A new science-policy-society interface for the 2030 Agenda: the role of European Advisory Councils on the Environment and Sustainable Development

Introduction

The implementation of the 2030 Agenda at the national, sub-national and local level requires a strong alliance between governments, a broad variety of stakeholders and the scientific community. The existing national and sub-national advisory councils on the environment and sustainable development play a strategic role as advisors to governments and parliaments worldwide in terms of agenda setting and knowledge dissemination. Above all, these advisory councils have a tangible, long-standing and successful role as interface between policy, society and science.

In Europe, 14 councils - offering independent advice to their national or regional governments and parliaments on environmental and sustainability matters - take active part in the network of European Environment and Sustainable Development Advisory Councils (EEAC). This network was established in 1993 and their council members include representatives from academia, civil society, the private sector and public bodies.

Some of these councils contributed to the preparation of the national or regional positions to the new 2030 Agenda, prior to its approval by the UN General Assembly. Others have contributed and/or still contribute to localising SDGs in their countries, through their advisory position to governments and/or parliaments, the dissemination of the 2030 Agenda among stakeholders and the promotion of independent, transparent and well-informed debate between policy makers, civil society and scientists.

This document contains an analysis of the way the advisory councils on sustainable development contribute to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. It includes background information combined with some examples from the advisory councils gathered in the EEAC Network, with special attention to their contribution to a renewed interface between society, science and policy making.

How can councils contribute to implementing the 2030 Agenda in a changing policy-science-society interface?

The implementation of the 2030 Agenda requires inclusive, effective and accountable institutions. The complex and crosscutting challenges to be addressed in terms of sustainability call for informed debate at the political and societal level, based on rigorous information and knowledge provided by the scientific community.

However, we are currently witnessing a changing political and societal atmosphere in which established forms of scientific expertise and policy advice are frequently challenged by citizens, stakeholders and, in some countries, by the government institutions themselves. A general erosion of trust in research institutions, universities and think tanks is sometimes coupled with deliberate

misrepresentation of evidence by vested interests[1]. In this context, it is necessary to re-think the existing interfaces between science, policy and society in order to ensure informed and inclusive decision-making processes and greater legitimacy of knowledge.

1. *Providing a long-term vision, rigorous and independent advice to government and parliaments*

Councils for Sustainable Development are active safeguards of the long-term focus in policy making, representing the needs of future generations. While sustainable development is a topic that needs a long haul, the nature of the current political debate mostly seems to privilege short term subjects over long term challenges, such as sustainable development. This means that safeguarding the long term vision is increasingly important to keep an integrated sustainable development approach. By providing sound advice in which the long-term interest is well protected councils can make a pivotal contribution.

Councils also advocate an integrated approach towards sustainable development. In practice this means that attention must be paid to better linking different policies and triggering crosscutting arrangements. Safeguarding an integrated approach is important, especially under current circumstances, and it requires a balanced representation of both socio-economic and environmental aspects. The Council for the Sustainable Development of Catalonia fulfils an interesting role as guardian of an integrated approach towards the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, since the council has been appointed to give support to the Inter-Ministerial-Commission in charge to elaborate the 2030 Agenda Implementation Plan, to guarantee coherence between SDGs.

2. *Cooperation between scientists, policy-makers and citizens*

By their structure and functioning councils are enabled to organize broad stakeholder inclusion, enhancing better connection between society, science and policymakers. Though the scientific community is involved to seek scientific input, the inclusion of a broader range of stakeholders enables councils to gather different opinions, ideas and interests. More precisely, it enables councils to include cross border thinking, strengthen innovative thoughts, ideas, approaches and proposals and to counteract the more sectorial or single interest approaches of many individual stakeholders and their lobby groups.

The role of councils in this process of inclusion, and the council's role as facilitators and agents of stakeholder engagement are often identified as core functions of the councils. In practice councils have frequently been able to amplify and widen the role and influence of many parts of (civil) society. Through their link to political leadership in sustainability and the expertise combined in the council, they build up an additional weight to the political sounding usually provided by civil society organisations.[2]

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[1] Queralt, A., De Graeff, J.J. (2017): *Letter of concern to the European Commission's Frist Vice President Frans Timmermans.* The Hague.

[2] Niestroy. I. (2007): *Stimulating informed debate– Sustainable Development Councils in EU Member States. A compilation of tasks, capacities, and best practice.* Brussels.

Reaching out to and engaging with society is also a way in which councils try to enhance cooperation between scientist, policy makers and citizens. Most advisory councils invite stakeholders and talk with them as part of their preparations for advisory reports.

Some councils go beyond engaging with organized civil society by directly engaging with citizens. For example, the National Council on Environment and Sustainable Development of Portugal reached out to citizens to discuss climate change. By connecting and proving that climate change impacts people's lives and enabling their participation, the Portuguese council was able to make their report a treasure of knowledge gained from society. Moreover, the agenda of the German Council for Sustainable Development offers some good examples as well: a school competition promoting best ideas to integrate SDGs into education, a project to boost the transition towards circular economy at the local level in cooperation with municipalities and citizens, an innovative Science Platform called 'Sustainability 2030' and the OpenSDGclub.Berlin-initiative which gathers a broad variety of expert-stakeholders from over the world to exchange views on how to better implement the 2030 Agenda.

