

# European Sustainable Development Network (ESDN) Side Event

HLPF  
2017

## The Role of Peer Learning in Achieving the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs

### Side Event Report

12 July 2017

**UN Headquarters New York**

*760 United Nations Plaza, Manhattan, New York City, NY 10017*

**Side Event organized by Austria**

*in cooperation with member countries of the ESDN Steering Group and the  
European Commission*

## High Level Political Forum 2017

### ESDN Side Event Report

The **ESDN Side Event** at the UN High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) 2017 was held on 12 July 2017 and organized by Austria, in cooperation with member countries of the ESDN Steering Group and the European Commission. The ESDN Side Event, titled **“The Role of Peer Learning in achieving the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs”**, introduced the Peer Learning Mechanism that the ESDN recently developed, which invites for a broader reflection on peer learning as a general approach to support learning and experience sharing in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Important questions that were addressed during this Side Event were: How has peer learning been addressed in different world regions? What issues in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs will particularly benefit from peer learning? How to put peer learning into effective practice?

This Side Event also reflected upon and suggested ways in which to showcase peer learning mechanisms and experiences from all over the world as a recurrent mechanism during each HLPF meeting in the future. This should offer a space for sharing and learning between countries to exchange on their experiences and good practices in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and SDGs. The ESDN Peer Learning Mechanism has been introduced to provide a space for experience sharing and learning between policymakers, who are responsible for the implementation activities of public administrations, across European countries in realizing the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. Peer learning is learning from and with the learner's peers. In peer learning, peers simultaneously learn from each other, and contribute to other peers' learning by sharing knowledge, ideas and experiences.

This Side Event at the HLPF 2017 provided an excellent opportunity to gain insights into the approach, concept and experiences made with peer learning among public administrators – and other stakeholders – in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. It also afforded participants the opportunity to discover what other institutions and multilateral mechanisms (namely the European Commission, UNECE, the Organisation internationale de la Francophonie) are doing in terms of peer exchange and learning. The side event also reflected upon institutional set-ups, securing political support, integrated policy approaches, and engaging stakeholders in implementation processes. Finally, participants of this Side Event were invited to discuss how to use and further develop Peer Learning for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs.





*Keynote speakers of the ESDN Side Event at HLFP 2017 (l-r): Monika Linn (UNECE), Anna Ballance (DG Environment, European Commission), Wolfram Tertschnig (ESDN Co-chair, Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, Environment and Water Management, Austria), Daniel Dubas (Federal Office for Spatial Development, Switzerland & ESDN Steering Group Member), and Tounao Kiri (Institut de la Francophonie pour le développement durable)*

The Side Event was set in motion by **Wolfram Tertschnig** (ESDN Co-chair, Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, Environment and Water Management, Austria) who welcomed the participants and opened the event. He provided an overview of the event agenda and introduced the keynote speakers. He pointed out that the main focus of the Side Event was to reflect upon Peer Learning as a mechanism to exchange experiences in, and support, the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (SD) and the SDGs.

Mr. Tertschnig provided a quick overview of the ESDN ([European Sustainable Development Network](#)) which has been in operation since 2002 when policy-makers (i.e. public administrators from national government ministries) met for the first time to informally exchange and share experiences on SD policies and strategies. It very quickly became clear that a regular exchange among policy-makers (and later also including SD experts) was extremely beneficial. In 2006, it was decided to professionalize the network, establish a secretariat (ESDN Office), develop a website as a one-stop shop for SD policy and strategies in Europe, provide country profiles on SD strategies, etc. The ESDN is currently overseen by a group of eight European countries.

The ESDN has been working on Peer Learning for the 2030 Agenda and SDGs for more than one year. At the ESDN Conference 2015, the participants agreed on an ESDN Proposition on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for SD, including the need for an ESDN Peer Learning mechanism. It was felt that this new space for exchange was not only necessary for the

effective and successful implementation of the 2030 Agenda, but also to create awareness in the various government ministries in an attempt to increase coherence in SD policy-making.

Based on this need for a new form and space for exchange, the ESDN developed a format and space in the form of the ESDN Peer Learning Platform and Visit (see also the respective section on the [ESDN homepage](#)). These Peer Learning Platforms and Visits are open and informal meetings of policy-makers, based on the Chatham House Rules, where participants can openly present and discuss success stories, as well as challenges and failures. This format is based very much on the history of the ESDN and the experiences that have been made from more than a decade's worth of informal exchange. The format for the Peer Learning approach was developed together with ESDN members and associated partners at an ESDN Workshop. The ESDN has organized two Peer Learning Platforms and Visits so far, and will continue doing so on an annual basis. The ESDN also intends to report about its experiences with Peer Learning at the next HLPFs and will highlight the importance for Peer Learning in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs.

