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**“Linking Policies and Implementation: Making SD Strategies a case for  
Parliamentary activities”**

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Dr Hauff, ladies and gentlemen,

let me start off by thanking you for inviting me here this evening to speak about the activities of the German Bundestag in support of sustainable development. It is my pleasure and I am honoured as Chairman of the Parliamentary Advisory Council on Sustainable Development to report on the work of this still young advisory body. And I hope to be able to provide you with a survey of the way we in Germany have embodied the issue of sustainable development within our parliament.

### **The idea behind the advisory council**

When the German Bundestag decided to set up the Parliamentary Advisory Council on Sustainable Development, parliament was guided by the following idea: the Bundestag has more than 20 committees and 10 sub-committees. The members of most of these committees naturally see themselves as a political lobby for their particular field, for their area of interest. But the future generations are the only ones who don't have this kind of parliamentary advocate. Up until recently, at least, the future had no specific representative lobby in the Bundestag.

This political dilemma was identified by the German-American philosopher, Hans Jonas, over a quarter of a century ago. In 1979 Jonas, who was born in my home town of Mönchengladbach, wrote in his momentous work "The Imperative of Responsibility":

"But the future is not represented, it is not a force than can throw its weight into the scales. The non-existent has no lobby, and the unborn are powerless. Thus accountability to them has no political reality behind it yet in present decision-making, and when they can make their complaint, then we, the culprits, will no longer be there."

Consequently, what is "new" and politically "groundbreaking" about the issue of sustainability is the demand for justice for the coming generations, in other words, for people who do not even exist yet.

Of course, a parliamentary advisory council is not in a position to override the patterns and processes of democratic representation. Nevertheless, by creating the sustainability council

the Bundestag has forged an instrument with which the now widely acknowledged ideas of generational justice and sustainability can be effectively fed into the political process.

And so, – to use the words of Hans Jonas once more – the work of the sustainability council is a test case for “the power of ideas in the body politic”.

### **The way the council sees itself**

The sustainability council sees itself explicitly as an early warning system for recognising undesirable political trends; a body which keeps an eye on the interests of future generations and, if necessary, champions them against the interests of present generations.

In a parliamentary democracy the political time horizon is strongly influenced by the length of a legislative period. Parliament and government possess a mandate which is valid until the next election. This doesn't mean that political thinking and actions are restricted to what is “feasible” within this prescribed time frame. Nevertheless, everyday political business is determined by the need to deal with a rapidly changing agenda by completing tasks quickly and ensuring an effective division of labour. In addition to this, often in the usual run of party competition, political answers to social problems are not judged by their anticipated long-term effects, but rather by their short-term presentable successes.

This is precisely what we in the Parliamentary Advisory Council on Sustainable Development are attempting to overcome. Despite the demands of everyday politics we want to keep sight of the long-term perspective and, where we consider it necessary, feed our ideas of sustainability and generational justice into the ongoing parliamentary process.

Incidentally, we work in the council on a consensual basis wherever possible. In other words, we try to develop opinions beyond the confines of party affiliations, because we are united in our goal and endeavour to think freely beyond the inevitable conflicts of everyday politics. This type of cooperation is another example of the way the council differs from other Bundestag committees.

## Why in parliament?

Both parliaments and governments alike, fulfill their tasks based on the division of labour, with high levels of specialisation, under time pressure and within legislative periods. The dynamics of scientific and technological developments, the influences of globalisation on the economy, the environment and life in society require not only this undoubtedly necessary specialisation; they also need long-term political planning based on across-the-board insights which reach beyond departmental boundaries.

As far as I can ascertain, the initiation and the further development of sustainability policies are carried out mainly by the executive in most European countries where efforts towards greater sustainability are already well under way. But I'm sure you are able to judge this situation better than I. At government level sustainability policies have often led to new administrative structures and to the setting-up of new institutions. A study commissioned by the German Bundestag three years ago on the institutional embodiment of sustainability policies in Europe showed that the majority of long-term and cross-sectoral institutions are attached to the governments. Only ten of the 77 institutions included in the study are exclusively linked to parliament; seven others are related to both government and parliament.

