Beyond climate policy: The perspective of sustainability

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Abstract
Since the 2019 European elections, the spotlight has been on climate protection. However, this strict focus obscures a broader view. Sustainability has three dimensions, all of which are of equal value. Thus, realising sustainability requires holistic action and a forward-looking approach. Sustainability also has the potential to be the driver behind economic modernisation and innovation. To tap into its real potential, what is needed is, instead of the apocalyptic global warming rhetoric of a self-fulfilling prophecy, a sound vision that unites ecological sustainability, economic performance and social justice. Given the European People's Party's comprehensive views on politics and society, the party is predestined to take the lead in the debate about a sustainable EU. Among Germany's Christian Democrats, a renewed positioning around this topic has recently begun.

Keywords
Sustainability, 2030 Agenda, Germany, Climate policy, Renewable energy technologies, UN Sustainable Development Summit, Sustainable finance, Innovation

Introduction
Since the 2019 European elections, the spotlight has been on climate protection. This is partly linked to the rise of Green parties throughout France, the Netherlands and, in particular, Germany. At the same time, there has been increased pressure to act due to the proliferation of heatwaves and extreme weather, even in the far north of Europe. These weather events are making the phenomenon of climate change tangible for EU citizens, and this explains why President-elect of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen has called for a European Green Deal to make the EU climate-neutral by 2050 (European Commission, 2019, p. 5–7). It is beyond doubt that this approach is the right one, but high transition costs should be avoided in favour of smart regulations and
market economy–based instruments. As signatories to the Paris Agreement, the EU, together with its member states, has committed to limiting global warming. Europeans must therefore deliver! That said, the strict focus on climate protection is obscuring our view of the real issue: sustainability! Taking this into consideration, it is worth taking a look at the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN 2015), which refers to sustainability in three respects. Transforming Our World focuses on creating a globally efficient economy with technological progress that works in harmony with the environment and is socially compatible. This triad of the economy, environment and society has distinguished the politics of the European People’s Party (EPP) since day one. The EPP is therefore predestined to take the lead in the debate about a sustainable EU.

This article argues that the time is ripe to unfold this potential. A broader definition of sustainability offers opportunities for the setting of a new political agenda that goes hand in hand with the EPP’s holistic views on politics and society, which stem from its status as a people’s party. In Germany, a renewed positioning around this topic among the Christian Democrats has recently begun. However, to walk the talk implies not only further integration of the various dimensions of sustainability into European and national policies, but also stirring a public debate on the local, regional and national levels about the complex realities of implementation. Furthermore, given the economic and demographic rise of Asia, the use of renewable energy technologies, the creation of international partnerships and the introduction of smart regulations to level the playing field for sustainable investments on a European and global scale will be indispensable to make the new narrative work.

**Sustainability reloaded**

First of all, it is worth noting that the threefold principle of sustainability is not an entirely new concept. The Brundtland Commission first coined the term in 1987 (UN 1987). However, we are now faced with a different political environment compared to that of the 1980s. Whereas at that time the discussion about sustainability was largely restricted to multilateral forums and expert conferences, the topic has now become far more salient for many EU citizens as a result of advancing global warming (European Parliament 2019). At the same time, our hyper-connected societies are undergoing dramatic changes as a result of growing connectivity and economic globalisation. The issue of global value chains provides one example of this. On the one hand, many developing and industrialised countries have benefited economically from the increased trade. On the other, the interconnected global economy is exerting high levels of competitive pressure on the affected multinational companies and producers (Berger 2019). It is true that consumers throughout Europe can make social and ecological criteria conditions for purchase. However, that is not enough to eliminate the social divide within societies or the abuses carried out at local production sites. It was against this backdrop that Germany adopted the National Action Plan on Business and Human Rights in 2016, and called on all actors in the supply chain to apply the UN guidelines for business and human rights (Die Bundesregierung 2017). Although implementing the plan is proving to be anything but simple for a manufacturing
process that involves a plethora of actors, such multi-stakeholder approaches are the only way to forge a path towards greater sustainability in globally interconnected value chains.