Connecting with representatives of the younger generation is also an often-used instrument by the EEAC member councils to operate the society, science, policy interface. For example, in Luxembourg and the Netherlands youngsters are included by the councils in the preparation of advisory work on implementing the 2030 Agenda. The EEAC network also included representatives of the younger generation in its conferences in both Barcelona and Maastricht, enabling inter-generational dialogue and mutual learning on the SDGs.

3. New methodologies in which citizens conduct research or contribute to scientific evidence

Advisory bodies are experimenting with including citizens in research. For example, in the Netherlands citizens were given measuring equipment to measure levels of harmful particles in the air. By doing so a major source of data became available, while citizens were directly engaged in the endeavour to generate (scientific) data. This data was used later in an advice placing SDG 7 and 13 on the political agenda.

However, the debate about the role of citizens vis-à-vis scientist is not yet over. Although it seems that there is general agreement about the scientists need of independence to fulfil their roles - which include critical reflection and pushing for action-, this does not mean that they must work in isolation. The challenge is to connect science to citizens' perceptions, while at the same time not losing the accuracy and credibility of science. In this sense, the advisory councils are well-positioned to play a role in this process of connecting science and society[3].

4. *More inclusive and transparent approaches to policy advise*

Independency of council members and their advice is a key point for the credibility of these councils, and this point is directly linked to transparency. In that sense, advisory councils understand that more transparent approaches towards policy advice are required, especially in those bodies with a stakeholder nature.

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[3] Schmidt, F. (Speaker) (2017) in *the 25th EEAC Annual Conference Proceedings*. Maastricht.

To enhance transparency, society needs to be well informed about the way in which policy advice is made. Which stakeholders were included and what questions have been raised? Was there a balanced set of voices represented and who are the advisors involved in the advisory work of the council? If these questions remain unanswered there is a risk that the public feels alienated, barring the risk of a further erosion of trust.

The need to work in a more transparent way is materialized in different ways. For example, in councils with a scientific/expert approach, whose members are solely appointed *ad-personam*, meaning that they are not or only softly linked to their constituency, it is common practise to ask these council members to sign official declarations of independence. Councils in – among others- Sweden, Germany and the Netherlands use this transparency system.

Moreover, nearly all councils make sure to deliver full transparency about the people and organisations which are consulted in prelude to an advice. In every council report or study there are lists including all the people and organisations which contributed to the advisory work. By doing so transparency is strengthened.

Furthermore, there is a need to link the discussion on the sustainability transformation to that other transformation which is going on, reflected by the present socio-political turbulence (Brexit, Trump, etc.). This transformation is driven by the dynamics between the winners and losers of globalisation, by people feeling that things are becoming uncontrollable. With the sustainability transformation it is also reasonable to assume that reaching the ambitions of the 2030 Agenda will cause 'winners' but also parties which will not see so many advantages. The effects of the SDGs will touch upon a broad variety of stakeholders and if society, science and policy interface is not re-organized, the group who will not win will at least hinder or delay the sustainability transformation.

By offering a platform for debate and consensus building advisory councils could play a pivotal role in managing the debate. By their structure and functioning Councils for Sustainable Development seem to be well suited to this task; being a forum for open and respectful debate[4]. An interesting example is the French Council for Ecological Transition, which gathers over 50 stakeholders from seven sectors and disciplines to ensure broad participation of organised civil society. By bringing a wide variety of stakeholders to the table and enabling open debate on a pathway towards consensus, councils may act as facilitator of change and transparency. However, the challenges to overcome conflicts of interest in science, society and policy making, which are sometimes reflected within the membership of councils themselves, will remain obvious.

5. *Informing the public*

We need to tell stories. Faced with xenophobia, the answer is: creating futures! Technical solutions are necessary, but they are not convincing people. Narratives are. Councils can play a pivotal role in telling the story of sustainable development. The councils are in possession of a treasure of scientific knowledge. Councils work hard to make this treasure easier accessible to citizens and society. To

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[4] De Vries, M., Osbron D., Bachmann, G. (2015). *The Role of National Sustainable Development Councils in Europe in Implementing the UN's Sustainable Development Goals*. Berlin.

achieve the communication aims councils use a variety of actions and instruments, depending on budget and capacity.

When dealing with a substantial sustainability issue, councils often aim to organise informed and well-balanced debates. They may invite governmental and political actors, scientific experts and other key stakeholders to contribute and to attend the debate, workshop, thematic gathering, conference, or award ceremony event. By including high-level representatives, such as ministers, parliamentarians and business leaders the message that is sent by the event gains value for (mass and social) media and finds its way more easily to the general audience.

Besides physical gatherings, councils often use services on the internet and newsletters to reach out to interest groups or the wider public. Councils regularly have a solid group of engaged followers with a major variety of backgrounds. The increasing use of social media enables Councils to communicate sustainable development related topics with the broader public as well. The strength of social media to get the message across should be reassessed to ensure that Councils can make the most of it. By sharing and re-sending messages the actual message a Council aims to send can reach hundred thousand of people at once. Councils from for example Catalonia, Ireland, and the Netherlands are very active users of social media, delivering their messages to almost 10.000 followers each.