It appears that – if at all – the tendency of parliaments is at the most to accompany and support sustainability policies.

The treatment of long-term and cross-sectoral questions presents a number of challenges to the established routines and the division of labour in politics: long-term social development trends and the long-term effects of political measures have to be identified and taken into consideration. Political action has to be coordinated between a great variety of different departments. It requires a high level of agreement with civil society interest groups if long-term political goals are to be realized.

In my opinion, the long-term time frames, the complexity of the problems and tasks together with the urgent need for discussion and agreement within society, make parliament's active participation in sustainability policies an absolute imperative, because of its role as a place of public debate and monitoring of the executive.

In the 19th century parliaments painstakingly won the right to control the budget from the executive; similarly, in the 21st century they have to demand for a central role in

sustainability strategies. The reason is simple: the more seriously the theme of sustainability is taken, the greater the significance will be of the course mapped by sustainability strategies. Parliaments have to be decisively involved in this mapping-out-process, if we wish to avoid jeopardizing public acceptance and the democratic legitimacy of this process.

### **The Bundestag's contribution to sustainability prior to the setting up of the advisory committee**

Ladies and Gentlemen, in any case I don't want to give the impression that the theme of sustainability was completely new to the Bundestag when our council was set up. In recent years the German Bundestag made a decisive contribution to informed national debate on sustainability with the work of the study commissions on the "Protection of Mankind and the Environment", "Demographic Change", and on "Sustainable Energy".

The thoughts of the study commissions on putting the concept of "sustainability" into operation made a substantial contribution towards embodying the subject of sustainability within politics; they still remain an important reference in German sustainability policy.

### **Tasks and rights of the Parliamentary Advisory Council on Sustainable Development**

There is a whole series of imaginable possibilities for strengthening the role of parliament in sustainability policies.

The range of options includes, for instance, the firm establishment of the sustainability theme in parliament by the setting up of a special committee dedicated to questions surrounding sustainability and the future, equipped, if possible, with monitoring powers; the stronger use of budgetary law to monitor government programmes and bills in relation to its promotion of sustainable development, and the holding of regular plenary debates on the state of sustainability politics.

When we established the Parliamentary Advisory Council on Sustainable Development in Germany, we chose a middle course between generating impulses and monitoring functions. On the one hand we monitor the work of the Federal Government on the national sustainability strategy; on the other hand we are not restricted to this function, because we

can independently choose the topics which we consider relevant to sustainability and launch the appropriate initiatives.

Admittedly, the council's position is by no means as important and influential as that of the classic Bundestag committees. But, despite this, the Bundestag does have an institutionalised body which deals exclusively with questions of sustainability and whose 40 members see themselves as representatives of the interests of sustainability and future generations.

The parliamentary advisory council has been working constructively and successfully since it was first set up in 2004. Which rights and tasks does the advisory council possess?

To begin with, the council supports the Federal Government's national sustainability strategy, is involved in the setting and realization of goals, measures and instruments.

It generates proposals on the further development of the sustainability strategy.

The council is furthermore entitled to freely select special focus areas concerning sustainable development, which need more detailed discussion, and present them to the Bundestag for debate.

It is the council's task to cultivate contacts and discussions with other parliaments, particularly in the European Union, with the aim of developing mutual positions on sustainable development.

In addition to this the council supports and monitors the European sustainability strategy.

### **The council's concrete projects**

I do not wish to talk only about the abstract level this evening. You are probably interested in hearing something about the projects currently being addressed by the council.

Apart from our main task, the influencing and political monitoring of the Government's national sustainability strategy, there are three projects at the moment. We have just finished working on a report about "Demography and infrastructure".

We are now in the middle of working on a concept for examining sustainability within the legislative process.

And in the third main project we are currently preparing a major conference here in Berlin for members of European national parliaments on the theme of sustainability.

I would like to make a few comments on each of these projects, because it will give a good idea of how the council works.

### **Demography and infrastructure**

At the end of last year the council carried out a hearing of experts on the effects of demographic change on the infrastructure in Germany. We wanted to identify the implications of a continuously aging and simultaneously shrinking population, including the various regional differences, for the future infrastructure. In the advisory council's opinion, this theme had not been sufficiently addressed in Germany's sustainability debate.

