

Are research and teaching active enough to tackle the big sustainability issues of the 21st century?

Fireside Chat on 12 May 2015 in the context of the Bonn Conference for Global Transformation

The “Rotunda” room in Bonn’s World Conference Center provided a very cosy setting when the Sustainable Development Solutions Network Germany (SDSN Germany) and the Center for Development Research (ZEF) hosted a Fireside Chat for around 35 high-level representatives from universities and academic institutions in Germany and abroad. “Are research and teaching active enough to tackle the big sustainability issues of the 21st century?” was the guiding question of this evening. **Prof. Jeffrey Sachs**, world renowned economist and Director of the global SDSN, highlighted in his opening statement that education can reach everybody across the globe, not least due to recent developments in information and communications technology (ICT). This provides great opportunities for research and teaching on sustainable development. **Svenja Schulze**, Minister of Innovation, Science and Research of the State of North Rhine-Westphalia, added that more interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research may be required to make academic institutions fit for the future.

The subsequent open discussion was facilitated by ZEF Director **Prof. Joachim von Braun** and started with comments by **Prof. Stefan Hiermaier** (Fraunhofer Institute for



Prof. Jeffrey Sachs and Minister Svenja Schulze

High-Speed Dynamics) and **Prof. Ulrike Grote**, (Leibniz University Hannover). Both of them identified key topics for sustainability research, such as resilience and engineering for resilience, climate change and household vulnerability as well as demographic change, migration and urbanization. Prof. Grote argued that sustainable development has to be better mainstreamed into research, teaching and education, building on an already positive trend: more and more BA and MA programmes address sustainability issues, and the fact that there are around 60 sustainability research institutions outside universities and 140 divisions within universities shows how much prominence this field has gained over the past years.

SUMMARY



The discussion also touched upon “infobesity”, i.e. the risk of an overflow of academic papers that do not really add something new. Prof. Sachs used the example of randomized control trials (RTC) to propose that more researchers should focus on a meta-analysis of existing sustainability data instead of conducting their own RTCs in isolation from previous results. There was also a call for greater coherence in sustainability research and teaching both across disciplines and between the national and regional (e.g. EU) level. This may require appropriate impulses from politics to bridge gaps between research “islands”, but also a more proactive stance among academics, as some of the participants claimed.

Minister Schulze argued that sustainability research has to get closer to the people – and others added that communication and mutual understanding also need to be improved within the research community. If researchers from one discipline tried to understand how the others think, as Prof. Sachs concluded, this would open up a whole range of new discourse opportunities.



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