A task of truly global proportions: the global community taking steps towards sustainable development

Sustainable development is the guiding political theme of the 21st century. Achieving sustainable development requires action in all areas of life. Promoting sustainable development is the task of every government and of the global community at large. Therefore, sustainability is also a clear priority of the United Nations (UN). The term refers to an overarching concept which demands that the development of our society and our economy must be aligned to the limitations of our planet such that we do not live at the expense of future generations. The subsequent overview gives proof of the growing international significance of “sustainability” over the last 40 years.

1972 – Launch of a global environmental policy

The first global UN Conference on the Human Environment was held in Stockholm in 1972. Since the 1960s, many environmental problems could simply no more be overlooked: The Rhine was called the “cesspit of Europe”, hazardous pesticides were used unreservedly, and wild animals were hunted without any restriction. UNESCO’s Biosphere Conference in 1968 was the first intergovernmental meeting to declare that the protection and use of natural resources must go hand in hand. It also called for strengthening interdisciplinary environmental research. Four years later in Stockholm, representatives of both industrialised and developing countries established the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). Germany has set up its scientific Advisory Council on the Environment in 1971. In the years following the Stockholm conference, some problems were mitigated or solved at national level, but global environmental challenges such as ozone depletion and climate change were just emerging at the time. In spite of the oil crisis, too few people realised that the limitedness of natural resources would at some point entail limits to growth.

1987 – Sustainable development - a concept becomes recognized globally

The UN established an independent expert commission in 1983. It was chaired by the former prime minister of Norway, Gro Harlem Brundtland, which is why the commission is also referred to as the Brundtland Commission. In its 1987 report, “Our Common Future”, the Brundtland Commission stated that sustainable development is “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. This definition led to global recognition of a concept that has ancient traditions and in German language was first coined 300 years ago by the Saxon mining administrator Carl von Carlowitz as a principle for German forestry. The “Brundtland definition” marked the start of a truly global discussion on sustainability.

1988 – Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change established

The IPCC was established as a both scientific and intergovernmental organisation by UNEP and the World Meteorology Organisation (WMO). The IPCC has carefully defined precise
processes for collecting the most up-to-date knowledge on climate change and presenting this knowledge in suitable formats to policy-makers. Scientists and government representatives negotiate in multiple sessions to determine what will be published as a consensus in the IPCC reports. The IPCC and Al Gore in 2007 shared the Nobel Peace Prize. In September 2013, the first volume of the fifth IPCC assessment report was published.

1989 – Ozone depletion halted, at least temporarily

Ozone depletion was first discovered in the early 1980s. Scientists from many countries had made urgent appeals and warned of drastic consequences. The Montreal Protocol took effect in 1989; today, 98 per cent of the ozone-depleting substances, halocarbons, are off the market. Former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan has called the Montreal Protocol the most successful single international agreement to date. It is hoped that ozone in the stratosphere will be back to its previous levels around 2050.

1992 – Global focus on climate change, biodiversity and desertification

The 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro was the start of the political response of UN member states to climate change and other global environmental challenges. They signed conventions on mitigating climate change, on halting the loss of biodiversity and on stopping desertification. A subsidiary body as interface to science was created for each of these three conventions. All countries also agreed to align their political actions towards achieving sustainable development. The objective was not limited to protecting the environment; more importantly, the idea was to establish a global partnership to reduce the gap between industrialised and developing countries. The Earth Summit passed the comprehensive action plan “Agenda 21”. In the years to follow, its specific recommendations for action became a guideline at all levels of society, globally. The German government founded its scientific Advisory Council on Global Change in 1992 and its Council for Sustainable Development in 2001. The first German Sustainability Strategy was adopted in 2002; since 2006 there has been a parliamentary advisory board for sustainable development.

