



DEVELOPING THE ESDN PEER LEARNING APPROACH TO SUPPORT THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE 2030 AGENDA FOR SD AND THE SDGS

Experiences and needs for peer learning
and peer review processes

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Discussion Paper

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	4
Chapter 1: Recent developments in the context of the 2030 Agenda	5
Chapter 2: Defining ‘Peer Learning’ in SD policy-making	7
2.1 PEER LEARNING: DEFINITION AND APPROACHES	7
2.2 PEER LEARNING AND POLICY LEARNING.....	8
2.3 DEFINITION OF ‘PEERS’ IN THE CONTEXT OF SD POLICYMAKING.....	9
2.4 PEER LEARNING AS OUTCOME OF PEER REVIEWS AND NETWORKS OF PEERS	10
2.5 PEER REVIEWS	10
2.6 NETWORKS OF PEERS: THE EXAMPLE OF THE ESDN AND ITS ROLE IN PEER LEARNING	11
Chapter 3: Practical approaches to Peer Learning and Peer Review.....	12
3.1 THE OECD’S LONG LASTING EXPERIENCE WITH PEER REVIEWS	12
3.2 THE UN LEVEL: THE CONTEXT OF THE 2030 AGENDA FOR SD.....	14
3.2.1 THE HIGH-LEVEL POLITICAL FORUM: FIRST VOLUNTARY NATIONAL REVIEWS IN JULY 2016.....	15
3.3 PEER REVIEWS IN EUROPE IN THE CONTEXT OF NATIONAL SD STRATEGIES	16
3.3.1 THE GERMAN EXPERIENCE WITH ITS NSDS PEER REVIEWS.....	17
References	20

Introduction

This workshop discussion paper provides background information for the **14th ESDN Workshop**, entitled **“Developing the ESDN peer learning approach to support the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for SD and the SDGs: Experiences and needs for peer learning and peer review processes”**, which takes place in **Berlin on 14 June 2016**. This ESDN Workshop is organized in cooperation with the German Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation, Building and Nuclear Safety.

In the context of the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), this ESDN Discussion Paper focuses on the topic of peer learning applied in policy-making, and intends 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, experts 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 those related to sustainable development**.

The **workshop will have the following objectives:**

- To develop, together with the workshop participants, the ESDN peer learning approach, based on experiences on peer learning and peer review in individual countries (e.g. Germany), and drawing also on European practices and examples from international institutions (e.g. OECD, UN);
- To provide the opportunity to exchange and discuss the needs of national policy-making with regards to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for SD, and to share experiences and perspectives on how to design policies and processes, and how to link them to national sustainable development strategies.

The workshop will comprise of an opening and orientating session, followed by three main sessions:

- **Session 1:** Defining Peer Learning and Peer Reviews: Concept and approaches;
- **Session 2:** National and international examples of Peer Reviews and Peer Learning;
- **Session 3:** Developing the ESDN peer learning approach.

The workshop discussion paper has the following structure: Chapter 1 provides a short overview of recent developments in the context of the 2030 Agenda implementation. Chapter 2 concentrates on defining 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 3 provides an overview on practical approaches to peer learning and peer reviews. A full documentation of the keynotes, discussions and group work at the workshop will be published in a workshop report shortly after the event.

Chapter 1: Recent developments in the context of the 2030 Agenda

DUTCH EU PRESIDENCY WORKSHOP ON 2030 AGENDA IMPLEMENTATION

Although not directly related to peer reviews and peer learning, an important meeting in the context of the 2030 Agenda implementation in Europe was held by the Dutch EU Presidency on 19 April 2016¹. We provide a short summary here to report on the outcomes of this workshop:

The main aim of the meeting was to **identify common challenges of EU Member States when implementing the 2030 Agenda on the national level**. The meeting provided the opportunity to receive information from Member States on steps taken at the national level to implement the 2030 Agenda; to what extent these depend on implementation of the 2030 Agenda on EU level; and the dilemmas and challenges they have been coming across so far.

The meeting revealed several interesting pieces of **information on the current 2030 Agenda implementation status** at the national level in Europe: (1) Most EU Member States (MS) are working on assigning responsibilities for different parts of the implementation process (e.g. who is in charge of the overall coordination, who for particular aspects, and who holds the overarching responsibility); (2) several MS have engaged in mapping exercises of current policies and are assessing to what extent these will meet the SDG targets. While most countries are still in the mapping phase, a number of countries is taking the exercise further and is working on gap analyses; (3) some MS are putting forward concrete proposals for decisions on how to adjust national policies to the 2030 Agenda; and (4) MS consider it important to be able to move forward in areas of EU competence together with the EU. There will come a point, many MS representatives stressed, when MS can only move once the EU has stepped forward.

