting traffic from road to rail; and the

reduction of the school drop-out rate. The German sustainability strategy was revised several times, most recently in the summer of 2016. A new version is currently being drafted in the SDG structure, which entails reviewing all policies of the Federal Government for their potential for contributing to achieving the SDGs. The indicators were also enhanced to include issues such as maritime policy, water protection and distributive justice. During 2016, the Government consulted with civil society representatives about the new draft. Civil society provided comments and criticisms, which concentrated on the fact that the sustainability strategy does not go nearly far enough in covering the complexity, intricacies and range of the SDGs. It is feared that the Government will implement only some of the SDGs and emphasize those policy areas, in which Germany has already achieved a lot. A final version of the revised sustainability strategy is expected by the end of 2016.

What role do the SDGs play in the G20?

Under the 2016 Chinese G20 Presidency, President Xi Jinping called for the design of the 2030 Agenda on the list of priorities of topics for the Summit in Hangzhou. The outcome of this Chinese initiative is the "[G20 Action Plan on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#)." In its role as a global economic forum, the G20 identified 15 sustainable development sectors (SDSs), in which the existing activities of the G20 are bundled. Then, it identified the SDGs to which each SDS would contribute.¹ The SDSs give the highest priority to achieving three SDGs: Decent Work and Economic Growth (#8); Reduced Inequalities (#10); and Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure (#9). The latter goal would include the G20's efforts to expand infrastructure, particularly in the transport, energy, water supply and information and communications technology (ICT) sectors. In these sectors, the G20 envisages interconnected, cross-border megaprojects, including some that are CO₂ intensive. Furthermore, the G20 sees its growth strategy as an important contribution to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

In the annex to the G20 Action Plan each G20 nation provides a short overview of its national implementation efforts. These differ depending on the

country. One of the central challenges for all nations, not only the G20, relates to the necessity for linking existing and new policies to the SDGs. In the national 2030 Agenda plans, there is lack of clarity about how the Agenda should be institutionally anchored within the respective government apparatus. This depends on whether there are already sustainability strategies being implemented and whether there are existing institutions committed to sustainability such as agencies and advisory bodies. Some nations also describe their key priorities within the SDGs (e.g., Australia on gender equality; Canada on climate change; India on broad access of its population to energy and livelihoods). But in so doing, they remain vague at this stage.

Why is it important that the 2030 Agenda be taken up by the G20?

First of all, it is commendable that the G20 member states are committed to the 2030 Agenda and the values and goals on which it is based. Thereby the 2030 Agenda of each G20 member as well as the collective G20 Action Plan have been launched. Many of the SDGs can only be achieved by the collective efforts of not only the G20, but of all states, working together through purposeful cooperation.

Commitment to the 2030 Agenda in supranational institutions such as the G20, the G7 or the association of the BRICS states (which are all members of the G20),² could exert peer pressure to implement the SDGs, although no country can be forced to do so under international law. Actually, in several of the G20 states first attempts have already been made to define the

implementation of the SDGs at national level and to integrate the targets into national politics. Also all G20 states have ratified the SDGs. More coherence of their national politics with these international goals could contribute to a positive development of the world.

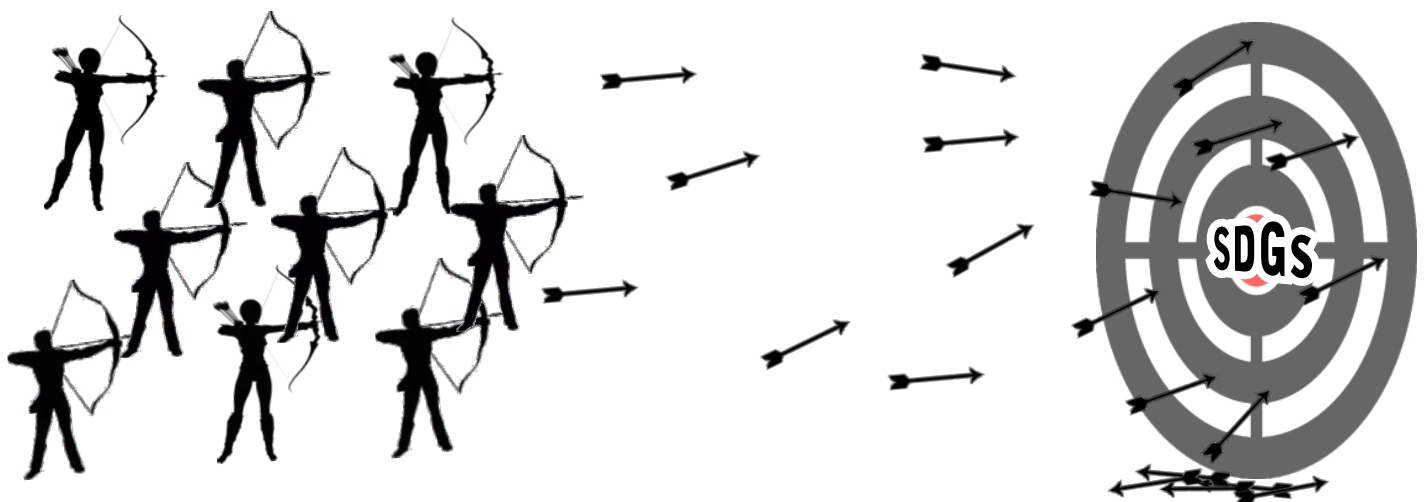
In their recognition of the 2030 Agenda, the G20 member states confirm the UN as the most important democratically legitimized international body for the implementation of the SDGs. This form of support for UN processes by the G20 is new. It is meaningful, because the G20 is criticized for having created a parallel and more exclusive structure than the UN which could undermine the UN's role and function.

