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Summary: The Sustainable Development Goals: Transform or perish?

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) just celebrated their first birthday. This UN agreement illustrates in 17 goals and 169 targets how the world should transform until 2030. As states who adopted the agenda, we committed ourselves to striving after these – quite ambitious – goals. What remained one year after the initial enthusiasm of having reached an agreement that holds us all to account, developed and developing countries? Have the SDGs even started to arrive in society, politics, science and education?

We explored how our science at BOKU can contribute to attaining the SDGs through research and through higher education.

THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS - A MANDATE TO US ALL

The evening's moderator **Georg Gratzner**, a forest ecologist at BOKU and longstanding partner of the Centre for Development Research, set the stage by reminding the audience that the SDGs do not only aim at developing countries: their objectives equally apply to the so-called developed countries in the global North.

NON-LEGALLY BINDING AGREEMENTS CAN STILL BE SURPRISINGLY EFFECTIVE

The SDGs might sound very appealing and ambitious – but they are not legally binding. There will be no sanctions if states fail to achieve the targets that they have set themselves. Do the SDGs even stand a chance of being attained under these circumstances?

In her talk, political scientist **Helga Pülzl** from BOKU's Institute of Forest, Environmental and Natural Resource Policy Institute, compared legally binding and non-legally binding agreements from the field of forest policy. She illustrated that despite the absence of sanctions non-legally binding agreements are often even better implemented than legally binding ones.

S-D-WHAT?

How does official Austria plan to implement the SDGs? To answer this question, students of the course "Sustainable land use in developing countries" interviewed different stakeholders (ministries, chancellery and NGOs). Snapshots from these interviews were presented as a short film accessible either at www.cdr.boku.ac.at or at



Panelists, interviewees of the snapshots and speaker with the audience in the Festsaal (f.l.t.r. Norbert Feldhofer, Ambassador Sylvia Meier-Kajbic, Helga Pülzl, Evi Frei, Karolina Begusch-Pfefferkorn, Hubert Dürrstein, Andreas Melcher, and Sebastian Postl).



The transformative character of the SDGs should not be belittled by chopping them up into small pieces, stressed Georg Gratzner.



Almost all international agreements concern the environment, said Helga Pülzl. Only few are legally binding and include severe sanctions.

<https://youtu.be/sXS98CqEgtA>.

Evi Frei, from the Federal Ministry of Science, Research and Economy, insisted that the SDGs have, in fact, arrived in Austrian policy making, as thriving after them has been integrated into the performance agreements between the ministry and universities.

SCIENCE AND RESEARCH SHOULD PROVIDE THE SOLID GROUNDS FOR INFORMED POLICY DECISIONS

How shall we implement the SDGs and evaluate our efforts? Especially in those cases, where different SDGs might seem to mutually exclude each other: how can we end hunger (SDG #1), while protecting life on land, below water, as well as the climate (SDGs #15, #14, and #13, respectively)? **Karolina Begusch-Pfefferkorn**, head of the unit *Ecology, Natural Resources, and Geological Survey of Austria* at the Federal Ministry of Science, Research and Economy, proposed to use the adoption of the SDGs as a window of opportunity to promote research on sustainable development.

She further stressed the need to encourage the scientific community to support knowledge production, and the development of techniques and indicators for monitoring and evaluation, but also for dealing with trade-offs between different SDGs.

However, the discussion also showed one of the major drawbacks of the current approach as there are little to no additional financial resources for research on the SDGs.

"THINK BIG" OR "SMALL IS BEAUTIFUL"?

Begusch-Pfefferkorn and **Norbert Feldhofer** from the Federal Chancellery, both mentioned the mainstreaming approach according to which the Austrian institutions investigate all their activities in a stock-taking exercise and evaluate which might already be line with the requirements of attaining the SDGs. This approach has often been criticised for fear of over-simplification and of losing the transformative character of the SDGs for providing a new narrative of intergenerational justice and fairness, but can also be seen as a means to reduce their sometimes seemingly overwhelming complexity.

WE NEED TRANSLATORS

Considering the often complex language of international agreements that have undergone several rounds of negotiation, Helga Pülzl suggested that translators might be needed; as nice as the pictograms (see picture on page 1, upper left corner) are, they might not be sufficient to transmit all the underlying messages. On the other hand, 17 goals constitute a large agenda that might need prioritizing of some goals in order to facilitate discussion of trade-offs between different SDGs.

REDUCING COMPLEXITY: LIGHT INTO DARKNESS

In this context, Begusch-Pfefferkorn stressed the important role of science in informing policy decisions. Research at BOKU is uniquely suited to address the SDGs, said **Hubert Dürrstein** from the Institute of



The SDGs are complex objectives, said Karolina Begusch-Pfefferkorn, we need scientists to help us balancing trade-offs.



Why is there so little coherence among the SDGs, asked professor Blum. The answer he received was: because they have been developed by politicians, not by scientists.



Achieving policy coherence is one of the biggest challenges, argued Norbert Feldhofer.



Interdisciplinary research is one of the strengths of BOKU, affirmed Hubert Dürrstein.

Forest Engineering, former rector and representative of the current rectorate in the panel discussion.

Not only does BOKU assemble scientists from many different and often complementary fields of expertise, preparing the ground for interdisciplinary research. The university also places emphasis on sustainability: the first sustainability report dates back to 2006, and rendering the university's activities more sustainable - ecologically, socially and economically sound – has been an issue ever since.

This resonates with Evi Frei's introductory plea, in which she reminded the audience of a university's responsibility for society and its challenges.

THERE IS NO PLAN B, BECAUSE THERE IS NO PLANET B

With this famous quote from then UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon, **Andreas Melcher** (Institute of Hydrobiology and Aquatic Ecosystem Management) underlined the utmost importance of achieving the SDGs.

Judging from his experience, he considers leaving one's own comfort zone inevitable: "it's easy to do research in the global North", Melcher said, but he also invited everybody to "go out, go to the South". Melcher further argues for extensive integration of project partners from the global South to form true partnerships in research and higher education.

QUESTIONS REMAIN

Arguably the most questioned SDG on that evening was SDG #8 whose topic is decent work and economic growth. The audience raised the question whether we really need economic growth, or whether we should rethink this paradigm, especially from the perspective of the global North.

Universities will be required through their performance agreements to take the SDGs into account. The need for in-depth analysis of expected trade-offs between goals was undisputed. However, whether additional resources should be allocated or whether scientist can make do with existing funds was a subject of hot debate during the evening's discussion. Nevertheless, there is no way round the SDGs, or as Georg Gratzner put it: we do not get more funds for research into sustainable development, but will our funds be cut, if we fail to respond to the research demand on the implementation of the SDGs? His question remains to be answered.

Reminiscent of the universal validity of the SDGs for all countries, Helga Pülzl finally stressed that implementation and evaluation must be transparent and include all actors, be they governmental or private, companies or educational institutions.



When I wrote my master thesis, my supervisor said, "What has land use to do with fish habitat? – But it's ok, it's *your* thesis, keep the chapter", Andreas Melcher illustrated how systems thinking took time to evolve.



The newly renovated Festsaal of the Gregor-Mendel-Haus quickly filled up for the discussion on the SDGs.

University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences

Centre for Development Research
Peter Jordan Straße 82
1190 Vienna

www.cdr.boku.ac.at
cdr@boku.ac.at
www.facebook.com/CentreforDevelopmentResearch

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Text: Rosana Kral
Photos: Axel Mentler, Florian Peloschek
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Find the snapshots on the SDGs on the CDR homepage or on youtube: <https://youtu.be/sXS98CqEgtA>