



EXPLORING PEER LEARNING TO SUPPORT THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE 2030 AGENDA FOR SD

Peer Learning as a tool for SD policymaking

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Introduction

In the context of the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), this ESDN Quarterly Report focuses on the topic of peer learning applied in policy-making, and how it is related to practices of governance *for* sustainable development. In this context, the report aims to support national policy-makers in their challenging job of implementing the 2030 Agenda. In addition, the ESDN is aiming to establish a peer learning mechanism for national policy-makers who are responsible for the 2030 Agenda/SDG implementation and the stakeholders involved in this process. One important cornerstone of this mechanism will be the yearly ESDN Peer Learning Platform (the first one in autumn 2016) that will offer policy-makers from all European countries and selected stakeholders the chance to exchange experiences and learn from implementation practice.

We see ‘peer learning’ as an umbrella concept that encompasses a number of different mechanisms or instruments that support ‘learning’ from and with peers with regard to policies, in our case related to sustainable development.

But, what exactly is a ‘peer’? Who are the peers in this context? Why is ‘peer learning’ key to support the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for SD? And is peer learning connected to policy learning?

We explore these and many other questions throughout this report, which has the following structure: Chapter 1 defines peer learning in the context of policies for sustainable development and, more specifically, in the context of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Chapter 2 provides an overview of practical approaches of peer learning and peer review. Firstly, the international level is explored through an overview of UN and OECD practices that relate to reviews potentially leading to peer learning. Secondly, we present the experiences made in Europe, especially in relation to peer reviews of National Sustainable Development Strategies that several European countries have voluntarily undertaken. We particularly focus on the German experience as the only country in Europe that has launched a Peer Review of its SD Strategy twice, in 2009 and 2013. Chapter 3 concludes and provides several reflections on the topic.

This ESDN Quarterly Report is also one of the background documents for the 14th ESDN Workshop on Peer Learning.

Chapter 1: Defining 'Peer Learning' in SD policy-making

Chapter 1 explores the concept of 'peer learning' by linking it and defining it in the context of policy-making for sustainable development and, more specifically, in the context of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The main intention is, therefore, to understand how this particular type of learning can be related to policy learning in the effort to support the continuous development and improvement of those policies that European countries are implementing towards sustainable development. Several questions will be addressed in this first chapter: Who are the 'peers' in this context? How can 'peers' contribute to policy learning? How can 'peer learning' support policy-makers? To what extent does 'peer learning' enhance governance *for* SD?

1.1 PEER LEARNING: DEFINITION AND APPROACHES

The concept of peer learning is mostly used in education and pedagogy, where the longest established and most intensively researched forms of peer learning have been *peer tutoring* and *cooperative learning*¹. For our purposes, we apply the concept of peer learning to policy-making and policy learning. More specifically, we explore peer learning in the context of policies for sustainable development and, therefore, on the 2030 Agenda for SD and the SDGs.

We see **'peer learning' as an umbrella concept that encompasses a number of different mechanisms or instruments that support 'learning' from and with peers with regard to sustainable development.** What we are interested in, is the effect of such mechanisms or instruments to produce learning effects.

According to Scott et al. (2016), **peer learning** – also known as *peer-to-peer learning* – is **learning from and with the learner's peers**. What is interesting here is that the learning relationship is set between equals, where, therefore, a different form of learning is implied. In fact, other forms of learning comprise unequal relations between the teacher and the learner (Scott et al., 2016, p.49). We want to stress that peer learning is a 'two-way, reciprocal learning activity', in which learning should be "mutually beneficial and involve the sharing of knowledge, ideas and experience between the participants" (Boud et al., 2002, p.3). Peers learn extensively by explaining their ideas to others, working collaboratively with others, giving and receiving feedback, and evaluating their own learning.

In peer learning, the peers simultaneously learn from other peers, and contribute to other peers' learning by **sharing knowledge, ideas and experiences**. Such learning is **based on common experiences that allow for 'equal' contributions**. Peers are equal, and have a similar reference system. There is no teacher on a pedestal in this relationship, and, therefore, learning is both formal and informal at the same time. A sense of trust is created, and peers feel that they are pursuing a common goal.

¹ Peer tutoring is characterised by specific role-taking as tutor or tutee, whilst, cooperative learning is perceived as more than "working together", namely working towards a specific shared goal, and involves goals, tasks, resources, and roles.

Benefits of peer learning can, therefore, be manifold² ³. Research⁴ indicates that *peer learning activities typically result in*: (a) a team-building spirit and more supportive relationships; (b) greater psychological well-being, social competence, communication skills and self-esteem; and (c) higher achievement and greater productivity in terms of enhanced learning outcomes. In many ways, *exchange and learning from, through and with peers can*:

- Be perceived as a credible source of help;
- Empower participants to help themselves;
- Provide a means of transferring knowledge;
- Be perceived as a safer, non-judgmental way for learning;
- Provide ongoing contact for all participants;
- Provide ongoing opportunities for development;
- Expose to diverse perspectives, and increase their understanding of them;
- Boost self-reflection, self-esteem and self-confidence; and
- Be cost-effective.

1.2 PEER LEARNING AND POLICY LEARNING

Before we go on explain peer learning a bit more in detail, it is worth spending a short while to reflect on **policy learning** in general. Policy learning generally refers to a structured and conscious process of exchange on experiences and routines of policy processes, and, sometimes, in a 'change of thinking' about specific policy issues (Kemp and Weehuizen, 2005). In the EU context, policy learning has become prominent as part of the *Open Method of Coordination (OMC)*, the learning-based mode of governance launched by the Lisbon European Council in 2000. 'Mutual learning processes' have been identified as important part of the OMC. Moreover, there are *different aspects of learning*:

- **Who is learning?** Usually, domestic politicians and civil servants are the main actors. However, as policy is influenced and shaped by other actors as well, this group can be expanded depending on the policy issue at stake;
- **Why are policy actors interested in learning?** As much depends in policy-making on past and current policy performance, there is a genuine incentive to learn about how to improve, become more effective and efficient (Radaelli, 2008);
- **What is the specific area of learning?** There are three areas in the policy world where learning can take place: on political processes (*politics*), on institution structures (*policy*), and on policy content (*policy*) (Lange et al., 2013);
- **How to learn?** One can learn, of course, from one's own past, innovation and success in public policy-making. But one can also learn when looking at the experiences of others, which can be very efficient because one does not have to wait for fiascos at home to amend processes, structures and/or content. And one can also learn by activating learning processes

² We draw here from the "My-Peer Toolkit" developed by the Western Australian Centre for Health Promotion Research at Curtin University in Perth, Western Australia: please refer to <http://mypeer.org.au/about/>.

³ <http://www.itworx.education/collaborative-learning-vs-peer-to-peer-learning/>

⁴ <http://www.cdnl.nus.edu.sg/success/sl37.htm>

via organizational networks – perhaps there are solutions to policy challenges somewhere in the network (Radaelli, 2008).