During the workshop, the MS also identified **various challenges and dilemmas** for the 2030 Agenda implementation process:

- 1) Appropriation by all different departments and line ministries. The 2030 Agenda is the responsibility of all.
- 2) Creating awareness and ownership of the 2030 Agenda; the Agenda's integrated approach offers a chance to strengthen the work of line ministries and make them more receptive. Awareness on the highest political level is important.
- 3) There could be a role for the EU to mobilize stakeholders, especially outside the development and environment arenas.
- 4) A question is to what extent can existing mechanisms be used. Some MS have opted for new instruments, while others use existing ones, but broadened their scope to address the full breadth of the agenda.
- 5) Integrated approach vs. silo approach: While the SDGs offer an opportunity to work on coherence, implementation might move faster if concentrate in put on certain areas first. Clustering or grouping of certain areas might be a way to address this in the national context.
- 6) Building on outreach and communication; e.g. by setting up a public website where initiatives can be shared and organizing conferences on SDGs.

¹ This part is based on the workshop report prepared by the Dutch EU Presidency.

- 7) Assessing the relevance of international targets and indicators for the national context: Member States should decide whether they want to cover the whole agenda or focus on the most important ones.
- 8) Member States feel the need to move forward on the EU level, including the addressing of gaps in existing policies.

An important milestone will be the UN's High Level Political Forum (HLPF) meeting in July 2016. The Member States pointed out that this meeting will be key for lessons learned and the next steps in the implementation process.

OECD MEETING ON SDGs IMPLEMENTATION AND POLICY COHERENCE FOR SD

The OECD and the World Resources Institute organised a workshop on **SDG Implementation** with a focus on **Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development** that was held at the OECD Headquarters in Paris on 2-3 May 2016. High-level representatives from OECD countries delegations working on Policy Coherence for Development, policymakers coordinating activities on the 2030 Agenda for SD, and several think tanks and researchers working primarily in the fields of development and sustainable development attended the meeting.

Several themes were touched during the meeting and four country studies were presented on the topic 'From global goals to national implementation: Learning from early experiences'. Specifically, such early experiences of national implementation were presented on Germany, Korea, Sweden, and the Netherlands: each in-depth case study was presented by different think tanks and research institutes². Many questions that are extremely relevant for the ESDN were discussed at the meeting, such as: (i) How can the universality and integrated nature of the SDGs be addressed at national level in the implementation process? (ii) What is the prioritization process used to identify areas of initial focus for SDG implementation at the national level? (iii) How is responsibility for coordinating national implementation organized and distributed across government departments, levels, other actors? (iv) Are policies in support of the SDGs examined for their need of policy coherence? (v) What analytical tools are helpful for governments to support policy coherence?

The OECD meeting also aimed to **investigate opportunities and challenges to build a so-called 'PCSD Partnership'** on Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development to respond to SDG target 17:14 on the means of implementation to "enhance policy coherence for sustainable development" (PCSD), and following-up the work done in the OECD context of Policy Coherence for Development (PCD). This work seems particularly relevant to the ESDN as it could support national implementation efforts to better capture not only the interactions among economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development, but also linkages and trade-offs among national strategies, policies and action plans in the context of the 2030 Agenda for SD.

² The case studies were prepared on Germany (German Development Institute - DIE); Korea (Korea Environment Institute - KEI); Sweden (Stockholm Environment Institute - SEI); and, the Netherlands (World Resources Institute - WRI).

Chapter 2: Defining ‘Peer Learning’ in SD policy-making

Chapter 2 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?

2.1 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*³. 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. 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).

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. **Benefits of peer learning** can be manifold⁴, ⁵ including: (a) developing 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.

³ 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.

⁴ 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/>. See also <http://www.itworx.education/collaborative-learning-vs-peer-to-peer-learning/>

⁵ <http://www.cdtl.nus.edu.sg/success/sl37.htm>

2.2 PEER LEARNING AND POLICY LEARNING

Before we go on explaining peer learning in more detail, it is worth spending a short while to reflect on **policy learning** in general. Policy learning 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.

In general, there are *different aspects of policy 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 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, Lethonen 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’.

2.3 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.)⁶. We refer to peers, in our context, 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 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 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. 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?

