

# MONITOR

SUSTAINABILITY MONITOR NO. 1/2021

## German Sustainability Strategy 2021

---

### Are we on the right track?

*By Sabina Wölkner & Gisela Elsner*

- On 10 March, The Federal Government published its updated German Sustainability Strategy (DNS). This update of the strategy focuses on strengthening the political relevance of the DNS and its governance structure, better co-ordination between ministries and systematic success monitoring.
- All efforts towards implementing sustainability are to be aligned with six Areas of Transformation in which progress is particularly relevant and which combine several SDGs and show their interactions.
- The pandemic has increased the need for transformation at all levels and has shown the importance of civil society groups actively participating in the DNS. The new DNS seeks to take account of this concern under the heading 'Sustainability as a joint effort' (*'Gemeinschaftswerk Nachhaltigkeit'*).
- The parties involved in formulating this update agree that Germany must significantly pick up its pace in meeting the sustainability goals. For that reason, it is important to drive forward integration with the objectives and policies of the European Green Deal and extend its focus to other aspects of sustainability.

## Table of contents

<b>2021 update of the German Sustainability Strategy</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Relevance through coherent action and strong institutions</b> .....	3
<b>Increased collaboration at all levels</b> .....	3
<b>The High-level Political Forum and the European Green Deal</b> .....	4
<b>Conclusion and outlook</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>Imprint</b>	<b>9</b>
About the authors .....	9

## 2021 update of the German Sustainability Strategy

The update of the **German Sustainability Strategy** (DNS by its German acronym) published on 10 March comes at an important moment. This key document for Germany's sustainability policy, updated regularly since 2004 and linked to the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2016, must be judged according to whether the SDGs can still be implemented by 2030 under pandemic conditions. The revised DNS, under the heading 'Set the course now for a decade of action',<sup>1</sup> gives a clear assessment. In her preface to the 388-page documents, Federal Chancellor Dr Angela Merkel emphasises: 'The pandemic has further increased the need for action worldwide.' She appeals to all countries to proceed more quickly and be more ambitious in implementing the Agenda.

As the new DNS takes effect, all efforts towards implementing sustainability are to be aligned with **six Areas of Transformation** in which progress regarding meeting the SDGs is deemed particularly relevant, and each of which is linked to several SDGs and shows their interactions. Introducing these Areas of Transformation implements a suggestion from the process of dialogue in revising the DNS.

The **Areas of Transformation** and the **SDGs** to which they are linked are as follows:

1. Human well-being and capacities, social justice (SDGs 1, 3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 10).
2. Energy transition and climate action (SDGs 7 and 13)
3. Circular economy (SDGs 8, 9, and 12)
4. Sustainable building and transport (SDGs 7, 8, 9, 11, 12, and 13)
5. Sustainable agriculture and food systems (linked to SDGs 2, 3, 12, and 15)
6. A pollution-free environment (SDGs 6, 13, 14, 15, also 3, 11, and 8)

The stakeholders from civil society, academia and politics involved in the update welcomed the comprehensive revision of the DNS. To put Germany 'on track for a decade of sustainability' (**German Council for Sustainable Development**, RNE), they had noted a need for improvement in the following areas in particular:

## Relevance through coherent action and strong institutions

The fact that responsibility for the DNS lies with the Federal Chancellery – more precisely **with the Committee of State Secretaries for Sustainable Development** (StA NHK), chaired by the Chancellery's Chief of Staff – shows that in Germany, sustainable development is considered a matter of the highest importance. Despite these ideal starting conditions, the pandemic has revealed that adjustments to the strategy are inevitable. Amid the continuing Covid-19 crisis, researchers and civil society increasingly call for the post-pandemic recovery of the country to be linked to the DNS and for its governance structure to be strengthened.

For the **Sustainable Development Solutions Network** (SDSN) of researchers, it is essential, above all, for the strategy to be more firmly anchored in parliament and society. In their view, it remains the case that 'sustainability policy has so far barely been able to break through the "glass ceiling" into realpolitik.'<sup>2</sup> It is true that a sustainability week was indeed held for the first time in the Bundestag in September 2020, during which parliamentary groups positioned themselves on the subject of sustainability and in which a joint motion by the CDU/CSU and SPD, 'Sustainability is the guideline of our policies',<sup>3</sup> was adopted. But more is required to put the guiding principle of sustainability, in all its dimensions, at the centre of political action.