In his analysis of OECD peer reviews, Lethonen (2008) argues that learning can help “bring about the needed changes in power structures, by empowering key change agents and shaping problem conceptualizations” (p.248). In particular, he focuses on the work of Hezri and Dovers (2006) and their conceptual and practical distinction made on four different types of learning. Although developed in the context of indicator-use outcomes, these four **‘learning’ types** are useful as they consider decision-making issues:

- **Instrumental learning** is the closest to decision-making: this happens when policy elites, engaged in policy formulation and implementation, learn about the viability of policy interventions;
- **Governmental learning** is when state officials responsible for the design and maintenance of policy processes learn about the efficacy of organizational structures and related policy processes;
- **Social learning** considers those policy communities both within and outside government that are not necessarily directly involved in policy processes: learning happens further away from the decision-making processes and tends to change problem conceptualizations, norms and values;
- **Political learning** is the type furthest away from decision-making, and involves coalitions of policy advocates wishing to influence the policy agenda and outcomes. These actors learn about the political feasibility of specific ideas and more sophisticated methods of advocacy. It may also involve change of membership of the policy coalition.

In our context, this needs to be reflected in terms of peer learning in general, and in connection to what kind of learning the ‘peers’ can facilitate and enhance. Similarly, a reflection is needed with respect to the ways or tools in which those four types of learning can be supported by ‘peer learning’.

1.3 DEFINITION OF ‘PEERS’ IN THE CONTEXT OF SD POLICYMAKING

But what exactly is a ‘peer’?

In general, a **peer** can be described as an *individual who is of equal standing with another one that belongs to the same societal group and is sharing similar characteristics* (e.g. position, responsibility, etc.)⁵. In this report, we refer to peers as **policy-makers working on SD policy issues being peers of other policy-makers working on the same topic**. There is an annotation to make here at this point, which tries to expand our understanding of policy-making, especially with respect to SD policies that are holistic and focused on establishing coherence and concentrate in a systemic way on the inter-linkages between the economy, the environment, and the social dimension of development. This is particularly holds true in a globalised world, in which policies produce intended – or unintended – effects, not only domestically, but also in neighbouring countries as much as internationally (i.e. trade

⁵ <http://mypeer.org.au/planning/what-are-peer-based-programs/what-is-a-peer/>

exchange, mining, discharge of chemicals, fishing, etc.). Similarly, in our complex reality, policies intended in one sector may generate intended – or unintended – effects in closer or more distant, and seemingly unrelated sectors. This is even more apparent when we think about addressing and implementing policies towards the 2030 Agenda for SD and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

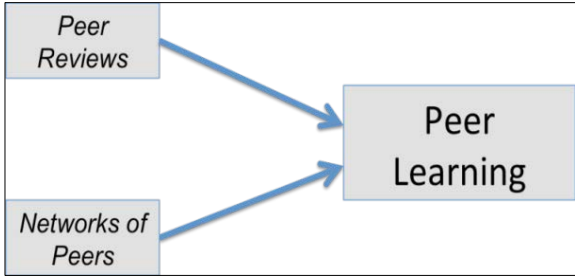
This is to say that policy-makers are dealing with a very complex challenge. Moreover, they also need to relate to the public, to politics, and to a variety of stakeholders that want to be heard and take part in decision-making and, through their knowledge and skills, ultimately contribute to the policy design and delivery process. Nevertheless, stakeholders also contribute in one way or another to influence policies. Take, for instance, the example of a business decision, i.e. an investment decision in the infrastructure sector: It will have an impact on the environment, on transport, on the life of those employed builders and their families, and so on. Consequently, we are inclined to include in our definition of ‘peers’ also those stakeholders or experts that work in and around SD and, therefore, are to be included in the group of actors that influence SD policies. This very much relates to the **change from ‘government to governance’**. The governance concept has emerged as response to the growing awareness that governments are no longer the only relevant actors when it comes to the management of societal issues. It has become evident that governance is increasingly a shared responsibility of state, market and civil society (Lange et al., 2013). Therefore, the question emerges, is peer learning in SD possible only for and with policy-makers, or is the inclusion of other actors responsible for implementation also necessary?

Our definition of peers naturally should, therefore, be expanded to **include other actors and stakeholders influencing SD policies**: thus, policy-makers working on SD issues being peers of other policymakers working on SD issues, and stakeholders, such as representatives from business, academia, and civil society, all working and dealing with SD.

1.4 PEER LEARNING AS OUTCOME OF PEER REVIEWS AND NETWORKS OF PEERS

Among several potential tools, we see two mechanisms that could mainly support peer learning in our context. Firstly, we relate to the widely known experiences of **Peer Reviews** (e.g. OECD). Secondly, the **set-up of a network of peers** that is, in our experience, a good example to support peer learning (see for instance the more than decennial experience of the ESDN), together with the use of **on-site meetings and events**, in which face-to-face interactions among peers are facilitated, and where exchange can happen more easily, both formally and informally.

Fig.1.1 Peer Learning as outcome



Source: Own elaboration

What do we intend by peer reviews and network of peers? Although in the second chapter we will provide a more substantial overview of international examples (e.g. UN, OECD) and European practices (e.g. EU, Germany), touching especially on peer reviews, in the following two sections we will briefly introduce both mechanisms.

1.5 PEER REVIEWS

Peer reviews are about **mutual learning and improvement towards a best practice** (Groenendijk, 2009). According to the OECD, a peer review can be defined as "the systematic examination and assessment of the performance of a State by other States, with the ultimate goal of helping the reviewed State improve its policy making, adopt best practices, and comply with established standards and principles" (Pagani, 2002). Moreover, as Pagani (2002) put it, such examination is conducted on a **non-adversarial basis**, and it relies heavily on **mutual trust** among the states involved in the peer review, as well as their **shared confidence in the process**⁶. Participation in peer reviews is considered to be on a voluntary basis (Groenendijk, 2009). The result is usually a report in which accomplishments and shortfalls of the reviewed country are described, and recommendations are made (Pagani, 2002, pp.4-5). In principle, every peer review process has its own procedure. However, it is possible to identify a common pattern, consisting of three phases: preparation, consultation, and assessment (OECD, 2003, pp.3). Peer pressure is particularly relevant in this discourse, and it arises (1) from the possibility of having (formal) recommendations by and informal dialogue with the peer countries, (2) from public scrutiny, (3) from comparisons, (4) from rankings among countries and – maybe the most important aspect – (5) the impact of all the above on domestic public opinion, national administrations, and policy-makers (Pagani, 2002).

1.6 NETWORKS OF PEERS: THE EXAMPLE OF THE ESDN AND ITS ROLE IN PEER LEARNING

A brief digression here is to say that within the adopted UN document "Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development", that outlines the international agenda on SD for the next 15 years, a very important statement is made on the power and importance of **peer learning**. On the other hand, the cooperation of regional and sub-regional commissions and organisations is welcomed: we suggest including in those entities also **networks** and their work, especially in terms of bringing a number of different bodies together. In the 'Follow-up and Review' chapter of the aforementioned document, paragraph 80 states:

"Follow-up and review at the regional and sub-regional levels can, as appropriate, provide useful opportunities for peer learning, including through voluntary reviews, sharing of best practices and discussion on shared targets. We welcome in this respect the cooperation of regional and sub-regional commissions and organizations. Inclusive regional processes will draw on national-level reviews and contribute to follow-up and review at the global level, including at the High Level Political Forum on sustainable development (HLPF)."