With the exception maybe of the decision for a particular pension system, surely no other political decisions will have longer-term effects than those concerning investments in the public infrastructure. We are still travelling on roads with routes dating back to Napoleonic times. Our trains run along lines which were determined mainly during the 19th century. Our schools have often stood for centuries. And our drinking water network has to remain functional for at least several decades.

To begin with, the long-term lifespan of our infrastructure requires long-term planning. And in turn, long-term planning requires that we predict the needs of future generations of citizens, and that we use our findings as a basis for our planning for the future. This is precisely the thing that touches on the key principle of sustainability: we must not allow the people who come after us to become the objects of our short-sighted decisions and preferences.

Like almost all developed countries, Germany is facing a massive challenge with increased average life spans and a shrinking society. The so called "new" federal states in the east are already in the midst of demographic change. For instance, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania has lost about 14 per cent of its population since 1990. It used to be the youngest German state in 1990 and is today the oldest – in just 17 years. Around two million people have left

the new federal states since 1990. In some parts of the new federal states large deserted areas are emerging, where demolition squads preside and the infrastructure is drastically under-used. The remaining population is threatened with per-capita expenses for the supply of basic services in education, health and trade, which can hardly be financed any longer by the tax payer. But: This shrinking process will soon continue in the Western part of Germany.

The members of the advisory council observe with concern that, in the towns and communities which are not among the very few benefiting from migration, abstract insights into such things as demographic change are unfortunately not being translated into practical politics. Although the number one priority has long since been modernisation, rather than new-build, every mayor is still desperate for the region's final zone for new-build houses to be located in his community!

One concern is to what extent can roads, water pipes and public buildings still be used, or used for different purposes in the future; and which qualitative changes will have to be made in the planning of transport and infrastructures.

A few days ago we presented the results of our work on this theme in the shape of a report to the Bundestag at "prime time" on Friday morning, and it produced a very lively debate. In the report we make a whole series of suggestions as to how the towns and communities and the state and the Federal Government, can intelligently redesign the infrastructure.

### **Examining sustainability and generational accounts**

We are currently working on the themes of generational balances and the possibility of an institutionalised form of examining sustainability in the legislative process. In the coming weeks we will be putting a first proposal to the Bundestag on the question of how sustainability can be effectively monitored in the everyday work of legislation.

The advisory council's third project is the organisation of an international parliamentarians' conference in Berlin in November this year on the theme of sustainable development. The conference will be taking place in the German Bundestag on 22 and 23 November 2007 with the motto "Our common future – parliamentarians for a sustainable Europe".



The main aim of this conference is to exchange ideas and establish networks with the parliaments of European countries in the area of sustainability policies. And the centre of attention will be the balances and perspectives of national and European sustainability policies.

### **The council's international networking**

The fact that the members of the advisory council are very interested in an international exchange of experiences is illustrated by our involvement in this area up till now.

Since it was first set up, the Parliamentary Advisory Council on Sustainable Development has sought contact with European and international partners and fostered close international links. The council has already travelled with delegations to Great Britain, Finland, Sweden, Portugal and Spain. There we had talks on the respective state of sustainable development with parliamentarians, government representatives, sustainability councils, NGOs and business representatives.

In addition to this, we are in close contact here in Berlin with embassy departments which are specifically concerned with sustainable development.

Ladies and gentlemen, today I consider it extremely desirable and necessary that decisive standards for responsible environmental, social and budgetary policies are set within the framework of parliamentary sustainability policies.

The directly elected representatives of the people possess the necessary legitimacy to demand an abstention from consumption for the benefit of successive generations. Therefore it is up members of the various national parliaments and the European Parliament to act upon the base of this legitimacy.

And consequently, it is both sensible and right to have a lobby for future generations at the centre of parliaments. Experiences in other countries, particularly Great Britain and Scandinavia, but also the experiences with our still young parliamentary advisory council, confirm my opinion that a parliamentary structure for sustainable development is worthwhile, and that it can have positive effects on a country's legislative work.