



Deutsches Komitee für
Nachhaltigkeitsforschung
in Future Earth

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How do cities contribute to the implementation of the Paris Agreement & the SDGs? A co-design workshop on science-practice cooperation

The German Committee Future Earth currently runs two activities that both address the challenges of implementing Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in cities and bringing science, policy and practice closer - namely the co-design project group SDGs and Cities and the working group Urban Sustainability Transformations.

Taking advantage of UNFCCC's COP 23, which was held in Bonn, Germany, the groups organized a side-event on 15 November 2017 in collaboration with the Future Earth Secretariat, in particular the Urban Knowledge-Action Network (KAN). The side-event consisted of a public event in the morning and a co-design stakeholder workshop in the afternoon.

The aim of the side-event was to discuss the implementation process of the SDGs and the Paris Agreement in a range of cities and municipalities and to identify related research gaps. The overarching question was what kind of urban knowledge and research is needed to effectively implement the SDGs.

The public event was split into three parts: introductory talks, a key note speech and a panel discussion. The introductory talks were delivered by Kerstin Krellenberg and Florian Koch (Helmholtz Centre for Environmental Research - UFZ, Leipzig), Barbara Malburg-Graf (German Committee Future Earth, DKN) and Thorsten Kiefer (Future Earth Paris Hub). Key note speaker Marie-Alexandra Kurth (Future Earth Urban Knowledge-Action Network/Cities Alliance, Brussels) gave a global perspective on achieving urban sustainability, with references to many African cities. In the panel session, mayors and deputy mayors from the Cities of Bonn, Stuttgart and Augsburg, namely Ashok Sridharan, Peter Pätzold and Rainer Erben as well as Cornelia Rösler from the German Institute of Urban Affairs (DIFU), discussed sustainable urban development projects and the implementation of the SDGs in cities.

The discussion with the three mayors highlighted the fact that, although considerable progress has been made in their respective cities towards implementing sustainable development in cities (e.g. the transformation of the municipalities public transport system on e-mobility), obstacles still exist, and are often related to the behavioral inertia of administrations and citizens. Cornelia Rösler reaffirmed this while discussing the challenges to implementing transformational projects over time. Furthermore, she highlighted the challenges of implementing Local Agenda 21 and emphasized the need to learn from these processes.

Overall, there was consensus that small-scale measures, which seem to have only a limited immediate effect, may trigger a broader shift towards more profound sustainability in cities. The panel participants further agreed that the SDGs and the Paris Agreement can help attract political attention to sustainability. However, they also noted that the SDGs are still perceived more as a general framework or guidelines than as a concrete action program for cities. Nevertheless, they bear the potential to foster urban sustainability transformations.



Fotos: DKN Future Earth

The participants at the workshop in the afternoon included representatives from German cities and municipalities, planning authorities, ministries, research and planning companies. The workshop revolved around their experiences of SDG implementation and the kind of urban research needed to further support the implementation. Furthermore, the hypotheses developed by the DKN working group Urban Sustainability Transformations on urban research and the SDGs, such as that other forms of research funding and a deeper mutual understanding between science and practice are needed in order to foster sustainability transformations were discussed. In doing so, the hypotheses produced by the research community were “practice checked” by the stakeholders.

Based on their practical experiences, the ten workshop participants mentioned an array of different, partly interrelated factors which drive SDG implementation; 1) political will, 2) adequate municipal administration structure which allows integration or action across departments, and 3) engagement of local communities in concrete sustainability projects. Furthermore, public participation was also considered crucial for sustainability transformation, even though the simultaneous involvement of all population groups can complicate implementation processes. To foster synergies and facilitate the implementation of the SDGs, collaboration with existing sustainability activities is needed at the urban level, such as climate protection or the still ongoing Local Agenda 21 processes; and networks to exchange ideas and best practices on urban sustainability are crucial. Although sustainability was considered to be of high importance for all institutions involved, only a few directly referred to the SDGs, with the majority having defined their own sustainability targets.

Participants differed in their opinion of what knowledge is needed to successfully implement the SDGs. While some flagged specific research gaps (e.g. the degree to which soils in our cities are sealed), others felt that there was no longer any thematic research gaps, but that more knowledge on the implementation of the SDGs is required. Knowledge of the interdependencies between different sustainability targets and associated knowledge on interlinked processes is also lacking, such as how climate protection can be integrated in municipal land-use planning. The discussion also highlighted the fact that scientific research on the urban dimension of the SDGs focuses predominantly on big

cities. However, the German settlement structure consists mainly of small to middle-sized towns. The specifics of these smaller-scale urban areas should be also considered in urban SDG research.



Fotos: DKN Future Earth

Further steps

The public discussion and the stakeholder workshop revealed the potential for a co-design process to develop a research agenda in support of the practical implementation of SDGs. It became clear that the emerging challenge of how to implement SDGs at the local level can only be addressed through insights from practice, research and through joint efforts. We therefore plan to follow up by organizing further discussions between scientists and practitioners in a joint effort of the working group Urban Sustainability Transformations and the co-design project group SDGs and Cities to establish an agenda for urban research on the SDGs.

Text: DKN Working Group Urban sustainability transformations and Co-Design Group SDGs and Cities
(spokespersons Florian Koch and Kerstin Krellenberg, in cooperation with Thorsten Kiefer and Barbara Malburg-Graf)

Links and further reading

DKN Future Earth AG Urban sustainability transformations. <http://www.dkn-future-earth.org/community/arbeitsgruppen/arbeitsgruppen/urbane-nachhaltigkeitstransformationen.html>
DKN Future Earth Co-Design project group SDGs and cities. <http://www.dkn-future-earth.org/community/co-design-projektgruppen/co-design-projektgruppen/sdgs-auf-urbaner-ebene.htmlh>

- Hartl, J. & Spohr, G. (2018): Am Rande der Weltklimakonferenz. Umsetzung der Pariser Klimaziele und der Sustainable Development Goals in Deutschland. Planerin 1/2018
- Koch, F. & Krellenberg, K. (2017): Bessere Städte für eine bessere Welt? Die Pariser Klimaschutzziele und die SDGs aus urbaner Perspektive. <https://scilogs.spektrum.de/umweltforsch/bessere-staedte-fuer-eine-bessere-welt-die-pariser-klimaschutzziele-und-die-sdgs-aus-urbaner-perspektive/>
- Koch, F., Roitman, S. & David, M. (2017): A transformative turn in urban studies? Three ideas on how research on sustainable cities can contribute to the SDGs and the New Urban Agenda <https://transformationstosustainability.org/magazine/transformative-turn-urban-studies-three-ideas-research-sustainable-cities-can-contribute-sdgs-new-urban-agenda/>