

# Voluntary commitments in international, European and national sustainable development processes – drivers for change?

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ESDN Case Study N°22



European Sustainable Development Network

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## Introduction

The aim of this case study is to outline various forms of voluntary approaches for the achievement of sustainable development (SD). Thereby the focus is set on European and, especially, on the national examples of how those voluntary commitments are applied in the implementation of SD.

In this case study, we show how these voluntary commitments look like and present their different nature. Examples are taken from the European as well as the national level, with a specific focus of Finland's national strategy of voluntary commitments in NSDS processes.

This case study has the following structure: Firstly, various approaches of voluntary commitments on the international, the European and the national scale are outlined. Secondly, two national examples of voluntary commitment processes in France and Finland are shortly outlined as implementation mechanisms in NSDS processes. Finally, the national experiences of voluntary commitments in Finland are illustrated as innovative approach for NSDS processes (based on a telephone interview with a responsible policy-maker).

# 1 Framing voluntary commitments and partnerships for SD

This chapter provides an overview of **definitions as well as processes related to voluntary commitments and partnerships in the context of SD** in order to portray its potential as driver for the implementation of SD, in general, and the 2030 Agenda for SD, in particular.

The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) defines **voluntary commitments and partnerships for SD** as *“multi-stakeholder initiatives undertaken by Governments, intergovernmental organizations, major groups and others that aim to contribute to the implementation of inter-governmentally agreed sustainable development goals and commitments in the Rio+20 outcome document “The Future We Want”, Agenda 21, the Programme for the Further Implementation of Agenda 21 or the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation of the World Summit on Sustainable Development.”*<sup>1</sup>

For this case study, we use the term ‘voluntary commitments’ in a generic context, encompassing that they are multi-stakeholder approaches with the role of addressing and involving various actors in order to achieve SD. Synonymously, we use the words “voluntary agreements” and “voluntary approaches”.

There are numerous types of voluntary commitments and partnerships for SD, dating back to the 1980s:

On the **international level**, International Environmental Agreements (IEA), including the Kyoto Protocol (1997) or the Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer (1989) are regulatory voluntary approaches in order to deal internationally with the preservation of public goods, i.e. ozone layer, biodiversity etc. Even though this is a form of a voluntary approach among countries, these international agreements are not voluntary commitments in the way we are discussing them in this case study because they primarily address individual countries and not stakeholders directly.

However, the most recent debate on the launch of the **SDGs and the 2030 Agenda for SD**, mandated by the Rio+20 Conference (2012), follows the approach of voluntary commitments we want to address in this case study. As in the definition mentioned above, voluntary approaches do not only address countries, governments and administration, but a great variety of stakeholders.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, in the 1990s, great attention in the **European Union** was given to the use of voluntary agreements to attain environmental and energy goals. These voluntary measures covered mainly industrial processes, industrial energy management policies and practices trying to foster partnerships between business, research and politics.<sup>3</sup> On the **national scale**, the use of voluntary environmental agreements reached its peak in the 1980s in Germany where they were set up as a response to the growing problems associated with the use of traditional means of regulation. This voluntary policy instrument was also applied in the

<sup>1</sup> UNDESA. 2013. Sustainable Development in Action – Special Report of the SD in action Newsletter – Voluntary Commitments and Partnerships for Sustainable Development. Available at: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/930Report%20on%20Voluntary%20Commitments%20and%20Partnerships.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Todd, C. et McEvoy, D.. 2012. Enforcing Compliance with Environmental Agreements in the Absence of Strong Institutions: An Experimental Analysis. Environ. Resource Econ (2013) 54: 63-77

<sup>3</sup> Rezessy, S. et Bertoldi, P.. 2005. Are voluntary agreements an effective energy policy instrument? Insights and experiences from Europe. Available at: [http://iet.jrc.ec.europa.eu/energyefficiency/system/tdf/aceee\\_2005\\_paper\\_13\\_final.pdf?file=1&type=node&id=2644](http://iet.jrc.ec.europa.eu/energyefficiency/system/tdf/aceee_2005_paper_13_final.pdf?file=1&type=node&id=2644)