What are the criticisms of civil society?

The implementation of the SDGs by Germany calls for fundamental changes in a whole range of political and policy areas. This is the case for every member state of the G20. However, civil society questions how motivated the G20 member states are in implementing their SDG action plans. Thus, there is the risk that in their national plans, they merely assign selected goals to already existing activities and miss the target.

Of course, such cherry-picking or empty gestures usually do not involve far-reaching re-thinking of policies.

Moreover, it is crucial that the G20 states begin to shift into new ways of economic thinking. However, the G20 relies mainly on achieving those SDGs that focus on economic growth, the development of major industry and infrastructure projects and cooperation with



private enterprises. The 15 sustainable development sectors emphasize these policy areas. Important aspects of sustainable development, such as the comprehensive integration of gender equality is overlooked and the G20 does not take into account or critically examine the historical growth model of the North and its excessive ecological footprint.

SDGs require a coherent approach to policy

The character of the SDGs is undermined without coherent inter-linkages between the social, environmental and economic policies of nations. Admittedly, if one focuses unilaterally on the economy, some elements of the SDGs may be achieved, but at the same time, regulatory requirements such as environmental protection, human rights standards, reducing the use of resources may not be considered and questions of global justice may go unanswered. It is the industrialized nations of the G20, such as Germany, that have to primarily ask themselves how their ecological footprint (greenhouse gas emissions, use of natural resources and energy consumption) be reduced, in order to enable countries of the global South to exercise their right to development.

Systematic screening

To date, there are no signs that the G20 states will undertake systematic monitoring and verification of implementation of their individual and collective plans to achieve the SDGs, neither at the international nor at national level. There is a danger that only showcase projects will be presented by nations, while inadequate policies or weaknesses will not be critically examined. The UN's role in SDG implementation needs to be strengthened.

Preserve inclusive negotiation processes and civil society participation

Civil society is concerned that, while there was a

universal negotiation process of the 2030 Agenda under the auspices of the UN, the G20's Action Plan may not align with the intentions of the UN. The exclusive character of the G20 means that the majority of states worldwide are not involved in its deliberations and decisions.

Civil society is also concerned that there are many G20 members (e.g., China, Russia, Turkey, India, Brazil, Indonesia and Saudi Arabia), in which activities of non-state actors are increasingly being criminalized. Many are persecuted and severely restricted in their scope of action. Civil society with its critical voices is, however, an important guarantor that the SDGs are really implemented and that the process is monitored accordingly. Civil society has to be included in the drawing up of SDG implementation strategies in a substantial, transparent and democratic process. Structures for such participation have not yet been



sufficiently developed in democratic states such as Germany or, if structures exist, they often do not work effectively. In autocratic states, civil society participation is not welcome.

The G20 member states intend to further develop their Action Plan in the future; so far they only have a first draft. If, however, the G20 does not re-think its economic and growth policy (see Fundamental #4 of this series), then selected specific actions alone for a better, more just and sustainable world may not be sufficient to achieve the SDGs.

¹ (A) infrastructure; (B) agriculture, food security and nutrition, (C) development of human resources and employment; (D) financial integration and remittances; (E) domestic resource mobilization; (F) industrialization; (G) inclusive economy; (H) energy; (I) trade and investments; (J) anti-corruption; (K) international financial architecture (L) growth strategies; (M) climate finance and green finance; (N) innovation and (O) global health.

² see issue #2 Fundamentals Series

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