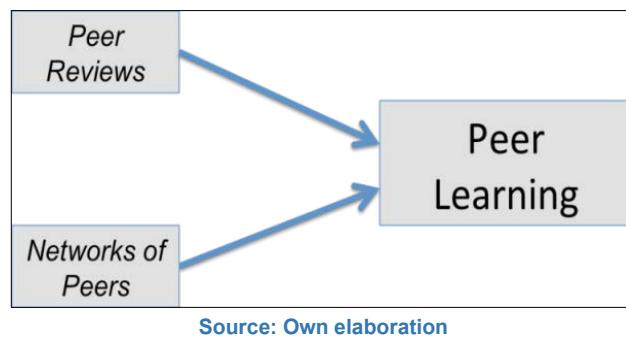
⁶ <http://mypeer.org.au/planning/what-are-peer-based-programs/what-is-a-peer/>

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.

2.4 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. The following two sections will briefly introduce both mechanisms.

Fig.1.1 Peer Learning as outcome



2.5 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**⁷. 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).

⁷ Our emphasis

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

In 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** (e.g. paragraph 80). In addition, 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. 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 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 **ESDN**⁸ 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 also facilitated by learning with and from others by creating networks spaces like evening receptions and coffee breaks, panel discussions, or keynote speeches.

⁸ See also the ESDN's Joint Understanding at: http://www.sd-network.eu/pdf/steering%20group/ESDN%20Joint%20Understanding_final.pdf

Chapter 3: Practical approaches to Peer Learning and Peer Review

Chapter 3 provides an overview of practical approaches to peer learning and peer review. Firstly, the international level is explored in an overview of OECD and UN 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).

3.1 THE OECD'S LONG LASTING EXPERIENCE WITH PEER REVIEWS

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)⁹. The OECD¹⁰ has most probably the largest experience and expertise with peer reviews. **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 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.

⁹ 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

¹⁰ 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>

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 process 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.

3.2 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 part on '**Follow-up and review at the regional and sub-regional levels**'. 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).

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 to 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, in the part on means of implementation, another 'Follow-up and review' part comprises the last 20 paragraphs of the Agenda (§72-91), and explains more thoroughly follow-up and review processes that will be crucial for the functioning and implementation of the 2030 Agenda. A 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.

3.2.1 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).

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 **national voluntary reviews** is scheduled from 11-20 July 2016 in New York. The **HLPF 2016** will be the first 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 voluntary reviews are expected to provide a platform for partnerships. A total of 22 countries are taking part in the national reviews at the 2016 HLPF session. Out of these 22, seven are European countries: Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Montenegro, Norway, and Switzerland.

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**.

3.3 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**.

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 understanding¹¹ 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. 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.

A number of principles were 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. Among these principles, we want to devote

¹¹ 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>

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.

3.3.1 THE GERMAN EXPERIENCE WITH ITS NSDS PEER REVIEWS

In Germany, **two peer reviews** of the German NSDS were undertaken¹²: the first one in 2009, and then in 2013. Both reviews were **facilitated by the German Council for Sustainable Development (RNE)**¹³, 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

¹² 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

¹³ We want to thank Prof. Dr. Günther Bachmann (General Secretary of the German Council for Sustainable Development) for his help and insights on both Peer Review processes that he facilitated..

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. 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 12 recommendations included in the 2009 Peer Review.

Both peer reviews followed a **multi-phase approach**, following practically the same structure with key elements being the scoping process, the fact finding and the Peer Week in Berlin, and the follow-up drafting process. The peer-review approach consisted of the following 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 at RNE 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).

This **extensive inclusion of such a wide array of stakeholders** was a distinctive feature of both peer reviews in comparison with more established forms of reviews: the ‘peers’ clearly wanted to include more perspectives and expertise. In particular, during the 2013 peer review several institutions and organisations (i.e. federal departments, private sector associations, local agenda groups, foundations and others) were asked to voluntarily provide a statement on the state of the art from their own perspective, so to broaden the view of the ‘peers’. In the same direction, the second review also included new elements that informed and ignited more fresh discussions:

- three “shadow rapporteurs” to the Peer Week were also included, but not allowed to take actively part in the discussions until the last day (conclusion of the “Berlin Week”) when the Peers asked for their assessment;
- a ‘Youth Dialogue’ (so-called “Carlowitz Generation”), separately conducted by the Council, was organized with the purpose to inform the Peers deliberations and brought in a generational perspective on innovative sustainable solutions (i.e. mobility, communication).

The two Peer Reviews were particularly beneficial for many reasons. First, they revealed a good way to maintain and continue high-level commitment of German politicians. Second, the timing of the Reviews somehow “bridged” the election gap between two policy cycles in Germany, so that formal reactions to the findings catalysed more action by both Parliament and Government. Thirdly, the Council and German policy-makers benefitted from the clear perspective and framing provided by the ‘peers’. Fourth, the German stakeholders felt encouraged and taken seriously. Finally, the reviews helped the creation of networks and trust was built.

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