It is clear that the international dimension of sustainability is nowadays more essential to the realisation of a sustainable future than ever. Thus, the recent UN Sustainable Development Summit represented a milestone for moving towards global sustainability. Here the aim, above all else, was to maintain the political momentum, particularly at a time when multilateralism has come under severe pressure. That is why the situation does not look promising at the moment. This impression has been reinforced by the mixed UN (2019, 2) assessment on the implementation of the global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Despite this, European countries once again achieved top marks thanks to the Nordic states, whose populations traditionally place a high value on sustainability. Germany ranked in sixth place, Austria in fifth and France, fourth. Nonetheless, both European countries and other G20 states (the US ranked thirty-fifth), need to show more commitment (Sachs et al. 2019). The consumption behaviour of rich industrial countries is a particular target of criticism. The UN warns that unless we see improved performance from the G20, whose members account for two-thirds of the world’s population and are responsible for 75% of global CO₂ emissions, the agenda will be doomed to failure (Rat Für Nachhaltige Entwicklung 2017).

The politics of sustainability

Since the 2019 European elections, discourse on sustainability policy in Germany has been subject to change. While to date the topic has mainly found expression among the political Greens, who limit the principle of sustainability to climate protection, the Union parties (the Christian Democratic Union and the Christian Social Union) are once again taking an increased interest in it, too. In the Christian Democratic tradition, the topic of sustainability is firmly anchored under the motto ‘Bewahrung der Schöpfung’ (Protecting Creation). The Energiewende, as heralded by German Chancellor Angela Merkel in 2011, is the most recent example of an extensive sustainability policy. After the Fukushima catastrophe, Merkel announced an energy policy turnaround including, amongst others, the phasing out of nuclear energy and an increased share of renewables in energy consumption (Bundesministerium für Wirtschaft und Energie 2019, 18–20). It was the global financial and economic crisis that temporarily pushed the issue into the background. The tide has now turned. Leading Christian Democrats are seizing the opportunity to cast sustainability in a new light and to reconcile it with the economy, society and the environment. Hence, in addition to the ‘black zero policy’, which aims to ensure a balanced state budget, the chair of the Christian Democratic Union (Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands, CDU), Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, and Andreas Jung, deputy parliamentary group leader of the CDU and climate expert, have also called for a ‘green zero policy’ in order to prevent future generations from being faced with mountains of rubbish as well as debt (Kramp-Karrenbauer and Jung 2018). To convince the broader population, a fine balance needs to be struck between an additional financial burden and opportunities for innovation and economic modernisation. It comes as little surprise that the Greens, in particular, are critical of the concept. They have been the
main beneficiaries of a sustainability debate which focuses solely on climate protection and fails to take social and economic aspects into account (Deutschlandfunk 2019). However, given that the three dimensions are considered of equal value, it is essential that they are all realised without cherry-picking. Instead, what is required is holistic action and a forward-looking perspective that includes the honest assessment that we need to readjust our harmful patterns of production and consumption. This complies with the idea expressed by Kramp-Karrenbauer that the principle of sustainability should be included in the constitution by amending the German basic law. The idea is to create a strong obligation to deliver the social dimension, since the constitution already covers the environmental (art. 20a) and fiscal aspects (art. 115(2)). According to former President of the Federal Constitution Hans-Jürgen Papier, provisions for the long-term satisfaction of community interests adopted within a parliamentary democracy fall short of expectations due to the nature of the system itself (Papier 2019). Hence, social compensation needs to take place not only within a generation but inter-generationally as well (CDU 2019). However, this initiative will only create commitment if sustainability also becomes a guiding principle of the budget. In other words, for this to be effective, sustainability will need to be taken into account when the draft budget is being drawn up, and there will also have to be effective parliamentary sustainability checks in place. Although approaches already exist, this development is still in its infancy in Germany and the other EU member states (Mulholland 2018).