In the opinion of the cross-party **Parliamentary Advisory Council on Sustainable Development** (PBnE), the legislative process must be targeted. The PBnE recommends 'further developing the existing sustainability tests for parliamentary bills into a comprehensive sustainability impact assessment for legislation'<sup>4</sup> so as to have bills checked by the Supervisory Council for Sustainability or the German Bundestag at an early stage in the legislative process. Such a reform would not only increase the relevance of the DNS in the political 'engine room', it would also make it easier to enter into a dialogue with citizens about specific legislative proposals. The PBnE itself would also benefit from such a reform, given that it is, by its own admission, virtually unknown 'outside the "sustainability scene"' and would, in this way, be more present to the interested public. But this would also require expanding the competences of the Advisory Council and putting it on an equal footing with Bundestag committees.

In addition, improved co-ordination between **ministries** will be essential for transposing the principles and objectives of the DNS into the individual strategies and programmes in the departments in a coherent manner and so achieving concrete results in implementing the sustainability goals. To that end, the RNE recommends strengthening the co-ordinating role of the Federal Chancellery as the office in charge of the process, and introducing success monitoring and follow-ups in case of foreseeable failures to meet targets in the departments. It calls for consistently following up on so-called 'off-track' indicators, that is, wherever goals are far from being achieved and an urgent course correction is needed.<sup>5</sup> In the view of the **Science Platform Sustainability 2030** (wpm2030), it was an important step, therefore, that the new DNS requires all federal ministries to report on those areas to the Committee of State Secretaries and that the results will be published.<sup>6</sup> For improved visibility, it was also suggested that a State Minister for Sustainability be appointed at the Federal Chancellery.<sup>7</sup>

## Increased collaboration at all levels

In many fields of action, the pandemic acts as a fire accelerant and increases the pressure to change. In so doing, it shows the importance of involving not only all levels of government and state actors, but also civil society groups, in a successful polity, particularly in times of radical reform. This involvement, along with appropriate communication between actors, is of crucial importance for implementing the sustainability transformation called for in the 2030 Agenda and the DNS.

Under the heading 'Sustainability as a joint effort', the new DNS seeks to take account of this concern and, in addition to existing instruments of exchange and collaboration, to establish some new formats for involving societal stakeholders within a multi-actor approach. This means involving various dedicated actors in civil society – citizens, trade unions, churches and civic associations – even more in developing and implementing the DNS: their commitment is to be strengthened and made visible, and they will be encouraged to network among each other and with other stakeholders. The RNE was commissioned with expediting the design and implementation of 'sustainability as a joint effort' as adopted by the federal and state governments in the autumn of 2020.<sup>8</sup>

This adoption of 'sustainability as a joint effort' is to give more coherence to German sustainability policy given the federal organisation of the state. This has already found expression in the **Exchange of Experiences between Federal and State Governments on Sustainable Development** (BLE NE) taking place twice a year, led by the state presiding over the conference of state premiers and the Federal Chancellery. The political will to engage in a joint collaborative implementation of sustainable development was expressed in a declaration by the Federal Chancellor and the state premiers in June 2019.<sup>9</sup> Most federal states have developed their own sustainability strategies in the style of the DNS; in some states, so have municipalities. Thus, leading local-government associations are also involved in the exchange.

With the focus on resilience in rebuilding after the pandemic, the **private sector** moves into the spotlight of the discourse on sustainability. A crucial issue here is the role of companies in reducing dependence on global supply chains for systemically relevant products as well as in developing the digital infrastructure. Other concerns for the private sector will be corporate social responsibility and the social and ecological shaping of globalisation. The sometimes heated disputes about supply-chain legislation in Germany aiming to improve the protection of human rights along the value chains illustrate that, in struggling for solutions, economically viable concepts must be found so as to avoid polarisation along these matters.

**Science and research** following interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary approaches remain crucial for implementing the sustainability goals, these goals themselves being drivers of innovation and highly interconnected. A continuous exchange between research and politics is of fundamental importance for bringing about a sustainable development that meets ecological challenges with economically viable and socially balanced solutions, the more so in times of a pandemic. Thus, Indicator 3.3 on global pandemic prevention, newly added to the DNS, is a result of this exchange. It further emphasises the principle of preparedness and prevention in dealing with sustainability.

