

Bertelsmann Stiftung (ed.)

# Developing Successful Sustainability Strategies

Fundamentals – Analyses – Design Options



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## Summary

Numerous studies show that the world is continuing along a path of non-sustainable development. It is only right, then, that the struggle to advance sustainability policies is also continuing through the definition of global sustainability goals and other measures, as part of the United Nations' "post-2015" agenda. Against this backdrop, Germany is also faced with the task of implementing effective sustainability policies. This applies both to national sustainability policies as well as the sub-national levels of the federal states and local authorities who also need to strengthen their approach to sustainability policies. Since the Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, establishing a sustainability strategy has been seen as the key instrument in the development and implementation of sustainability policies. Although Germany has had a sustainability strategy in place at the national level since 2002, and has updated it periodically, there has been no comprehensive introduction of effective sustainability strategies in the federal states, nor the local authorities. This is the starting point of the "Developing Successful Sustainability Strategies" project carried out by the Bertelsmann Stiftung and supported by the Ministry for Climate Protection, Environment, Agriculture, Conservation and Consumer Protection of the State of North Rhine-Westphalia. An analysis and transfer project aims to bring together the current status and development prospects for sustainability strategies to provide impetus for sustainability policies at the state level. Using a retrospective evaluation focused on the content of the project work, the aim is to identify the success factors of sustainability strategies

and evaluate the relevance of good practice examples for concrete technical issues.

Listed below are success factors for the development and implementation of sustainability strategies and strategic sustainability policies; these are drawn from a review of the literature on sustainability strategies in particular and strategic (sustainability) policies in general, analysis of documentation and a survey of project participants. Here it is important to note that several distinct aspects must be taken into account in the development of successful sustainability strategies:

- Key elements of sustainability strategies: content and objectives, measures, horizontal integration, vertical integration, participation, strategy assessment and targeting audiences;
- Comprehension and function of strategy in sustainability policies: the concept of strategy, the significance of strategy in the context of sustainability, purpose orientation and motives;
- Framework conditions and prerequisites: sustainability policies in a multi-level system, capacities and resources as well as willingness and capacity to act among state and non-state actors;
- Good practice and transfer potential: national/European/international best practices, sector-specific best practices/areas of activity and structural/instrumental best practices;
- Cross-disciplinary approaches and methods: project design, project management, methodological approach and project process.

The multidimensional nature of these aspects requires a sophisticated spectrum of success factors, which are presented below:

### **Success factor 1: Key elements of the sustainability strategy**

The professional application of key conceptual elements – content and objectives, vertical and horizontal integration, implementation, participation, monitoring and evaluation – is essential for any high-quality sustainability strategy. There was a broad consensus, particularly

among survey respondents, on the significance of this point. However, at times there is a considerable discrepancy between significance and difficulty of implementation. This applies in particular to vertical and horizontal integration, for example.

## **Success factor 2: Comprehension and function of strategy in sustainability policies**

A mainstream understanding of sustainability has asserted itself over the last two decades, one which draws on the definition of the Brundtland Commission and which encompasses the key features of long-term orientation, multi-dimensionality (economic, social, environmental) and participation. This is also seen in the empirical analysis of this study. Less widespread is the potentially major relevance of the natural foundations of life, the “planetary limits” to social and economic development and a definition of sustainability which corresponds with this perspective. The processing of sustainability issues chosen for the project also highlights the need for an issue-specific definition of sustainability. Against this backdrop, successful sustainability strategies also require the conception of sustainability underlying the sustainability strategy and policies to be made explicit or developed in a comprehensible and ideally participatory process.

Of equal or even greater importance is a reflective handling of the conception of strategy underlying the sustainability strategy. A generalized, colloquial understanding of the term ‘strategy’ has prevailed to date (long-term goals, goal-oriented action). A conceptually nuanced understanding of strategy (objective-goal-means-environment-coordination) and reflection of political strategy capabilities seems essential for drafting sustainability strategies which are equal to the problem, and also important when considering the challenge of competition between sector-specific strategies.

Finally, it seems the conscious consideration of the specificities of state politics is essential in the comprehension of sustainability and

the strategy approach. This applies to such factors as considering the local authority level and regional specifics and the resulting issue of the target audience for the sustainability strategy.

### **Success factor 3: Framework conditions and prerequisites**

A review of the literature shows that framework conditions and prerequisites which extend beyond the conceptual strategy elements are significant in the development and implementation of sustainability strategies. Human resources appear to be of particular relevance, as are political will, individual commitment and a willingness to innovate on the part of those involved, but also a willingness to cooperate across departments, which participants in the online survey regard as even more important than cooperation with non-state actors. With a view to sustainability policies in the context of multi-level political and administrative systems which reach from local to global, we see that, for the states, the directly adjacent political levels of federal and local authorities are much more significant than more “removed” sustainability policies, particularly those of the United Nations, but also of other countries. Alongside the significance of these framework conditions and prerequisites, which must be considered more systematically as success factors in the development and implementation of sustainability strategies, the survey also shows that there is sometimes considerable discrepancy between perceived significance and the realities of framework conditions, for example in the aspects of “political will” and “willingness for interdepartmental action.” Where proper framework conditions are insufficient or non-existent, even sustainability strategies which are professional in an instrumental sense run the risk of failure, or diminished impact, when they encounter political-administrative reality. Along with the professional treatment of key elements for sustainability strategies and the specification of function and comprehension of sustainability and strategy, framework conditions and prerequisites must be reflected and configuration possibilities assessed. Development of sustainability strate-

gies therefore requires that the context in which they are anchored is reflected and addressed.

#### **Success factor 4: Good practice and transfer potential**

Twenty years after the first pioneering countries began experimenting with sustainability strategies, Germany and other countries can draw on experiences in this area which have been subject to scientific assessment. This means that there is a diverse range of interesting, positive examples available to hand in the field of instrumental and organizational issues as well as concrete technical issues. Findings from document analysis and surveys indicate that the relevance of good practice is seen as very high. However, the usefulness of good practice appears to differ between states. Good practice is particularly helpful when it addresses concrete technical issues arising from politics and administration in Germany (local, state and federal levels). Good practice from other areas of society (business/civil society) and other countries are less useful, sometimes of little use at all. While good practice represents a success factor, the targeted selection of good practice from structurally comparable contexts is important.

#### **Success factor 5: Cross-disciplinary approaches and methods**

Sustainability strategies constitute complex political instruments from a social (diversity of actors) and thematic (diversity of topics) point of view. Consequently, one useful approach appears to be analytical and developmental projects which support the development of sustainability strategies. Expert discourse on cross-disciplinary sustainability strategies stresses that a joint problem definition and project process by the relevant actors is key. This study shows that while a collaborative problem definition might be seen as desirable, the more traditional aspects of transfer projects such as professional project management – particularly in relation to organization, informa-



tion and documentation – are seen as the most important factors. Interactive formats are seen as important not so much for joint problem definitions as for the transfer of good practice.

This study shows that these five success factors are of particular significance to the successful development and implementation of sustainability strategies.

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