

Where did the ambition go?



German NGO Forum on
Environment and Development

Since its last VNR in 2016, Germany has lost track of SDG implementation

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The 2021 German VNR report starts with big affirmations. A quote by Chancellor Angela Merkel promises accelerated action towards more sustainability. The report confirms the SDGs as a leading principle for German politics. The German VNR shows that the government recognizes the relevance of the SDGs in creating a more just, healthy and sustainable world. There is no knowledge gap. But unfortunately, there is an implementation gap.

Internationally, Germany is considered a champion for sustainability. This might have been the case for the SDG negotiations and the first years of their implementation. Germany contributed and supported much of the ambitious language in the SDGs, was one of the first movers in SDG reporting at the HLPF with its 2016 VNR, and in 2015 even joined a High Level Group of nine countries for fast and progressive SDG implementation. Domestically, in recent years Germany added important new elements to its sustainability governance architecture. Notably, it restructured the German Sustainable Development Strategy (GSDS) around the SDGs, every ministry has appointed an SDG-coordinator, and a new dialogue group on the State Secretaries' Committee for Sustainable Development was established. Unfortunately, these developments have not lead to more sustainable policies. Much of the promising aspirations of the early SDGs years are now lost. Instead of accelerated action, we see decelerating relevance.

We need an accelerated actions SDG strategy now!

The 2020/2021 revision of the GSDS serves as the basis for Germany's 2021 VNR. Yet it is important to note, that the strategy has received a great deal of criticism by civil society. This includes the fact that it tends to list selected policies that are going well in great detail, but inadequately deals with negative effects of unsustainable policies. In order to have an impact on decision-making, a proper sustainability strategy should reflect on problems, voice criticism, find solutions, follow-up on implementation and come up with consequences for non-compliance. The GSDS is not a tool for any of this. Furthermore, of the 75 indicators in the GSDS, only about half cater to the 247 international SDG indicators. While there might be relevance in choosing our own national indicators and limiting the number, the GSDS cannot be called an SDG implementation strategy, as it simply does not reflect most of the SDG targets and indicators at all. Therefore, 6 years after the SDG adoption Germany still has no proper SDG implementation strategy or plan. Consequently, civil society has been calling for a new "Accelerated Actions SDG Strategy" with binding goals and targets!

We need transformation now!

The German VNR in line with the GSDS mentions **six main areas of transformation**: Wellbeing and Social Justice; Climate and Energy, Circular Economy, Building and Transport; Agriculture and Food Systems; and Health. Progress in these areas is much needed, as these sectors have been missing progressive policies since the adoption of the SDGs and the last German VNR. While we welcome that the government specifically highlights the need for transformation in these areas, the VNR only touches upon them and does not sufficiently acknowledge their problems and need for solutions. Some examples:

Germany's export-oriented industrial agriculture has not only lead to biodiversity loss, water pollution, and soil degradation in many areas, but also contributed to a concentration of agriculture in the hands of a few huge farms, pushing small-scale farmers out of business in Germany as well as worldwide. As an example: Of the 33 million tons of milk produced in Germany in 2019, 50% were exported to the EU or internationally. A quantity that can only be generated by importing enormous amounts of animal fodder from South America and other regions. The German agricultural model thus contributes to deforestation and climate change in the Global South. Furthermore, it has also led to a dramatic decrease of farms in the country itself. While the overall size of area used by agriculture in Germany has remained the same with about 16.6 Million Hectares, in the last 10 years an average of 3560 farms have closed for good – per year! These developments have only increased in speed in the last years, with little hope resting on the EU-GAP reforms. All the while Germany proclaimed at the 2016 VNR to increase organic

farming to 20% by 2020, yet we have still only reached 9.6% in 2020. The 20%-target has been moved to 2030 and even the 2021 VNR itself suggests that in line with current trends this target will not be reached.

As for the **energy sector**, the last years have seen the same powerful bottom-up climate protest movements as the rest of the world. Yet, Germany has lost its place in the line of champions for a progressive energy transition. It lags behind the EU targets in CO₂ reduction and an actual coal power plant went on the grid in 2020. Its goal to reach 65% renewable energies by 2030 is not only less than needed in order to reach the Paris Agreement, but will most likely not be achieved either, as the trajectory hints at only 49% by 2030. The German energy transition has always been mainly community-led with most of the systems run by citizens, cooperatives or public service providers. Yet in recent years, there have been ever new obstacles for a community-led roll-out of renewable energies. It is good to see that the VNR refers to the latest decision by the German Federal Court ruling that the 2019 climate protection act is in part unconstitutional. Once again, the highest court had to push the German government for more sustainable policies.

On **circular economy**, the VNR features an important sentence: "Growth needs to be decoupled from resource use." However, this is not reflected in German policies at all. Even compared to Germany's own coalition government agreement of 2018, the renewed Resource Strategy of 2020 falls behind in terms of human rights in supply chains as well as binding environmental and human rights standards in EU trade policy. Security of supply for the German industry is still the main driver behind German resource policies, and the German industry is the fifth largest consumer of metal resources worldwide. The country's waste production is yet another example of unsustainable practices that keep getting worse. Germany produced 417 million tons of waste in 2018, each German uses 16,000 kg of resources annually, of that only 12% from recycled materials. We need to drastically change this resource waste, stop exporting our trash to the Global South and introduce ambitious circular economy and reduction (sufficiency) policies.

Finally, when it comes to **social justice, wellbeing and health**, Germany's labour market participation is high and real wages have increased over the last years. Until the beginning of the COVID-pandemic, unemployment went down, and during the pandemic, governmental supported short-time work has been an important social and economic factor. Yet, poverty numbers have been going up in recent years as economic growth and increased wealth does not benefit society as a whole. 15.9 % of Germans are at risk of poverty, especially vulnerable groups and people working in low-wage jobs. Germany is one of the richest countries in the world. It is unfathomable why people are living in poverty in Germany at all. COVID-19 has also shown how the privatization of care and health has taken its toll: Hospitals are closing, especially in rural areas, compared to other OECD countries nurses have to care for a much higher number of patients, and the lack of nursing staff lies between 63,000 to 120,000.

We need a Sustainable, Green and Inclusive Recovery

The COVID-19 pandemic has uncovered the weaknesses of our globalized economic system, its destructive effects on the environment and people, and the lack of social justice worldwide. Billions of euros in recovery funds are putting our economies on pathways that will shape our societies for decades. These recovery packages must deliver a fairer, safer, greener and healthier future for all with the SDGs as a guiding principle. Yet, the recovery plans of the German government and the European Commission have huge gaps in this regard. For a sustainable, green and inclusive recovery, we need a waiver of patent rights for COVID-19 vaccines, structural and financial improvements of our social system and an economy linked to socially and ecologically transformative policies.

Germany has to do better!

We welcome the chance to highlight our reflections on the VNR in this annex. However, we would have expected a much more participatory process. This is especially true for the VNR report itself, which we could only comment on shortly before its finalization without much real influence on the text. In our opinion, this falls behind best practices from other countries, for instance Austria, Finland and Norway, that have included civil society in the writing process or have added CSO analysis for each SDG within the VNR report itself. We consider the VNR an important stepping-stone in preparing a strong sustainability process for the next government. With federal and several state elections coming up, the SDGs need to receive much higher priority in the next government.