## The High-level Political Forum and the European Green Deal

The DNS sets out Germany's measures for achieving the sustainability goals on three levels. Along with measures whose effects are confined to Germany, there are measures by Germany with global effects. Added to this is supporting other countries through bilateral co-operation.

On the international level, the focus is on the annual **High-level Political Forum (HLPF) on Sustainable Development** of the United Nations (UN). Although the HLPF is deemed in need of reform with respect to the quality and comparability of the so-called 'voluntary national reviews' discussed there, it remains the only forum for monitoring countries' progress and relevant SDG topics while involving civil society and other organisations.

The wpn2030 calls for a better integration of the DNS into international and multilateral policy and a better co-ordination with the chronological sequence of critical political processes.<sup>10</sup> According to wpn2030, another important question is how the Federal Government intends to catch up with implementing the SDGs in the context of the pandemic. In July 2021, there will be an opportunity to support the UN in its 'Building Back Better' process when Germany presents its second national review to the Forum.

Ultimately, international alliances of countries would be useful for advocating meeting high sustainability standards at home and abroad and making this a priority of their international (development) co-operation. As the RNE points out, sustainability policy must not only be a guideline for relations to countries in the Global South, but must also apply to the EU as a whole and its relations to the US, China and even Russia.<sup>11</sup>

At least at the EU level, there has been some progress through the **European Green Deal**. The presentation of the guidelines of the Green Deal in December 2019 created a new political framework which 'breaks down' the SDGs of the UN's 2030 Agenda for the EU and establishes an environmentally friendly and resource-saving growth strategy with goals and action plans for Europe.

Although the focus here is on the ecological challenges and the aim to become climate-neutral by 2050, the SDSN sees an opportunity to make the Green Deal a 'unifying instrument fostering a sense of community and identity within the EU'.<sup>12</sup>

This may seem 'pie in the sky' – but the six Areas of Transformation established by the DNS more or less match the key topics of the EU Green Deal: action on climate change, the energy transition and a circular economy, a sustainable transformation of the construction and transport sectors, a pollution-free environment, and sustainable agriculture and food systems are all areas in which progress is considered particularly important both in Germany and at the level of the European Union.

## Conclusion and outlook

1. The updated DNS provides an overview of the state of progress and the collaboration between the institutions in implementing the sustainability goals in, with and by Germany. It is to be welcomed that the Federal Government – taking up a suggestion from the dialogue with stakeholders – intends to continue its exchange with relevant actors in society and research about where the strategy should be refined further. However, decisive structural changes will only be tackled in the next parliamentary term. These will include urgently increasing the political impact of the Parliamentary Advisory Council on Sustainable Development in the political decision-making process and introducing the comprehensive sustainability impact assessment for legislation it has called for. It is not least in this area that an actual **political will** to implement the sustainability transformation will have to be shown.
2. As a result of the coronavirus pandemic, in addition to the principle of preparedness, democratic participation, recognising ecological limits and human rights, a demand for **resilience** as a guiding principle of health, economic and social policy has come to the fore: the resilience of our societies is a topic recently discussed in detail by Federal Chancellor Dr Angela Merkel in her speech at the World Economic Forum Davos Dialogue.<sup>13</sup> This step at the national level corresponds to 'Building Back Better' initiative as advocated at the UN level and is to be linked with the 'Decade of Action to deliver the Sustainable Development Goals' proclaimed at the 2019 SDG summit. Realising this aspiration will require not only strong institutions and intensified public engagement with sustainability topics, but also more **visibility** at the national, European and international levels, as well as in multilateral forums, such as by the proposed creation of a State Minister for Sustainability at the Federal Chancellery or a comparable role.

3. The stakeholders involved in the update agree that the new DNS is a success but that Germany must significantly pick up the pace in meeting the sustainability goals. For that reason, it is important to drive forward integration with the objectives and policies of the European Green Deal and extend its focus to other aspects of sustainability. According to the DNS, a further national review by Germany for the HLPF is planned for 2024, building on the next update of the German Sustainability Strategy. What is certain is that commitment to sustainability is a long-term task transcending parliamentary terms which will continue to make demands on politics beyond the federal election.