However, Germany does have a comprehensive national sustainability strategy. The strategy was revised in 2016 to reflect the 2030 Agenda and updated in 2018 (Die Bundesregierung 2018). As a cross-cutting issue, it is now present in all departments and is the main tool when it comes to implementing sustainability. Yet despite the strategy’s importance, progress and challenges on the path towards greater sustainability are scarcely discussed beyond the circle of usual suspects. The German Council for Sustainable Development, an independent advisory body, thus recommends involving civil society to a greater extent. This primarily involves networking between local and regional actors (Rat Für Nachhaltige Entwicklung 2019). Thus, the consent of the federal states in June 2019 to adopt the federal government’s sustainability principles represents a vital step towards meeting this intention. Since there is no one way of implementing sustainability, it is also necessary to create more space for discussion around the topic and, in particular, to promote political debate. The parliaments, whether at the national, regional or local level, are the ideal places to answer concrete questions. The political foundations can also make substantial contributions to the discussion on sustainability thanks to their broad network in Germany as well as worldwide.

**Sustainability as a driver of innovation**

Sustainability is also the driver behind modernisation and innovation. This implies placing increased emphasis on sustainability principles in agriculture and transport, as well as in trade policy and when managing the internal market. A common European framework is essential for this. To date, however, the EU’s development policy has merely been adjusted with the introduction of the New European Consensus on Development
Policy in 2017. The hope is now that the new European Commission will quickly address the issue. That said, the most important prerequisite would be to include the sustainability principles in the Multiannual Financial Framework for 2021–7, and primarily to enshrine expenditure that fulfils SDG priorities in the EU cohesion and competition policy. A further suggestion, which has a similar goal, is to incorporate sustainability goals in the monitoring of the European Semester (Renda 2019, 14). Comparison at the EU level is needed to better display and integrate the results of sustainable policies across Europe. Despite the fact that all member states take note of the SDGs in their national strategy documents, the scope of these documents varies greatly and the range of results achieved is accordingly large (European Parliament, Directorate-General for External Policies 2019, 24).

Furthermore, sustainability is also about the question of who has the upper hand when it comes to future technologies: renewable energies are imperative here. German companies, in particular, have gained valuable experience thanks to the Energiewende, although it has turned Germany’s energy—at least for the moment—into the EU’s most expensive. However, the faster cutting-edge ‘green’ technologies are disseminated globally through market-based incentives, the sooner prices will be normalised. For the moment, China is leading the way with the expansion of renewable energy capacities. Between 2010 and the first half of 2019 the country invested $758 billion in renewable capacity, followed by the US in second place, with a mere $356 billion of investment, and Japan in third, with $202 billion. The EU comes after these three, with overall $698 billion of investment, with Germany contributing the most, at $179 billion (Frankfurt School of Finance & Management GmbH 2019, 14–16). However, we should also extend our view beyond China, to include the other growth centres in Asia: India could overtake China as the most populous country in the world as early as 2027. Forecasts predict that over 60% of the global middle class will live in Asia by 2030; in 2015 it was 46% (Kharas 2017). There can be no doubt that Asia’s economic rise will result in higher energy demands and more consumption and production. This phenomenon could thwart our progress in climate protection on a global scale. The World Energy Outlook assumes that global energy demand will experience major changes in the coming years. Whereas in the year 2000 more than 40% of global energy demand came from Europe and North America and approximately 20% came from developing and emerging countries in East Asia, this ratio will have reversed by 2040 (International Energy Agency 2018). Thus it is clear that innovative concepts in mobility, climate-friendly fuels and greater energy efficiency are not only needed in the West, but are even more necessary in the new growth regions beyond Europe. Hence, in order to really save the climate and our planet, the EU, Germany and the other member states must boost their economies and position themselves more visibly in the global competition for climate and resource-saving technological solutions (Bertelsmann Foundation 2018).

