

Sustainability as a political principle

# Citizens' councils for promoting the global common good

by Okka Lou Mathis,

German Development Institute /  
Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE)



## The Current Column

of 18 March 2021

d·i·e

Deutsches Institut für  
Entwicklungspolitik



German Development  
Institute



Prioritise climate protection, promote sustainable food production, increase funds for development cooperation, and create a sustainability ministry: These are just four of the 32 proposals from the citizens' council on "Germany's Role in the World", consisting of 154 randomly selected citizens. The Bundestag will receive the final report on 19 March. The citizens' council is an instrument of innovative citizen participation that has been used in many countries and at various political levels.

Citizens' councils promise to reduce disenchantment with politics and to promote courageous solutions to socially controversial issues. The trick is that certain people come together by lot, ideally representing the socio-economic composition of society, in a so-called "mini-public". The council is therefore much more inclusive and diverse than, for example, the Bundestag. Moreover, the councillors have neither voters, nor a party line, or lobby interests breathing down their necks. The idea is that this allows them to discuss political issues more impartially and at eye level. In addition to learning together, an appreciative, personal and yet fact-oriented exchange of experiences and views can take place according to the principle of "deliberation": In the end, the best argument for the common good should actually be convincing, not just the loudest voice or the best-organised interest. For this reason alone, citizens' councils are a useful addition to our democracy. In concrete terms, citizens' councils can provide valuable impulses in terms of content, as the political recommendations on sustainability from the citizens' council "Germany's Role in the World" show.

**"What is new and encouraging is that the international community's existing goals, and their consequences for us in Germany seem to enjoy support among the general population."**

The citizens examined this broad topic from five perspectives in working groups: sustainable development, peace and security, democracy and the rule of law, economy and trade, and the EU. The topics were selected in advance through a participatory process, and it is gratifying that sustainable development was considered very important. A small drop of bitterness, however, is that sustainable development was not, by its very nature, considered as a cross-cutting basic principle everywhere. Be that as it may, both the agreed guidelines and the concrete recommendations of the sustainable development group showed that the randomly chosen citizens were

serious about wanting to anchor sustainability as an overarching guiding principle in German politics. For example, at their final meeting on 20 February, they agreed that Germany should "promote sustainability, climate protection, the right to clean water and the fight against world hunger as a global cross-sectional task (...) and place them at the centre of its political action so that future generations can also live well". They proposed "enshrining sustainability in the Basic Law" and the "establishment of a sustainability ministry that coordinates, controls and monitors other ministries and ensures transparency". They also found clear words for prioritising climate protection and for Germany to show "courage to embrace a reorientation towards the common good and end the continuous growth paradigm". In addition, funds for "development aid" should be increased to 2% of gross national income (currently the rate is 0.6%). In addition, food production should become sustainable worldwide – "even if food prices in Germany rise as a result."

If we think of the international agreements such as the Paris Climate Agreement and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, sustainability and the reduction of greenhouse gases are central and overarching political goals, and are not exactly new. What is new and encouraging, however, is that the international community's existing goals, and their consequences for us in Germany seem to enjoy support among the general population, at least when citizens are given the opportunity to discuss them in an informed way. This could increase both the pressure on politicians for the ambitious implementation of these goals and the social legitimacy of sustainability measures in Germany. Despite all the euphoria, however, questions remain about the citizens' council as an instrument, for example how to strengthen its political weight and how to attract broader public attention to the discussions and conclusions.

The citizens' council "Germany's Role in the World" shows the instrument's potential for searching for solutions oriented towards the common good – both at national and global level. This makes the format directly relevant for international (development) cooperation, because the global common good is the very rationale behind the climate and sustainability agendas. The institutionalisation of citizens' councils in Germany, especially on sustainability issues, would therefore be a promising way of exerting pressure for the implementation of these international targets. Incidentally, this is also a recommendation of the panel itself: "Germany should (...) use and account for citizen-based, political forums (e.g., citizens' assemblies) on a permanent basis". The next citizens' council that could work for the global common good is already in the starting blocks – the topic: climate.