According to Provan and Kenis (2008), **networks** have been broadly acknowledged as an **important form of multi-organizational governance**. They highlighted the numerous advantages of network coordination in both, public and private sectors, and considered in particular **enhanced learning** and

⁶ Our emphasis

an **increased capacity to plan for and address complex problems** (see also: Alter and Hage, 1993; Brass et al., 2004; Huxham and Vangen, 2005). Although, as argued by Howlett et al. (2015), network theory has not addressed the issue of 'learning' in a direct way, **learning is one of the activities that members of a network embark on** (see also Dunlop and Radaelli, 2013). In fact, actors involved in networks undertake a process that gets them to *joined-up co-produced outcomes* and, at the same time, this process produces and involves "learning about policy problems, learning about solutions, learning about other actors and learning how to influence them to move towards ones preferred policy outputs and outcomes" (Howlett et al. 2015, p.6).

As an example of network of peers, the ESDN⁷ since many years tries to (a) advance SD at the EU and Member States level; (b) facilitate the exchange of good practices and experiences on sustainable development across Europe; (c) provide added-value for policy-makers of the EU, its Member States and other European countries; and, (d) mainstream sustainable development issues into vertical and horizontal integration of the EU, national and sub-national levels of policy-making, especially integration of the EU SDS in the executive and steering-cycle of the EU. Therefore, the ESDN targets are clearly in line with on the approach of peer learning, where **mutual learning is sought among peers, but also with other SD networks** (e.g. EEAC) that, similar to the ESDN, are mainly facilitating and enabling exchange of information and experiences.

The **ESDN uses various means for peer learning**: besides the ESDN reports and background papers for its events (knowledge provision), and the online ESDN country profiles (which offer detailed information by policy-makers about their respective SD strategies and policies from more than 30 countries), **the face-to-face interactions among peers in conferences and workshop** are key. These events make use of **interactive sessions and methods** designed to facilitate and spur discussions, exchanges and, therefore, **enhance learning among peers**. Interactive methods not only increase the chance of exchange and mutual learning, but also increase the sense of **group work, community creation, and sharing of experiences**. Another key element to be considered in conjunction with face-to-face interactions in events relates to the **degree of 'formality/informality'** of these events. In the ESDN events, the creation of mutual trust is facilitated also through allowing learning with and from others by creating networks spaces, like evening receptions and coffee breaks, panel discussions, or from keynote speeches.

⁷ See also the ESDN's Joint Understanding at: http://www.sd-network.eu/pdf/steering%20group/ESDN%20Joint%20Understanding_final.pdf

Chapter 2: Practical approaches to Peer Learning and Peer Review

Chapter 2 provides an overview of practical approaches to peer learning and peer review. Firstly, the international level is explored in an overview of UN and OECD practices that relate to reviews potentially leading to peer learning. Then we present the experiences made in Europe, especially in relation to peer reviews of National Sustainable Development Strategies (NSDSs) that several European countries undertook voluntarily. We particularly focus on the German experiences as the only country in Europe that has, so far, launched a Peer Review of its NSDS twice (in 2009 and 2013).

2.1 INTERNATIONAL EXAMPLES OF PEER LEARNING AND PEER REVIEW

The Peer reviews are most often associated with the **Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)** that began to use the peer review process in the 1960s. Since then, peer reviews lie at the heart of the international cooperation in the OECD and this method has been adopted by various international organisations, like the EU, the United Nations (UN), the International Monetary Fund (IMF) or the World Trade Organisation (WTO)⁸.

2.2 THE OECD'S LONG LASTING EXPERIENCE WITH PEER REVIEWS

The OECD⁹ has most probably the largest experience and expertise with peer reviews. Since its foundation more than 50 years ago, the OECD uses the tool of peer reviews in most of its policy areas (i.e. Pagani, 2002; Groenendijk, 2009). According to Pagani, "there is no other international organisation in which the practice of peer review has been so extensively developed as the OECD". Very interestingly, the use of peer review has, over the years, "characterised the work of the Organisation in most of its policy areas" (2002).

As already mentioned in chapter one, peer reviews are basically examinations of one state's performance or practices in a particular area by other states. Increasingly, civil society, business and other stakeholders are invited to contribute to reviews. According to the OECD, the system relies in particular on **mutual trust among the states involved**, as well as their shared confidence in the process; OECD staff experts also play an important role in supporting and stimulating the process. The peer review is a **discussion among equals**, not a hearing by a superior body that will hand down a judgement or punishment. This makes them a more **flexible** tool; a state may be more willing to

⁸ See also: Berger, G. and R. Steurer (2006) Evaluation and Review of National Sustainable Development Strategies. ESDN QR September 2006. Available at: [http://www.sd-network.eu/quarterly%20reports/report%20files/pdf/2006-September-Evaluation and Review of NSDS.pdf](http://www.sd-network.eu/quarterly%20reports/report%20files/pdf/2006-September-Evaluation%20and%20Review%20of%20NSDS.pdf)

⁹ One of our main sources we used for this section is OECD's own website section on peer reviews at: <http://www.oecd.org/site/peerreview/peerreviewataglance.htm>

accept or give criticism, as this would not commit to a rigid position or obligatory course of action. Peer reviews also **encourage open dialogue** that can help clarify positions in a **non-adversarial setting**.

A peer review is usually a **joint operation** involving the reviewed country, the examining countries and staff from the OECD Secretariat. The review is carried out by the committee, working party, or other body which has decided to undertake it; **officials in the relevant policy field from other countries (the peers) are, therefore, involved in the evaluation process**. The examiners represent the **collective body** carrying out the review. Their work includes examining documentation, taking part in discussions with the reviewed country and the Secretariat, and taking a lead speaker role in the debate in the collective body. The OECD Secretariat supports the process by producing documentation and analysis, organising meetings and missions, stimulating discussion and maintaining continuity. Typically, the Secretariat carries out the most labour-intensive part of the job.

OECD peer reviews cover a wide range of topics, from economics and governance to education, health, environment and energy. Very well-known examples of such peer reviews processes are, for instance:

- (1) **Economic surveys** cover the overall economic performance and policies of an individual country, with a certain regularity;
- (2) **Environmental performance reviews (EPRs)** 'help Member countries improve their individual and collective performances in environmental management with the goal of achieving sustainable development', by helping governments judge progress, by promoting continuous policy dialogue among member countries and by stimulating greater accountability from member country governments towards representatives of all sectors of society at both national and international levels (OECD, 1998; Lethonen, 2008);
- (3) **DAC Peer Reviews** have the objectives to improve the quality and effectiveness of development co-operation policies and systems, and to promote good development partnerships (OECD, 2014). [Peer reviews by the OECD's Development Assistance Committee](#), which groups the world's major official aid donors, assess performance in development co-operation in areas such as poverty reduction, conflict prevention or policy coherence.

Whatever the topic, peer reviews are generally carried out on a regular basis, resulting in a **published report that assesses accomplishments, identifies shortfalls, and makes recommendations**. The frequency of reviews varies: whereas the economic surveys on individual member countries are carried out every 18 months on average, the environmental performance reviews are on a five-to seven-year cycle, and the DAC reviews approximately every four years.