Sustainability needs capital

According to the European Commission, the transformation of the European economy into an environmentally friendly and circular system will not only result in reducing our
ecological footprint, but will also increase competitiveness, as production processes will be designed more efficiently and the cost of accessing and managing resources will be reduced (European Commission 2018, 2). This transition requires capital, however. To date, only a fraction of investments have been made in sustainable projects. The Commission estimates that there is an annual backlog in the investment needed to achieve the EU climate and energy targets of €180 billion (European Commission 2018, 2). Additional environmental and social considerations are rarely taken into account. In the same vein, it is unclear which companies really produce in a sustainable way. This is why the EU has recently adopted legislation in the framework of an action plan, which is currently being discussed by the Parliament and Council. The primary focus of the action plan is to develop a taxonomy that, as a uniform classification system, will ensure clarity about which activities can be considered ‘sustainable’ in order to help inform investors and to increase economic investment in sustainable projects (European Commission 2018, 5). Again, the emphasis is placed on climate protection and measures to adapt to global warming. Whether an agreement will be achieved in brief, remains unclear. Even though many EU member states have identified ‘sustainable finance’ as being relevant, opinions about the criteria continue to differ (Godinot 2019). Nevertheless, the European discussion is a reflection of the global trend (UN Environment Programme 2018). The UN also believes that the time has come for sustainable finance. Despite it still being in the embryonic stages, some sectors have already experienced high growth rates. The principles of responsible investment adopted in 2017 on the initiative of the UN committed shareholders and investors, who represent a value of some $90 billion, to fully comply with environmental, social and governance criteria. The Global Impact Investing Network also takes the view that interest in ‘impact investing’ is on the rise (Haberstock 2019). This is driven by hard-hitting self-interest. Banks and insurance companies need to calculate the growing risks triggered by climate change and environmental degradation differently, and hence take sustainability into account when making their decisions. However, we need to be aware that the global market is diverse. Since there is ‘still no uniform standard for measuring or proving whether and to what extent a company supports sustainable development and the SDGs’, the risk of ‘greenwashing’ persists (Orosz 2019, 168, author’s translation). Furthermore, the question of how increased amounts of private capital could be directed to those countries that most need it remains unresolved. Von der Leyen therefore intends to put forward a strategy for green financing and a sustainable European Investment Plan (European Commission 2019). Money often fails to materialise, especially in fragile countries, where the risks for investors remain incalculable (UN Conference on Trade and Development 2019). To date, expectations to mobilise private capital with the help of state subsidies in the form of ‘blending’ or by providing guarantee loan coverage, especially in the poorer developing countries, have not been fulfilled (Wolff 2019, 24–36). More effort is needed. Therefore, innovative financial instruments need to be refined to attract private equity to sustainable projects even in difficult circumstances.

**Conclusion**

It is beyond doubt that ‘business as usual’ achieves nothing when it comes to paving the way towards a sustainable world by 2030. The latest UN SDG report makes it clear that
present and future generations will have to pay a high price if we fail. To prevent the realisation of such a negative scenario, the new complex reality of sustainability has to be taken into account by policymakers. That said, the apocalyptic global warming rhetoric of a self-fulfilling prophecy must stop and be changed into a sound vision that unites ecological sustainability, economic performance and social justice. This requires taking vital steps to create more space for political debate in order to build a broader consensus. To set the course, innovative concepts and ideas in areas such as mobility, climate-friendly fuels and higher energy efficiency need to circulate beyond national boundaries while forging partnerships with multiple actors, particularly in the new growth centres outside Europe. It is therefore imperative to strongly boost Europe’s economies through increased investment, particularly in cutting-edge green technologies, and to continue the EU’s pioneering role in the advancement of sustainable finance. At the same time, to ensure that sustainability actions are widely accepted, political measures are needed to avoid the high social costs affecting the most vulnerable within our societies. It is now high time to widen the scope of public discourse on sustainability and to promote political debate on the different choices of transformative pathways. While the discourse in Germany on sustainability has long been hijacked by the political Greens and their sole focus on climate issues, the tide has now turned. New ideas, generated by the Christian Democrats, are evolving and are giving sustainability a more forward-looking approach and holistic perspective. Given Germany’s size and role in the EU, this is good news for making real progress on sustainability within the country, but also in and outside Europe.

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