- 
- 1 German Sustainability Strategy 2021, published by the Federal Government, as of: 15 December 2020, Cabinet decision of 10 March 2021,  
<https://www.bundesregierung.de/resource/blob/998006/1873516/3d3b15cd92d0261e7a0bcdc8f43b7839/2021-03-10-dns-2021-finale-langfassung-nicht-barrierefrei-data.pdf?download=1>, (last consulted on: 26/03/2021)
  - 2 *Nachhaltigkeitspolitik im Krisenmodus* [Sustainability policy in crisis mode], comments by SDSN Germany, Bonn, 04/06/2020,  
[https://www.die-gdi.de/fileadmin/user\\_upload/pdfs/dauerthemen\\_spezial/20200604\\_Nachhaltigkeitspolitik\\_im\\_Krisenmodus\\_SDSN\\_Germany.pdf](https://www.die-gdi.de/fileadmin/user_upload/pdfs/dauerthemen_spezial/20200604_Nachhaltigkeitspolitik_im_Krisenmodus_SDSN_Germany.pdf), (last consulted on: 26/03/2021)
  - 3 Motion by the parliamentary groups of CDU/CSU and SPD, *Nachhaltigkeit ist Richtschnur unserer Politik* [Sustainability is the guideline of our politics], German Bundestag Document 19/22505, 19th parliamentary term, 15/09/2020,  
<https://dip21.bundestag.de/dip21/btd/19/225/1922505.pdf>, (last consulted on: 26/03/2021)
  - 4 Parliamentary Advisory Council on Sustainable Development, position paper: *Den Nachhaltigkeitszielen im Gesetzgebungsverfahren ein angemessenes Gewicht verleihen* [Giving appropriate weight to sustainability goals in the legislative process], 19th parliamentary term, German Bundestag,  
<https://www.bundestag.de/resource/blob/704126/5200ee72f67fa1a6f17bb0e32a4d401d/positionspapier-Weiterentwicklung-PBnE-data.pdf>, pp. 2 et seqq. (last consulted on: 26/03/2021)
  - 5 *Jetzt die Weichen für ein Jahrzehnt der Nachhaltigkeit stellen!* [Get on track now for a decade of sustainability] Comments by RNE on the draft German Sustainability Strategy 2021, p. 2, [https://www.nachhaltigkeitsrat.de/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/20201029\\_RNE\\_Stellungnahme\\_zur\\_Weiterentwicklung\\_der\\_Deutschen\\_Nachhaltigkeitsstrategie\\_inkl\\_Anlage.pdf](https://www.nachhaltigkeitsrat.de/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/20201029_RNE_Stellungnahme_zur_Weiterentwicklung_der_Deutschen_Nachhaltigkeitsstrategie_inkl_Anlage.pdf) (last consulted on: 26/03/2021)
  - 6 wpn2030, Statement on the updated German Sustainability Strategy, 12/03/2021, <https://www.wpn2030.de/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Statement-DNS2021.pdf> (last consulted on: 26/03/2021)
  - 7 wpn2030 - Science Platform Sustainability 2030 (2020). *Nachhaltig aus der Corona-Krise! Impulse aus der Arbeit der Wissenschaftsplattform Nachhaltigkeit 2030 zur Stärkung deutscher Nachhaltigkeitspolitik* [Exiting the coronavirus crisis sustainably: ideas for strengthening German sustainability policy from the work of Science Platform Sustainability 2030] - IASS Brochure, [https://publications.iass-potsdam.de/pubman/item/item\\_6000421](https://publications.iass-potsdam.de/pubman/item/item_6000421), p. 15 (last consulted on: 26/03/2021)
  - 8 Meeting of the Chief of Staff of the Federal Chancellery with the chiefs of staff of the state chancelleries on 12 November 2020, Item 6: Update of the German Sustainability Strategy, decision of 12 November 2020,  
<https://www.bundesregierung.de/resource/blob/975274/1811660/eec5656c8ec32c2142a56b95b24b7024/2020-11-16-chefbk-beschluss-dns-data.pdf?download=1> (last consulted on: 24/03/2021)
  - 9 *Gemeinsam für eine nachhaltige Entwicklung – Bund und Länder erklären ihre Verantwortung für eine gute Zukunft* [Together for sustainable development – Federal and state governments declare their responsibility for a good future], press statement by the Federal Government, 6 June 2019, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/aktuelles/pressemitteilungen/gemeinsam-fuer-eine-nachhaltige-entwicklung-bund-und-laender-erklaeren-ihre-verantwortung-fuer-eine-gute-zukunft-1635460> (last consulted on: 24/03/2021)
  - 10 wpn2030 - Science Platform Sustainability 2030 (2020). *Nachhaltig aus der Corona-Krise! Impulse aus der Arbeit der Wissenschaftsplattform Nachhaltigkeit 2030 zur Stärkung deutscher Nachhaltigkeitspolitik* [Exiting the coronavirus crisis sustainably: ideas for strengthening German sustainability policy from the work of Science Platform Sustainability 2030] - IASS Brochure, [https://publications.iass-potsdam.de/pubman/item/item\\_6000421](https://publications.iass-potsdam.de/pubman/item/item_6000421), p. 13 (last consulted on: 26/03/2021)