Although there is no standardised peer review mechanism, Pagani (2002) describes at least **four core structural elements** that all peer reviews comprise: (1) a basis for proceeding; (2) an agreed set of principles, standards and criteria against which the country performance is to be reviewed; (3) designated actors to carry out the peer review; and, (4) a set of procedures leading to the final result of the peer review.

According to Pagani (2002), the effectiveness of peer review depends upon the combination of a number of factors, such as:

1. **Value sharing:** convergence among the participating countries on the standards or criteria against which to evaluate performance. A strong common understanding on these will prevent uncertainty or backtracking during the process;
2. **Adequate level of commitment** by the participating countries in terms of both human and financial resources. Thus, the participating countries must be fully engaged in the process at different times as examiners, as active members of the collective body, and as subject of the examination;
3. **Mutual trust:** since peer review is, by its nature, a co-operative, non-adversarial process, mutual trust is an important basis for its success;
4. **Credibility:** the credibility of the peer review process is essential to its effectiveness, and to its added value in comparison with governmental reports or consultants' certifications. There is a strong linkage between the credibility of the process and its capacity of influence. (...) The main threat to the credibility of the process is the possibility of attempts by the reviewed State to unduly influence the final outcome.

In many ways, the effectiveness of peer review relies on the so-called '**peer pressure**' that refers to the influence and persuasion exercised by the peers during the process¹⁰ through, for instance: (1) a mix of formal recommendations and informal dialogue by the peer countries; (2) public scrutiny, comparisons, ranking among countries; (3) and the impact of these on domestic public opinion, national administrations and policy makers. Peer pressure does not take the form of legally binding acts, it rather works as a **mechanism of soft persuasion** that can encourage states to change, achieve goals, and meet certain standards. According to the OECD, peer pressure is particularly effective when it is possible to provide both qualitative and quantitative assessments of performance.

¹⁰ Please refer to OECD's website section on peer reviews at: http://www.oecd.org/site/peerreview/peerreview_ataglance.htm

2.3 THE UN LEVEL: THE CONTEXT OF THE 2030 AGENDA FOR SD

In the [Declaration of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#), peer learning is mentioned in the context of **Follow-up and review at the regional and sub-regional levels** (see Fig.2.1) (UNDG, 2015). These levels are understood as

places to “provide useful opportunities for peer learning, including through voluntary reviews, sharing of best practices and discussion on shared targets” (paragraph 80). The Declaration welcomes the cooperation of regional and sub-regional commissions and organizations, and mentions the chance for inclusive regional processes to draw on national-level reviews and to contribute to follow-up and review at the global level, including at the High Level Political Forum on sustainable development (HLPF) (paragraph 80).

Fig.2.1: Structure of the Agenda



Source: UNDG, 2015

The role for reviews is, therefore, strongly recognised as two sections in the declaration refer to its importance (Pisano et al., 2015). Under section ‘Follow-up and Review’, two paragraphs (§47-48) deal with follow-up and review mechanisms. The main responsibility for this is given to national governments. An important role at the global level, with regards to overseeing these national mechanisms, is assigned to the **High Level Political Forum** under the auspices of the General Assembly and to the Economic and Social Council. Indicators are also mentioned and developed that will assist this work as well as the development of broader measures of progress that would complement the gross domestic product (GDP).

Then, later in the text, a second section called ‘Follow-up and review’ (§72-91) comprises the last 20 paragraphs of the Agenda, and explains more thoroughly follow-up and review processes that will be crucial for the functioning and implementation of the 2030 Agenda. In this context, §74 describes in more detail the principles that will guide such processes: we have summarised them in Fig.2.2 below.

Fig.2.2: Principles for SDGs Follow-up and review processes

1. They will be **voluntary and country-led**, will **take into account different national realities, capacities and levels of development and will respect policy space and priorities**. As **national ownership** is key to achieving sustainable development, the outcome from national level processes will be the foundation for reviews at regional and global levels, given that the global review will be primarily based on national official data sources;
2. They will **track progress in implementing** the universal Goals and targets, including the means of implementation, in all countries **in a manner, which respects their universal, integrated and interrelated nature and the three dimensions of sustainable development**;
3. They will **maintain a longer-term orientation, identify achievements, challenges, gaps and critical success factors and support countries in making informed policy choices**. They will help

mobilize the necessary means of implementation and partnerships, support the identification of solutions and best practices and promote coordination and effectiveness of the international development system;

4. They will be **open, inclusive, participatory and transparent** for all people and will support the reporting by all relevant stakeholders;
5. They will be **people-centred, gender-sensitive, respect human rights and have a particular focus on the poorest, most vulnerable and those furthest behind**;
6. They will **build on existing platforms and processes**, where these exist, **avoid duplication** and **respond to national circumstances, capacities, needs and priorities**. They will **evolve over time**, taking into account emerging issues and the development of new methodologies, and will minimize the reporting burden on national administrations;
7. They will be **rigorous and based on evidence, informed by country-led evaluations and data** which is high-quality, accessible, timely, reliable and disaggregated by income, sex, age, race, ethnicity, migration status, disability and geographic location and other characteristics relevant in national contexts;
8. They will **require enhanced capacity-building support for developing countries**, including the **strengthening of national data systems and evaluation programs**, particularly in African countries, LDCs, SIDS and LLDCs and middle-income countries;
9. They will **benefit from the active support of the UN system and other multilateral institutions**.

Source: UN, 2015

Particularly relevant is §75 as it describes the development and use of a global indicator set that will monitor the SDGs and related targets. This framework will be “**simple yet robust, address all SDGs and targets** including for means of implementation, and **preserve the political balance, integration and ambition contained therein**”. Last but not least, this set of global indicators will be complemented by “indicators at the regional and national levels which will be **developed by member states**, in addition to the outcomes of work undertaken for the development of the baselines for those targets where national and global baseline data does not yet exist”.

Another key paragraph is §77 as it commits to “fully engage in conducting **regular and inclusive reviews of progress** at sub-national, national, regional and global levels”. In this regard, already **existing networks of follow-up and review institutions and mechanisms are seen as crucial**. Moreover, §77 affirms that “national reports will allow assessments of progress and identify challenges at the regional and global level. Along with regional dialogues and global reviews, they will inform recommendations for follow-up at various levels”.

On the national level, §78 encourages “all member states to develop **as soon as practicable** ambitious national responses to the overall implementation of this Agenda. These can support the transition to the SDGs and **build on existing planning instruments, such as national development and sustainable development strategies**, as appropriate”.

At the regional level, §80 sees such processes as “**useful opportunities for peer learning**, including through voluntary reviews, sharing of best practices and discussion on shared targets” and welcomes “**cooperation of regional and sub-regional commissions and organizations**”.

At the global level, §82-90 describe the roles and functions of the main actors involved in this respect. It is worth noticing that the **UN High-Level Political Forum (HLPF)** will have a “central role in overseeing a network of follow-up and review processes at the global level, working coherently with the General Assembly, ECOSOC and other relevant organs and forums”.

Also important is the establishment of an **Annual SDG Progress Report** (see §83) that will inform the HLPF and will be prepared by the Secretary-General in cooperation with UN System, based on the global indicator framework and data produced by national statistical systems and information collected at the regional level.