**Daniel Dubas** (Federal Office for Spatial Development, Switzerland & ESDN Steering Group Member) provided important practical insights and experiences with Peer Learning from the perspective of a policy-maker. Mr. Dubas pointed out that Peer Learning, as such, has been a core business of the ESDN in general – a fact that has also been recently acknowledged by the European Union's General Affair Council Conclusions. The newly developed ESDN Peer Learning format for the 2030 Agenda and SDGs is based on various exchange mechanisms for the 40-50 participants who take part in these events. The participants are primarily policy-makers who are responsible for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs who meet their peers to exchange their experiences, needs, challenges, etc. The ESDN Peer Learning events provide a lot of time and space to discuss. So far, the ESDN has organized two events (one in Belgium in 2016, and another one in Finland in 2017). The Peer Learning approach of the ESDN is not only about exchange and discussions, but it is also comprised of a Peer Learning Visit, through which the host country makes it possible for participants to meet with policy-makers and other stakeholders to acquire first hand practical knowledge of implementation experiences.

Mr. Dubas reflected upon his own experiences with the ESDN Peer Learning approach. He pointed out that the informal setting is of prime importance: these meetings are not about official statements, but about informal exchange and openness; they are not about diplomatic formality, but about reflection and openly addressing challenges. Another advantage is that the event participants are a homogenous group, namely policy-makers from national government ministries, who are peers who face similar problems and challenges. An ESDN-internal impact survey, based on participant feedback on their experiences from the Peer Learning Platforms and Visits, enables the ESDN Office to see which sessions and exchange methods work best. These impact surveys are then able to better inform all subsequent Peer Learning Platforms and Visits in an effort to constantly improve this mechanism.

Two interesting experiences of the ESDN Peer Learning Platforms and Visits were highlighted by Mr. Dubas. Firstly, it was interesting to see how differently the communication and awareness raising of SDGs is done in various European countries. Secondly, the Peer Learning Visits are interesting and remarkable learning experiences in which participants receive a very in-depth look into the policy mechanisms, institutional set-ups, and stakeholder exchange mechanisms of the host country.

**Anna Ballance** (Policy Officer for International Aspects of Sustainable Development, DG Environment, European Commission) started by saying that there is a lot of talk that SD is a shared responsibility, i.e. not only are governments responsible for its achievement, but also other stakeholders. The important issue in this respect is to think about how this can be effectively organized. The European Commission believes that stakeholder engagement goes beyond sheer consultation. Instead, stakeholders should have the possibility to meaningfully contribute to the policy agenda at hand. In this context, she referred to Thomas Gass (Assistant Secretary-General for Policy Coordination and Inter-Agency Affairs in UN DESA) who said early at the HLFP 2017 that it is key to move from coordination and control, to mobilization and empowerment.

There are various peer learning examples in the EU: Recently, the European Commission launched an [Environmental Implementation Review](#) that is based on the approach that peer exchange on environmental law and policy is important to elaborate, as well as to test good policy solutions that are applied in the different Member States.

Regarding stakeholder engagement and the 2030 Agenda, the EU was, from the very beginning, instrumental in shaping this Agenda. The European Commission will work with Member States, stakeholders and other EU institutions for a successful implementation process. Recently, the European Commission launched a Multi-Stakeholder Platform which will be a Commission Expert Group to support and advise the Commission on SDG implementation, and to contribute to looking beyond the current 2020 policy time frame. It will be a forum for exchange and best practice elaboration, aiming to balance economic, environmental and social issues. It will have 30 members, which is necessary to make it a workable and efficient body.

Recently, the European General Affairs Council Conclusions, which were adopted in June 2017, took stock of actions in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and provided strategic orientation. Also in June 2017, the European Parliament issued a report on the EU action for sustainability.

Overall, Ms. Ballance concluded, the EU is very aware that the policies it proposes and implements affects other countries and world regions. Therefore, policy coherence for SD is important and a prime goal for the EU. The EU supports the UN in the 2030 Agenda and SDG implementation process.

**Monika Linn** (Principal Advisor to the Executive Secretary, United Nations Economic Commission for Europe) talked about the UNECE's approach to supporting SDG implementation. At the beginning, she gave an overview of the UNECE's four voluntary review mechanisms, which included the Environmental Performance Review (EPRs). The EPRs are comprised of 6 stages, where 3 of those stages make up their Peer Learning focus: the Review Mission (an expert team travels to the country and meets with government officials, representatives of business, international organizations, NGOs, independent experts and local governments; preparation of the draft report); the Expert Review (review of the draft report by the Expert Group on EPRs, participation of country's environmental authorities in the discussion); and the Peer Review (peer review of the EPR report by the Committee on Environmental Policy, involving, as main actors, the Committee, the respective country's high-level environmental authorities, and the EPR Programme Secretariat).