- <sup>11</sup> *Jetzt die Weichen für ein Jahrzehnt der Nachhaltigkeit stellen!* [Get on track now for a decade of sustainability] Comments by RNE on the draft German Sustainability Strategy 2021, see chapter *Kohärenz stärken* [Strengthening coherence], [https://www.nachhaltigkeitsrat.de/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/20201029\\_RNE\\_Stellungnahme\\_zur>Weiterentwicklung\\_der\\_Deutschen\\_Nachhaltigkeitsstrategie\\_inkl\\_Anlage.pdf](https://www.nachhaltigkeitsrat.de/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/20201029_RNE_Stellungnahme_zur>Weiterentwicklung_der_Deutschen_Nachhaltigkeitsstrategie_inkl_Anlage.pdf) (last consulted on: 26/03/2021)
- <sup>12</sup> Sustainable Development Solutions Network Germany, comments: Five proposals for updating the structure of the German Sustainability Strategy, Bonn, 03/03/2020, p. 2, [https://www.die-gdi.de/fileadmin/user\\_upload/pdfs/dauerthemen\\_spezial/20200303\\_StN\\_DNS\\_SDSN\\_Germany\\_03.03.2020.pdf](https://www.die-gdi.de/fileadmin/user_upload/pdfs/dauerthemen_spezial/20200303_StN_DNS_SDSN_Germany_03.03.2020.pdf), (last consulted on: 26/03/2021)
- <sup>13</sup> Remarks by Federal Chancellor Dr Angela Merkel on the occasion of the World Economic Forum Davos Dialogue on 26 January 2021 (video conference), published by the Federal Government, [https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/aktuelles/rede-von-bundeschkanzlerin-merkel-anlaesslich-des-davos-dialogs-des-world-economic-forum-am-26-januar-2021-videokonferenz--\\_1844594.pdf](https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/aktuelles/rede-von-bundeschkanzlerin-merkel-anlaesslich-des-davos-dialogs-des-world-economic-forum-am-26-januar-2021-videokonferenz--_1844594.pdf) (last consulted on: 24/03/2021)



## Imprint

### About the authors

Sabina Wölkner is head of the Agenda 2030 department in Analysis and Consulting of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung.

Gisela Elsner is responsible for Global Sustainability in the Agenda 2030 department.

#### **Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V.**

##### **Sabina Wölkner**

Head of department  
Agenda 2030  
Analysis and Consulting

T +49 30 26 996-3522  
[sabina.woelkner@kas.de](mailto:sabina.woelkner@kas.de)

##### **Gisela Elsner**

Policy Advisor Global Sustainability  
Agenda 2030  
Analysis and Consulting

T +49 30 26 996-3759  
[gisela.elsner@kas.de](mailto:gisela.elsner@kas.de)

This publication by Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V. is for information only. It must not be used for electoral campaigning by parties or campaigners or canvassers. This applies to federal, state and local elections as well as European Parliament elections.



The text of this work is licensed under the 'Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International' (CC BY-SA 4.0) licence (available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>)