2.3.1 THE HIGH-LEVEL POLITICAL FORUM: FIRST VOLUNTARY NATIONAL REVIEWS IN JULY 2016

With regards to the global follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the declaration highlighted that the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) will have a central role in overseeing a network of follow-up and review processes at the global level, working coherently with the General Assembly, ECOSOC and other relevant organs and forums, in accordance with existing mandates.

The HLPF's main aims are to (1) **facilitate sharing of experiences, including successes, challenges and lessons learned**, and (2) **provide political leadership, guidance and recommendations** for follow-up. It should also **promote system-wide coherence and coordination of SD policies**. And, it should ensure that the Agenda remains **relevant and ambitious** and should focus on the **assessment of progress, achievements and challenges** faced by developed and developing countries as well as new and emerging issues (see §82).

Particularly relevant to understand the role of the HLPF are paragraphs 84 and 85:

84. The HLPF, under the auspices of ECOSOC, shall carry out regular reviews, in line with Resolution 67/290. Reviews will be voluntary, while encouraging reporting, and include developed and developing countries as well as relevant UN entities and other stakeholders, including civil society and the private sector. They shall be state-led, involving ministerial and other relevant high-level participants. They shall provide a platform for partnerships, including through the participation of major groups and other relevant stakeholders.

85. Thematic reviews of progress on the Sustainable Development Goals, including cross-cutting issues, will also take place at the HLPF. These will be supported by reviews by the ECOSOC functional commissions and other inter-governmental bodies and forums which should reflect the integrated nature of the goals as well as the interlinkages between them. They will engage all relevant stakeholders and, where possible, feed into, and be aligned with, the cycle of the HLPF.

In our context, paragraph 84 is particularly pertinent as it calls for **regular reviews** that are **voluntary** and **state-led**, involve ministerial and other relevant high-level participants, and that also provide a **platform for partnerships**, with the participation of major groups and other relevant stakeholders.

The first round of such **voluntary national reviews** is scheduled between 11-20 July 2016 in New York. The **HLPF 2016** will be the first HLPF after the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The forum, which should adopt a Ministerial Declaration, is mandated to conduct national reviews and thematic reviews of the implementation of the Agenda, with inputs from other intergovernmental bodies and forums, relevant UN entities, regional processes, major groups and other stakeholders. The national reviews are expected to provide a platform for partnerships. A total of 21 countries are taking part in the national reviews at the 2016 HLPF session (see Fig.2.3). Out of these 21, seven are European countries: Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Montenegro, Norway, and Switzerland. A very interesting Q&A information document was produced by the UN that helps better understand the preparation and processes behind the national reviews at HLPF 2016¹¹. We provide a synthesis in **Fig.2.4** below.

Fig.2.3: National reviews at 2016HLPF



Source: UN, 2016

Fig.2.4 Understanding national reviews at the 2016 HLPF

Scope: In the long term, the scope of national reviews at the HLPF is expected to be the whole 2030 Agenda. Since the implementation of the 2030 Agenda only started on 1 January 2016, countries are not expected to already be able to report on the review of 2030 Agenda and SDGs. Rather, they could choose to focus on strategies and policies that are being put in place to facilitate implementation, or decide to share any progress and accomplishments related to activities supporting the 2030 Agenda.

Format: using an interactive format, information could be grouped around findings, good practices, challenges, lessons learned, areas that need support and shared experiences.

Presentation: Consultations are underway to identify the most effective ways for presenting national reports at the HLPF.

Written report: producing a report as background to a national presentation may actually facilitate the process of preparation of the national reviews, by crystallizing the efforts made to collect data and involve stakeholders, and could follow the guidelines proposed by the Secretary-General.

Statistics and indicators: statistics and indicators are not expected to be a main focus of national reviews.

Participation of Major Groups, other Stakeholders and partnerships: specific modalities for engagement of MGoS in national reporting are likely to vary from country to country and are decided by the national governments making voluntary presentations.

Source: Q&A for national reviews at the 2016 HLPF

¹¹ Please also see: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/9765Q%20and%20A%20for%20HLPF%20National%20reviews%202016.pdf>

In preparation for such a HLPF meeting and in response to paragraph 90 of the Declaration, the Secretary General (SG) recently published his report outlining so-called **critical milestones**, and exploring **how to put in place such a coherent, efficient and inclusive follow-up and review system at the global level**, within the mandates outlined in the Agenda.

In terms of peer reviews, the SG suggests to the UN General Assembly to encourage “all countries to champion inclusive and rigorous approaches to high-level political forum reviews, including where appropriate, conducting **peer reviews** and **reviews among groups of countries facing similar situations, taking into account existing arrangements and practices**” (§6). In addition, in section E on the regional perspective, the SG emphasized **peer learning and peer reviews as important tools** to allow discussions, provide potential valuable lessons and boost regional cooperation and partnerships (see §§56-59).

The focus is also very much on **mutual learning** (i.e. §16). In ‘Section B. Incentives for countries to participate in voluntary national reviews by the high-level political forum’, the SG put a strong emphasis again on **mutual learning**, where in paragraph 77 it mentions that the HLPF voluntary national reviews

- (1) must be **geared towards accelerating implementation**;
- (2) aim at **enabling mutual learning across countries and regions**;
- (3) help all countries, in particular those being reviewed, **to enhance their national policies and institutional frameworks**, and
- (4) mobilize necessary **support and partnerships for the implementation of the SDGs**.

The Secretary General’s report went also a step further and suggested a ‘Proposal for voluntary common reporting guidelines for voluntary national reviews at the high-level political forum’ that is included in the Annex to the Report. Although each country should be free to decide on the scope of their review and the format in which they want to present their findings, the SG’s Report outlined several components as a way to help countries to frame the preparations for voluntary national reviews at the high-level political forum (please see Fig.2.5 below).

Fig.2.5: Suggested components for the National Reviews at the HLPF

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Opening statement; 2. Summary; 3. Introduction; 4. Methodology and process for preparation of the review; 5. Policy and enabling environment: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (a) <i>Creating ownership of the Sustainable Development Goals;</i> (b) <i>Incorporation of the Sustainable Development Goals in national frameworks;</i> (c) <i>Integration of the three dimensions;</i> (d) <i>Goals and targets;</i> (e) <i>Thematic analysis;</i> (f) <i>Institutional mechanisms;</i> 6. Means of implementation; 7. Next steps; 8. Statistical annex; 9. Conclusion; 10. Link to more in-depth national reports and reviews.
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Source: UN (2016)

2.4 PEER REVIEWS IN EUROPE IN THE CONTEXT OF NATIONAL SD STRATEGIES

Peer reviews are one of the three forms of qualitative review processes of NSDSs that have taken place in Europe together with **internal reviews** and **external reviews**. Qualitative evaluations and reviews (Pisano et al., 2013) assess the quality of SD strategy processes, policy instruments used, and stakeholders involved. NSDSs are not only strategic documents but also foster strategic processes. As NSDS processes constantly need to adapt to new situations and challenges, the evaluation of these policy processes and the achievement of the NSDS targets is important and has been introduced in almost all European countries. In the context of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for SD, such processes will be particularly important.

