The City of Bonn, Germany: BUILDING ON A SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT TRADITION TO ACHIEVE THE SDGs

The City of Bonn has gone through a comprehensive process to localise the SDGs through its new Sustainability Strategy, supported by the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development alongside 14 other pilot cities and municipalities in Germany.

The City of Bonn has a long-term commitment to sustainable development. This can be seen – inter alia – through its engagement in Local Agenda 21 since 1997, certification as Fair Trade Town since 2010 and as signatory of the resolution by municipalities to support the 2030 Agenda in February 2016. Bonn’s first sustainability strategy, developed in the context of the 2030 Agenda, was officially adopted by the City Council in February 2019.

The 2030 Agenda is seen as an excellent opportunity to bring together the city’s global responsibility agenda with actions promoting sustainable development within the city itself. As such, the Sustainability Strategy was designed to respond to key challenges and strengths of the city, for which some SDGs were identified as particularly relevant (Figure 1). For example, clean air and reduced CO₂ emissions are high on the political agenda in Bonn. As several other German cities, Bonn is struggling to reduce NO₂ levels to comply with European norms. This is particularly challenging in light of Bonn’s growing population and persistently high rates of individual motorised vehicle traffic in the city, due to – among other things – high commuter flows. Mobility is thus a hot topic in the public debate. Increasing rents is another challenge dealt with by the city within the confined city limits and the desire to keep its green spaces intact (50% of the city’s surface are protected green areas).

Figure 1. Key SDGs for the City of Bonn

Source: OECD elaboration based on SDG survey compiled by the City of Bonn (2018).
Bonn’ Sustainability Strategy is developed with the support of the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). In this process, Bonn is one of 15 pilot cities, municipalities and administrative districts in North Rhine Westphalia (NRW) that participated in the pilot project “Global Sustainable Municipality in NRW”, funded by BMZ and implemented by the Service Agency Communities in One World of Engagement Global.

Key priority areas of the strategy are: i.) Mobility; ii.) Climate and energy; iii.) Natural resources and environment; iv.) Labour and business; v.) Social participation and gender; vi.) Global responsibility. Existing plans and projects have funds for some measures included in the strategy (e.g. education), while some will require case-by-case decisions by the city council (e.g. some mobility-related measures).

The City of Bonn has produced key indicators on sustainable development since 2002. The current sustainability report, covering 2016-2018, includes 55 key indicators structured around four main categories: wellbeing, social justice, environmental quality and resource efficiency, and economic efficiency. It applies a traffic light system to visualise whether the trends are moving in the desirable direction. In this most recent sustainability report, the SDGs have come further into focus and the indicator set was enlarged to cover further SDG-relevant dimensions.

Taking a holistic view, the City of Bonn identifies SDG 11 as a guiding theme for the city, in particular for generating synergies with SDG 7 and SDG 13. Energy-efficient building standards, provision of clean and affordable energy and low-carbon means of transport are key to meet the required CO2 emission standards while at the same time developing the city sustainably. Moreover, SDG 4 (education) is central to keep the employment rate high in a labour market characterised by high-skilled jobs. The city thus uses the SDGs to analyse and address interlinked challenges.

Bonn is growing into a popular hub for small and medium enterprises (SMEs) focussing on sustainability as part of their core business. The Chamber of Industry and Commerce also sees Bonn as a vibrant environment for social entrepreneurship and is supporting companies to connect with each other around common themes.

The City of Bonn has made great efforts to raise awareness of the SDGs among the public. Campaign initiatives include the annual Bonn SDG-Days to give SDG initiatives in the city visibility and to advocate for wide support for the SDGs by showcasing individual actions. Prior to the 2030 Agenda, the city already successfully engaged in collaboration with primary schools in the Climate Ambassadors initiative. In 2019 alone, more than 50 percent of the city’s primary schools participated. Since 2012, more than 10.000 primary school students became Climate Ambassadors. The concept was presented to local schools in several of Bonn’s partner cities.

While social participation, gender and business development are included among the priorities in the Sustainability Strategy, environmental issues and urban planning are predominant in the perception of sustainable development. The SDGs offer an opportunity to broaden this perspective and look at interlinkages between socio-economic and environmental goals. For example, addressing climate change and maintaining the city’s green spaces, while at the same time catering for a growing population and the need for affordable housing, is key to Bonn’s future development potential.

FORWARD LOOKING POLICY RESPONSES

Embed the horizontal coordination and multi-stakeholder mechanisms set up in the development of the strategy in the organisational structure of the city administration. This will help to ensure broad-based support to the implementation and further development of the strategy through to 2030, conveying multiple stakeholders around e.g. funding decisions.

Step up efforts by the City of Bonn to connect with the business community on the SDGs. Providing a platform that allows businesses to connect will help seize the private sector’s contribution to the SDGs. Support to local Small and Medium sized Enterprises (SMEs) working on sustainability by e.g. R&D grants to help their contribution to the SDGs can be considered.

Strengthen the work on citizen engagement and expand the work on SDGs in the education system, including the Vocational Education and Training System, helping to shape the habits and lifestyles (e.g. sustainable mobility and consumption) of future citizens. Awareness-raising efforts could be linked to HLPF priority SDGs each year to connect with global visibility.

Use the SDGs to analyse policy interlinkages and promote synergies between the goals. Participatory urban planning can further help to link all dimension of sustainability while preventing social issues from becoming worsened or entrenched (e.g. housing, long-term unemployment).