

The 2018 international Peer Review of the German Sustainable Development Strategy

Rt Hon Helen Clark
former Prime Minister of New Zealand and former UNDP Administrator,
Chair of the international Peer group

Key note given at the 2018 UN High-Level Political Forum Side Event, Permanent Mission of Germany to the United Nations

New York, 12 July 2018

My thanks go to the Government of the Federal Republic of Germany and its Permanent Mission to the United Nations for organizing today's side event.

It was my privilege to chair the 2018 International Peer Review of Germany's Sustainable Development Strategy. I speak on behalf of all members of the Review Team in saying that we felt privileged to be invited to undertake the review.

I believe we all accepted the task knowing that **what Germany does on sustainable development is of global significance because of the size and scale of the country.** Its economy developed, as most have, with a **big carbon footprint**, and so it has heavy legacy issues in its transition to sustainability. That transition needs to be swift and it needs to be just. It is to Germany's credit that it is **approaching these issues holistically** as the 2030 Agenda urges all countries to do.

Germany, however, was ahead of many in thinking in this way. It produced its first sustainable development strategy in time for the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002. The strategy which our team reviewed is Germany's third, and we were also the third international review team. All that says to me that Germany is serious about sustainable development and is prepared to both solicit and receive international scrutiny and recommendations.

Our review team met with stakeholders across government, parliament, the private sector, and civil society. From considering that wide range of perspectives, we concluded that:

- The *institutional architecture* established to support the strategy is sound. Leadership of it resides in the Chancellery which convenes state secretaries charged with driving the strategy at ministerial level.
- Nonetheless, the Federal Government's *co-ordination capacities* could be strengthened. With 29 of the Strategy's 63 indicators reportedly off-track, this calls for a strong action plan for the State Secretaries' Committee and for departmental action plans for which there is accountability for delivery.
- At all levels of government, *broad partnerships* will need to be formed with stakeholders to turn around those indicators which are currently heading in the wrong direction. The Strategy's indicator system suggests that there is a concentration of challenges relating to agriculture, land use, and energy where targets would not be met on current trends.
- The indicators should be kept *under close review* to ensure that they remain relevant and that they steer progress. Those off-track indicators need to be addressed rapidly with action taken to turn them around to a positive direction.
- There were areas where the Peer Review felt that the Strategy could be *more ambitious* in scope and/or speed of progress in the areas targeted; for example, on moving towards zero land degradation, reversing the current negative trend on biodiversity loss, phasing out both fossil fuel- and nuclear-based energy generation, achieving a circular economy, and in promoting informed public debate on why achieving sustainable development is critical for both Germany and the wider world.
- Sustainable development in Germany is often seen as being focused on environmental issues, and civil society actors in the social and economic spheres do not always see the Strategy as speaking to them. Yet the Strategy is *comprehensive* in covering the social, economic, and environmental strands of sustainability. That needs to be better communicated, so that citizens perceive that their future wellbeing and that of the natural ecosystems on which life depends are interlinked.
- This calls for enhancing capacity for systems thinking, and for *education for sustainability* at all levels of the education system and through lifelong learning. Politicians and officials need to comprehend the opportunities, the risks, and the challenges implicit in the transition to sustainability to make optimal policy decisions and to implement them.
- *Leaving No One Behind* is a core principle of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. Among those to whom we spoke, there was concern expressed that more people are being left behind in Germany itself. Efforts to secure social cohesion and solidarity are more important than ever amidst the growing diversity of the population. This challenge is far from unique among high income countries and is complicated by populist political reactions to economic and social trends in a number of them. The 2030 Agenda is an agenda of hope for

inclusion, human rights, and human development: following its principles does offer a way forward in these challenging times.

- The oversight mechanisms provided by *parliaments and national audit institutions* are important globally in monitoring progress on sustainable development and ensuring accountability. The Peer Review recommended greater powers for the Bundestag's Advisory Committee on Sustainable Development. We also suggested that ways be found to reflect the Strategy in the Government's budget to enable monitoring. As well, we noted the decision of the *International Organisation of Supreme Audit Institutions Congress* in 2016 that the national institutions should undertake performance audits on SDG implementation, thereby contributing to ensuring accountability.
- The *German Council for Sustainable Development* was established in 2001 and is a well-respected convener of stakeholders and advisor of government on cross-cutting issues of sustainability. Consideration should be given to it having a legal entity status which befits its independent role.
- Germany's commitment to sustainable development positions it well at the European and global levels to be an *advocate for meaningful action* to advance the SDGs. Beyond its own shores, it can do more to address its overall footprint by committing to sustainable supply chains. Its substantial international development budget and its technologies and expertise can be even more significant in supporting developing countries to achieve the SDGs.

Overall, there is much that is commendable in Germany's Strategy for Sustainable Development. Our review calls for keeping what works, elevating what is good, and changing what doesn't deliver. We emphasise the urgency of addressing off-track indicators, recognizing emerging issues and threats to sustainable development, lifting ambition, and expanding dialogue, engagement, and communication with stakeholders.

We observed that the concept of sustainability has deep roots in German society, and that the social market economy and its tradition of dialogue are positive for tackling major challenges. Those attributes combined with a progressive Sustainable Development Strategy provide a sound basis for a transformational sustainability agenda and action.

We commend Germany for its preparedness to open up this core government strategy to independent international review and recommend this practice to all countries as a way of helping to strengthen implementation of the 2030 Agenda, the SDGs, and national sustainability strategies.