In the context of NSDSs, the European Union addressed the issue of peer reviews with a proposal at the World Summit on SD in Johannesburg in 2002 where it suggested developing a system for **promoting the sharing of experience with NSDSs among countries**. The idea of undertaking a “light peer review process, focussing on themes, and in particular seeking to identify examples of good policies and practices that could be implemented by all” was then launched by the EU Commission in 2005 in the context of the Commission’s proposal for a revised EU SDS (EU Commission, 2004). The uptake of peer reviews for NSDS was further specified and concretized in the renewed EU SDS from June 2006. In paragraph 37, it affirms, “with regard to the national level, the Commission report [biannual progress report on the implementation of the SD strategy in the EU and the MS, starting in September 2007] will build on Member States’ actions to implement the EU SDS and the results gained from completed Peer Reviews”.

The idea behind the peer reviews of the NSDS within the EU is to **identify and share good practices in a process of mutual learning**. The peer review of a national strategy is **voluntary** and should be **undertaken upon the initiative of the Member State concerned**. The process should be a **bottom-up exercise with participatory elements** – involving stakeholders from all political levels – with no intention to ‘name and shame’. The peer reviews are intended to **address all three SD pillars** and the peer-reviewed country is free to choose to undertake a review of the whole NSDS or focus on one or more specific issues. They should **involve officials and stakeholders from other Members States and international observers** in a process of mutual learning where other countries are taken as peers in the process.

In the European Union, peer reviews of NSDSs have been conducted in four countries: in France (2005), Norway (2007), the Netherlands (2007) and Germany (2009 and 2013). The key document to support our understanding¹² of peer reviews in Europe is provided by the EU Commission in 2006 as a Guidebook for those countries interested in considering such a process. The Guidebook was, therefore, developed with the intention (a) to present “an approach to mutual improvement and learning on NSDSs that can be applied across all EU Member States”, but also (b) as a response (EU Commission, 2005) to common challenges in preparing, implementing and reviewing their strategies found by an analysis carried out by the EU Commission in 2004.

¹² We based this section on our analysis of the following document: European Commission (2006) PRIME-SD Peer Review Improvement through Mutual Exchange on Sustainable Development. A guidebook for peer reviews of national sustainable development strategies. Available at: <http://ec.europa.eu/environment/pdf/nsds.pdf>

Mainly, the EU Commission saw the potential to respond to these challenges through peer reviews that would: (1) **better identify, pool and exchange national experiences**; (2) **develop greater synergies and complementarities** between NSDSs and between NSDSs and the EUSDS; and, (3) **generate information** that can be used to inform assessments of progress across the EU and globally.

According to the EU Commission's Guidebook, **peer reviews can offer several benefits**, some of which are extremely similar as the one pointed out in the discussion about peer learning:

- **External perspectives:** peers can bring new ideas, knowledge, experience and perspectives to national SDS processes, and help counter any tendency to be excessively inward looking;
- **Capacity building, networking and dialogue:** peer reviews can support the sharing of information and skills, to the benefit of the review and the peer countries. Peer reviews can lead to enhanced cooperation within and between countries and stakeholders, contributing to better understanding of arrangements and challenges;
- **Promoting transparency:** involving external parties as well as stakeholders can increase the visibility of the NSDS inside the country, in peer countries, in the European and international community and among the general public;
- **Increased focus on major cross-cutting issues:** peers can help to ensure a more balanced approach to sustainable development issues. Reviewed countries can also choose to focus on specific areas of their strategy which they believe are of particular importance;
- **Promoting voluntary convergence of practices:** the exchange of experience and good practices may lead to emulation by countries that were not using them yet. This may progressively increase coherence between widely different national approaches in areas of joint interest, thereby strengthening their collective efficiency and effectiveness.

A number of principles (synthesized in the following **Fig.2.6**) are suggested in this common EU framework for **mutual improvement and learning** that aims at ensuring some level of comparability between reviews, and therefore at facilitating the identification and sharing of good practices.

Fig.2.6 Principles underlying a common EU framework for mutual improvement and learning

<p>Practical, efficient and effective: the framework is intended to be above all a practical tool.</p> <p>Voluntary: application of the guidebook is entirely voluntary. The framework includes core elements that Member States are encouraged to follow in preparing for, undertaking and following-up on their NSDS reviews.</p> <p>Participatory and peer based: one country's NSDS is scrutinised not only by stakeholders from within that country (the 'reviewed country'), but also by peers from several other countries (the 'peer countries'). In this way, strong and weak points in the SDS process are identified, as are opportunities for building on experiences in other countries. Discussions, analysis and reflection between those being reviewed and the peer reviewers are informed by background</p>
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documentation, as well as preparatory interviews and other information gathering exercises.

Politically backed: the success of the approach will depend on ownership, vision, and personal and political commitment to continuous improvement of the SDS process, the review and outputs from that review.

Participatory and partnership: involving broad participation by the public and stakeholders, to ensure transparency throughout the review process.

Feedback-cycle: monitoring and evaluation play a central role in a national sustainable development strategy. That is why conducting a review should not be seen as a one-off event, but as part of a cyclical and iterative process towards sustainability.

Learning by doing and sharing: a constructive and positive approach focusing on improvement and learning based on the gathering and sharing of information on experiences and good practices. The approach should work towards extracting and reflecting on lessons and identifying ways forward. The framework itself should evolve overtime, as lessons from undertaking reviews are fed back. The framework also aims to foster a culture of mutual learning both within and between Member States, where organisations seize the opportunity to work together to analyse objectives and their delivery, reflecting on experiences both good and bad. The success of the review process will thus depend on the level of voluntary participation and on there being a climate of mutual respect, sharing and trust.

Coherence and comparability: coherence and comparability between national reviews should allow information to be gathered and disseminated among the Member States as well as aggregated at EU level.

Vertical linkage: a common approach should include a core set of issues, so as to ensure appropriate vertical linkage between NSDSs and the EU SDS, balancing this with the desire for NSDSs to reflect national and local priorities.

Flexibility: there should be sufficient flexibility so that countries at different stages of development and implementation of their NSDSs can apply the framework.

Source: EU Commission, 2006, pp.6-8

Among these principles that we have synthesized in the previous figure and that can be found in their original version in the cited document, we want to devote our attention **on two principles that could be particularly valuable to support the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for SD:**

- 1) **Learning by doing and sharing:** a constructive and positive approach focusing on improvement and learning based on the gathering and sharing of information on experiences and good practices. The approach should work towards extracting and reflecting on lessons and identifying ways forward. The framework itself should evolve overtime, as lessons from undertaking reviews are fed back. The framework also aims to foster a culture of mutual learning both within and between Member States, where organisations seize the opportunity to work together to analyse objectives and their delivery, reflecting on experiences both good and bad. The success of the review process will thus depend on the level of voluntary participation and on there being a climate of mutual respect, sharing and trust;

- 2) **Feedback-cycle:** monitoring and evaluation play a central role in a national sustainable development strategy. That is why conducting a review should not be seen as a one-off event, but as part of a cyclical and iterative process towards sustainability.

Both principles are valuable in particular if considered in conjunction with principles of governance for SD, and especially with respect to the concept of '**reflexivity**', the principle by which governance for SD requires reflexive processes based on continuous reflection and policy learning (Pisano et al., 2015). This is crucial for the continuous improvement of policies and strategies for SD and with particular consideration of supporting the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for SD, and the SDGs.