Ms. Linn then outlined three options to integrate the SDGs into the EPRs: (a) Integrate EPR-relevant SDGs into the contents of the chapters of the EPR reports; (b) Introduce a

comprehensive chapter with detailed coverage of all EPR-relevant SDGs; and (c) Integrate EPR-relevant SDGs into the contents of the chapters of the EPR report and cover, in an additional chapter, those SDGs that were not addressed, upon request by the country under review.

Finally, Monika Linn presented information on the Regional Forum on SD, which is a space for peer learning and the exchange of policy experiences and good practices for UNECE Member States. The Forum provides a regional and sub-regional overview of progress and challenges in SDG implementation, which complements reports at the global level. It aims to enhance regional and sub-regional cooperation and addressing transboundary issues and is a platform for the participation and contributions of all relevant stakeholders. The format in 2017 for the Regional Forum on SD is centred on policy dialogue and the Regional Round Tables for peer learning focus on nationalization and localization of the SDGs; sub-regional cooperation for SDG implementation; and data and monitoring.

Next to present was **Tounao Kiri** (Institut de la Francophonie pour le développement durable) who spoke about the experiences with peer learning and exchange in the Francophonie. The main objectives of the peer learning and exchange mechanisms that are applied are to offer a self-evaluation on SD to all member countries; to voluntarily share the experiences of state and non-state actors; and also to share experiences among the member countries.

Mr. Kiri then outlined the most important aspects of their peer learning and exchange: (i) process – how the exchange is organized and actually undertaken; (ii) content of the planning – what part(s) of SD are included; (iii) results of the implementation; (iv) mechanisms of governance and indicators; (v) the financing; and (vi) the gender aspects. It is important to note that this is an exchange mechanism of experts to integrate them better into the planning and activity stages. Over the years, Francophonie has gathered rich experiences on exchange, learning, and understanding the full value and reach of SD.

Mr. Kiri concluded by stressing that the EU has been a main partner for the Francophonie in their work on SD. The peer learning in the Francophonie enables a lot of information and experience exchange on various SD activities and ways in which implementation activities are organized.

These keynote presentations were followed by a **Panel Debate** on the merits and perspectives of Peer Learning mechanisms in support of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, in which participants of the Side Event could ask questions and comment on the topic.

One participant pointed out the importance of Peer Learning for SD, in general, and the very interesting approach of the ESDN in this regard. The participant brought in some experiences with Peer Learning in the Mediterranean (also based on the Barcelona Convention), for instance, the simplified peer learning (SIMPEER), and the mutual learning among countries, as countries in the same region often face similar problems and challenges.



Another participant mentioned that the exchange and peer learning in the ESDN provided a lot of input and guidance for the development of the Catalan Plan for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

Another participant argued that a lot of time is spent on talking about how to best implement the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs and how we can learn from each other. However, it would not be time to look into which impacts have been achieved with the 2030 Agenda and SDG implementation. More specifically, it would be key to see how the SDGs have been included into national budgets, financial planning, the economic world, etc. In addition, it would be important to include peer learning at future HLPFs.

Monika Linn answered to the last question by mentioning that the 2030 Agenda implementation requires us to see whether we need new strategies and bring in all the different stakeholders more effectively. UNECE undertook a survey in 2015 on the implementation process and it showed that only a few of their member states looked into budgeting for the SDGs; instead, there were a lot of efforts put into preparing strategies. The survey will be done again in 2017 in order to see if something has changed.



One participant argued that the ‘whole society approach’ would be key in order to have all stakeholders on board, not only government officials. The Partner for Review mechanism that was established as a transnational, multi-stakeholder network is a global exchange mechanism in support of countries that prepare Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs). It is equally important to link the national implementation and monitoring system. Overall, informal discussion forums are very important as they provide safe spaces for exchange.

Two other participants brought two more issues into the debate: On the one hand, one participant argued that coordination and cooperation between the different government ministries is of prime importance. HLPF meetings are very protocol-oriented and do not offer enough space for informal exchange and practical learning. On the other hand, another participant pointed out that sub-regional activities and networks are key to achieving the SDGs.

Wolfram Tertschning said that the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs seem to some as only an exercise in practicing and optimising technical or managerial change. However, they also need political commitment and financing. This means that the nexus between political and financial capital is an issue that needs to be openly addressed. He concluded the Side Event by mentioning that more learning could happen at the HLPF meetings. The ESDN may propose a more learning oriented space during future HLPFs in the form of Peer Learning.