1996 – Bonn turns into the UN sustainability city

Since the mid-1990s, more and more UN secretariats in the areas of environment and sustainability have opened their doors in Bonn, such as the Secretariat for the Framework Convention on Climate Change. Today, more than 1,000 UN employees work in Bonn.

1999 – Global scientific conference calls for a focus on sustainability

UNESCO’s World Conference on Science highlighted the importance of science for sustainable development. Science should serve all of humankind and help foster greater understanding of nature and society, better quality of life, and a sustainable and healthy environment for current and future generations. Two years later, the foundation was laid for “sustainability science”, a discipline focused on researching and implementing sustainability.
The German government has invested billions in the research programme FONA (Research for Sustainable Development) since 2004. In 2012, Germany hosted the “Science Year Project Earth” to promote science for sustainable development.

**2000 – The UN member states formulate ambitious development goals**

The Millennium Declaration is a voluntary agreement by the heads of state and heads of government of 189 UN member states which sets goals inter alia in four areas of action: 1. Promoting peace, security and disarmament. 2. Eradicating poverty. 3. Protecting the environment. 4. Promoting human rights, democracy and good governance. The eight Millennium Development Goals (MDG) are based on this declaration. They are scheduled to be reached in 2015. The goals include halving the number of persons suffering from extreme poverty and hunger, securing universal primary education and ending the spread of malaria.

**2002 – Education confirmed as a key factor in sustainable development**

Ten years after Rio, the Earth Summit in Johannesburg reviewed the progress made and agreed on new action items. The Earth Summit highlighted the great importance of education as a key to sustainable development. 2005–2014 was declared as the “UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development”. UNESCO is the lead agency for implementing the decade; in Germany, the German Commission for UNESCO implements the decade through its national committee. Starting in 2015, a world action programme will follow.

**2010 – Biodiversity Panel kicked-off**

The loss of biodiversity was supposed to have been significantly reduced by 2010. This has not been the case. This is one reason why the 2010 UN General Conference green-lighted the Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES). IPBES is modelled on the success of the IPCC, and again is both a scientific and an intergovernmental organisation. The new organisation met for the first time in 2013 and is headquartered in Bonn.

**2012 – The global community commits itself to a “green economy”**

Twenty years after the first Rio Earth Summit, the global community returned to Rio de Janeiro for the Rio+20 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development. The primary goal was to overcome challenges in achieving previously adopted goals. The participants committed to sustainable business and the model of a “green economy”. A new format was adopted for discussing sustainable development at the UN General Assembly and at the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). The UN also announced that it would establish the UN Scientific Advisory Board (SAB). It is intended to advise the UN Secretary-General and the executive heads of all UN agencies in interdisciplinary and science-related matters of sustainability. The Scientific Advisory Board, hosted by UNESCO, will meet for the first time in January 2014.
2013 – The last mile on achieving the Millennium Development Goals

At a high-level special session, the 68th UN General Assembly reiterated the commitment of the global community to reaching the Millennium Development Goals, regardless of the economic and financial crisis. Several MDG have been met or will be by 2015. For instance, the number of people who still live on less than USD 1.25 a day was reduced by half, five years ahead of schedule. The number of people without access to safe drinking water has also been reduced by half. However, in other areas such as ecological sustainability, the progress is far from satisfactory.

2014 – Research results taken better into account

The UN Scientific Advisory Board will meet for the first time at the end of January 2014. In Berlin, 26 scientists from all over the world will discuss how research results can be better integrated into UN processes for promoting sustainable development.

Beyond 2015 – Sustainable development will take additional steps forward

Negotiations have been ongoing for some time about the global development agenda after 2015. The task now is to set goals not just for developing countries but for the whole world. Plans include common sustainable development goals that each country is to specify for itself.

Contact for media enquiries:
Björn Köllen and Sophia Vassilev
fischerAppelt, relations GmbH
Tel. +49-30-726146-704 | 722
bjk@fischerappelt.de | sva@fischerappelt.de
http://www.fischerappelt.de