2.4.1 THE GERMAN EXPERIENCE WITH ITS NSDS PEER REVIEWS

Two peer reviews on their NSDS were undertaken in Germany¹³: the first one in 2009, and then in 2013. Both reviews were facilitated by the German Council for Sustainable Development (RNE), and based on the practice of the OECD (i.e. economic and environmental performance reviews), in combination with new approaches suggested by the EU Commission in 2006, such as the EU Commission's Guidebook for Peer Reviews of NSDSs (EU Commission, 2006), and the revised EU SDS 2006 that encouraged EU Member States to carry out review processes. The German Federal Chancellery mandated the peer reviews and expected to receive advice on strategic issues and on the process of policy-making to help strengthen the case for German policies towards SD. Although not intended to perform technical audits or to assess specifics of sectoral policies, both peer reviews resulted in the publication of a report containing both English and a German version. Both reports had a similar length: 108 pages for the 2009 report, and 116 pages for the one published in 2013.

The President of the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD), Björn Stigson, acted as chair of the peer group in both peer reviews, whilst its members were distinguished persons involved in leading policies devoted towards sustainable development, with a high profile competence, and an international background on sustainability issues. In 2009, seven people were part of the peer group coming from different backgrounds: Policy-making, Business, NGOs, and Research. Apart from one member, all the peer group members chosen for the 2009 peer review also participated in the second one, with the difference that the 2013 group included two new peers: one from South Africa and one from South Korea. The office of the German Council for Sustainable Development served as secretariat to the peer review, supporting the whole review process by providing the evidence base (i.e. research, analysis, interviews, meeting organisation), producing documentation, organising meetings and individual sessions, stimulating discussion, and maintaining continuity of the process. Firstly, in 2009, the German Federal Government invited the peer group to **review progress** on sustainable development in Germany and asked for **recommendations** necessary to strengthen the '*transition to a more sustainable society and economy*' in Germany. The Peer Group's report "Sustainability – Made in Germany" was then presented and published in 2009. As shown in the following **Fig.2.7**, the 'peers' performed a SWOT analysis to understand Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats of SD policy-making in Germany.

¹³ This section is based on the publications by the German Council for Sustainable Development of the Peer Review on Sustainable Development Policies in Germany performed in 2009 and 2013. Both publications are available at: https://www.bundesregierung.de/Content/EN/StatischeSeiten/Schwerpunkte/Nachhaltigkeit/2013-09-26-peer-review-2013-nachhaltigkeitsrat_en.html

Fig.2.7 SWOT analysis of the Peer Review in 2009

Strengths	Weaknesses	Opportunities	Threats
Deep roots	Weak horizontal and vertical coordination	Building on what has been achieved	Increasing global pressure
National Sustainability Strategy in place	Weak cooperation between public and private sector	Speeding up change	Demographic change
Institutional competencies	Confusing information to consumers and business	Building the Grand Design	
Research and development	Lack of vision		

Source: German Council for Sustainable Development (2009)

In the **2009 peer review**, while recognising the crucial role of the German Federal Government in promoting the so-called “Grand Design” for sustainable development, the peers provided 12 recommendations that are below summarised in **Fig.2.8** and linked to the main institution/actor/area to which these are devoted.

Fig.2.8 Twelve Recommendations of the Peer Review in 2009

Recommendations	Institution/actor/area
1. Strengthening the Chancellery’s leadership and creating a new strategy for implementing the Grand Design; 2. Creating a Ministry for energy and climate change; 3. Creating a Commissioner on sustainable development; 4. Introducing a Sustainability Action Plan and tooling up for action;	The Federal Government
5. Empowering the Parliamentary framing of the sustainability agenda, tooling up for (new) Parliamentary decision-making of sustainability assessment of pieces of legislation, and reviewing of Government’s departmental sustainability reports;	Parliament
6. Expanding the outreach of the Council for Sustainable Development, enlarging its scope and function;	Council for Sustainable Development
7. Improving vertical integration between the Federal level and the Laender and between the Laender and local levels; encouraging sustainable development strategies in the Laender and regional networks;	Laender and municipalities
8. A public-private partnership for action, and sectoral roadmaps for implementation;	The business community
9. Changing gear in policies towards customers and consumers, and markets;	Customers, consumers, and markets
10. Encouraging citizens’ action;	Citizens and grassroots action
11. Strategising for “gaining brain”, and crafting learning partnerships;	Education
12. Increasing sustainability-related research and innovation and sharpening advanced studies into sustainability; breeding green clusters and engineering standards for sustainable solutions.	Research and innovation

Source: German Council for Sustainable Development (2009)

With respect to the **2013 peer review**, the peers firstly acknowledged Germany's commitment to sustainable development and applauded Germany's key actors for the significant action taken and for the progress made in the four years since the first peer review, including the implementation of a number of the above mentioned 12 recommendations. The peers also considered how the institutions/actors/areas indicated in Fig.2.8 above responded to the 2009 recommendations. We have summarised such considerations as follows:

- **Federal Chancellery**: key role in the German governance approach to sustainability; such a role has been strengthened since 2009. Moreover, Germany has begun to focus on the issue of a green economy and has introduced some longer-term goals for 2050;
- **State Secretary Committee for Sustainable Development**: from within the federal administration, it has used its coordinating role on sustainability to strengthen sustainable public procurement, corporate reporting and land management and enhance resource productivity and recycling;
- **Parliamentary Body for Sustainable Development (PBNE)**: has been strengthened; a new scrutiny procedure now enables it to assess pieces of legislation based on whether they are formally in line with the NSDS. Nevertheless, the peers learned that the PBNE still faces limitations in mainstreaming sustainability into the work of the German Parliament;
- **Council for Sustainable Development (RNE)**: has gained momentum, brought significant policy papers to the attention of the Government and initiated action, made use of an extended mandate and initiated a move to improve transparency in corporate responsibility. The Council also facilitated platform dialogues;
- **Laender and cities**: many have taken significant initiatives at the local level and are even ahead of national action in some respects. Some of the Laender have introduced their own sustainability strategies, and others are expected to do so;
- **Several transformative policies have been initiated** (e.g. '*Energiewende*');
- **New governance structures and processes have been put in place**, e.g. sustainable procurement platforms, voluntary codes and standards;
- **R&D efforts have been strengthened** through for instance a remarkable budget for basic and applied science, the funding of new research projects, and the establishment of the German Sustainability Award scheme.

In the 2013 peer review, the peers made the following 15 recommendations to support implementation, also in relation to institutions, actors, and areas of focus:

1. **Government**: Providing a Long-Term Framework for Implementation and Restructuring Capacities
2. **Parliament**: Empowering its role
3. **Council for Sustainable Development**: Facilitating stakeholder cooperation
4. **Laender and Municipalities**: Advancing concerted action
5. **Civil Society**: Linking the sustainability transformation and the people
6. **Energiewende**: Planning and coordination of the transformation
7. **Quality of Life**: Ensuring social cohesion, prosperity and Wellbeing
8. **Shaping the Green Economy**: Providing a Reliable Framework and Tools
9. **Government and Business**: Cooperating on Implementation Strategies

10. **Financing the Transitions:** Promoting dialogue and establishing a supportive Framework
11. **Research and Development:** Strengthening transformative knowledge and solutions
12. **Demography:** Intensifying adaptive solutions
13. **Education:** Building Sustainability into all levels of education
14. **Europe:** Leadership for a Sustainable Future
15. **Germany as an International systems provider of sustainability solutions**

Both peer reviews followed a **multi-phase approach**, consisting of similar phases:

- (1) **Mandate:** included the mandate by Government, the acceptance of the mandate by peers, the facilitation by the Council for Sustainable Development, and an initial meeting of the Chair and facilitators;
- (2) **Scoping:** as one of the prime requisites for an effective peer review, the peers held a two days scoping meeting (before the working phase) to reach an agreement among the peers on the core points of the international sustainability agenda against which assessing German performance, to share backgrounds, values and expectations, and to reach an understanding about the process, workflow, and division of work;
- (3) **Preparation:** comprised the circulation of key documents, setting up meetings with interview partners and sounding experts, preparation of comments on specific issues, circulation of a draft “skeleton”;
- (4) **Assessment Week:** fact-finding, on-site interviews, sharing, assessment, negotiating recommendations, consensus-building, documentation, quality assurance;
- (5) **Editing and finalizing:** editing Peers’ text elements, circulation and resolution of differences, approval;
- (6) **Reporting and dissemination:** presentation of the main conclusions and recommendations to the audience as well as handing the report over to the forthcoming Government at the annual conference of the Council for Sustainable Development.

The secretariat also provided an overview on approaches and procedures of the Peer Reviews recently performed in the Netherlands, Norway and France, and advised the peers on possible procedural steps. Particularly relevant was the fact that peers put much weight on **dialogue and interactive investigation**, which comprised face-to-face meetings with eminent representatives of government bodies, parliament, interest groups, civil society, the private sector, and academics: “Consulting altogether more than 30 target actors in Germany (plus members of the German SD Council) added to the influence and persuasion exercised by the Peers during the process and helped building Peer pressure” (German Council for Sustainable Development, 2009).

Chapter 3: Conclusions and reflections

In chapter 1, we provided a conceptual basis for our report and explored the reasoning and ideas behind peer learning. We defined **'peer learning' as an umbrella concept that encompasses a number of different mechanisms or instruments that support 'learning' from and with peers with regard to policies, in our case related to sustainable development.** In peer learning, the peers learn from each other simultaneously, and contribute to other peers' learning by sharing knowledge, ideas and experiences. Such learning is based on common experiences that allow for 'equal' contributions. Benefits of peer learning can be manifold, resulting for instance in: (a) a team-building spirit and more supportive relationships; (b) greater psychological well-being, social competence, communication skills and self-esteem; and (c) higher achievement and greater productivity in terms of enhanced learning outcomes. But what exactly is a **'peer'**? In general, a peer can be described as an *individual who is of equal standing, belongs to the same societal group and is sharing similar characteristics* (e.g. position, responsibility, etc.).

In our context, and in consideration of the change from 'government to governance', we define peers as: **policy-makers working on SD issues as being peers of other policy-makers working on SD issues, and stakeholders, such as representatives from business, academia, and civil society, which are all working and dealing with SD.**

Currently, there exist two main mechanisms that support peer learning in the SD context: (1) Peer reviews (e.g. OECD, peer reviews of NSDSs), and (2) networks of peers (e.g. ESDN, EEAC). Peer reviews are about **mutual learning and improvement** towards a best practice. **Peer pressure** is particularly relevant in this discourse, and it arises from (1) the possibility of having (formal) recommendations by and informal dialogue with the peer countries, (2) public scrutiny, (3) comparisons, (4) rankings among countries and – maybe the most important aspect –, and (5) the impact of all the above on domestic public opinion, national administrations, and policy-makers. On the other hand, networks have been broadly acknowledged as an important form of multi-organizational governance. In particular, networks result in **enhanced learning** and an **increased capacity to plan for and address complex problems**. Learning is a central activity that is undertaken by members of a network: while embarking on a process towards joined co-produced outcomes, members can learn different things about policy problems, solutions, other actors and how to influence other actors. In our experience within the ESDN, **on-site meetings and events**, in which face-to-face interactions among peers are facilitated and where exchange can happen more easily, both formally and informally, is a key tool that networks should consider to enhance mutual learning.

In chapter 2, we focused on peer learning and especially on peer reviews, to provide an overview of the main examples and approaches that we found on peer learning in practice.

Through the example of the OECD, the organisation with the longest practical experience of peer reviews, we offered several key points for reflection. First of all, whatever the topic, peer reviews are generally carried out on a regular basis, resulting then in a **published report that assesses accomplishments, spells out shortfalls and makes recommendations**. Secondly, the effectiveness of peer review depends on the combination of a number of factors such as (1) **value sharing**; (2) **adequate level of commitment**; (3) **mutual trust**; and (4) **credibility**. In many ways, the

effectiveness of peer review is dependent on '**peer pressure**'. This refers to the influence and persuasion exercised by the peers during the process not through legally binding acts, but rather as a **mechanism of soft persuasion** that can encourage and spur on change.

With regards to the international outlook, the UN stands out with the new 2030 Agenda for SD and the emphasis given to 'peer learning' especially in relation to the system of national reviews in the context of the HLPF, whose main aims are to (1) **facilitate sharing of experiences, including successes, challenges and lessons learned**, and (2) **provide political leadership, guidance and recommendations** for follow-up. The first round of such **voluntary national reviews** is scheduled to take place 11-20 July 2016, in New York. Here, 7 out of 21 countries are European: Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Montenegro, Norway, and Switzerland. In addition, we also showed the strong attention on peer learning in the Secretary General's report. Referring to the mentioned national reviews at the HLPF, the SG put a strong emphasis again on mutual learning, suggesting that such reviews (1) must be geared towards accelerating implementation; (2) aim at enabling mutual learning across countries and regions; (3) help all countries, in particular those being reviewed, to enhance their national policies and institutional frameworks; and (4) mobilize necessary support and partnerships for the implementation of the SDGs.

The example from the European Union – the 2006 Guidebook for NSDSs peer reviews prepared for the European Commission – remains a particularly valuable document, as it offers several principles for mutual learning with practical and conceptual reflections on peer reviews in the context of SD policies and strategies. Two principles have captured our attention, as we believe they could be particularly valuable to support the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for SD through peer learning. The first of these principles is called "**Learning by doing and sharing**" that works by **focusing on improvement and learning**, by **gathering and sharing of information on experiences and good practices**, by **operating towards extracting and reflecting on lessons and identifying ways forward**. The second principle is the "**Feedback-cycle**" that highlights not only how monitoring and evaluation play a central role in a national sustainable development strategy, but also **suggests to conduct reviews that are part of a cyclical and iterative process towards sustainability and not just a one-off event**. Both principles are valuable in particular if considered in conjunction with principles of governance for SD, and especially with respect to the concept of '**reflexivity**', the principle by which governance *for* SD requires reflexive processes based on continuous reflection and policy learning. This is crucial for the continuous improvement of policies and strategies for SD and with particular consideration of supporting the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for SD, and the SDGs.

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