Netherlands and Finland, in different forms, however. Nevertheless, the shared interest in voluntary agreements is derived from the standpoint that new policy objectives – especially related to sustainability – require new instruments which are more flexible, less antagonistic, and which can be adopted more quickly and foster collective learning.<sup>4</sup>

In the following paragraphs, current examples on voluntary commitments are briefly outlined with a special focus on the on-going SDGs debate within the international context. In this context, we refer exclusively to voluntary commitments with the aim to address various stakeholders for common SD goals. Moreover, one current EU approach of voluntary commitments is touched upon and a short overview of national patterns regarding voluntary commitments is given. Thereby, this chapter aims to set the stage for elaborating on how European countries address the implementation of such agreements within their NSDSs.

## 1.1 International Approach

As far as the international agenda for SD is concerned, the relevance of voluntary commitments and partnerships for SD is also expressed in the **Rio+20 Outcome Document**, which mandated the United Nations Secretariat to establish and maintain a comprehensive registry<sup>5</sup> of voluntary initiatives to promote SD. Please find the relevant paragraph 283<sup>6</sup> in the box below:

### Box 1: Paragraph 283 of the Rio Outcome Document

283. We welcome the commitments voluntarily entered into at the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development and throughout 2012 by all stakeholders and their networks to implement concrete policies, plans, programmes, projects and actions to promote sustainable development and poverty eradication. We invite the Secretary-General to compile these commitments and facilitate access to other registries that have compiled commitments, in an Internet-based registry. The registry should make information about the commitments fully transparent and accessible to the public, and it should be periodically updated.

The Rio+20 Conference emphasized the importance of action-oriented voluntary initiatives in order to complement government-led action in realising SD. It envisioned key voluntary initiatives including voluntary commitments, partnerships for SD, and green economy policies and initiatives. These initiatives are expected to announce and achieve concrete time-bound deliverables that advance SD. It also mandated the UN secretariat to establish and maintain a [comprehensive registry of voluntary](#)

<sup>4</sup> Töller, A. 2013. The Rise and Fall of Voluntary Agreements in German Environmental Policy. German Policy Studies. Vol. 9, No.2: 49-92

<sup>5</sup> UNDESA. 2015. Partnerships for SDGs. Available at: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/partnerships>

<sup>6</sup> UN. 2012. The Future We Want, Rio+20 outcome document. Available at: [http://www.uncsd2012.org/content/documents/774futurewewant\\_english.pdf](http://www.uncsd2012.org/content/documents/774futurewewant_english.pdf)

[initiatives for SD](#). Moreover, the **2030 Agenda for SD** stresses **multi-stakeholder partnerships** in the SDG 17. Please find the concrete targets in the box below<sup>7</sup>:

**Box 2: Multi-stakeholder partnerships in SDGs**

17.16 Enhance the global partnership for sustainable development, complemented by multi-stakeholder partnerships that mobilize and share knowledge, expertise, technology and financial resources, to support the achievement of the sustainable development goals in all countries, in particular developing countries

17.17 Encourage and promote effective public, public-private and civil society partnerships, building on the experience and resourcing strategies of partnerships

In order to frame the concept properly, a [UNDESA report \(2013\)](#) provides a comprehensive definition with various **features of voluntary commitments** or, synonymously, voluntary, multi-stakeholder initiatives, agreements, and partnerships to facilitate and expedite the realisation of SDGs. The following features are hereby considered as relevant, displaying importance for the international, EU and national scale:

- Partnerships and voluntary commitments are ***not a substitute for government responsibilities and inter-governmentally agreed commitments***, but they are intended to ***strengthen implementation by involving relevant stakeholders making a contribution to SD***. Therefore, commitments by governments remain the cornerstone of national, regional and global efforts to pursue sustainable development.
- The Rio+20 voluntary commitments seek to be SMART – Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Resource-based, and Time-bound – with depth of information on the action plans of SD implementation by entailing ***transparency and future accountability***.

As far as examples and types of UN wide initiatives are concerned, many voluntary commitments announced at Rio+20 originated from a number of networks and initiatives, for instance the Sustainable Energy for All initiative (SE4All), United Global Compact or the Higher Education Sustainability Initiative. The most thematic areas covered include education, green economy in the context of SD, health and population, energy and water and sanitation. According to the report from 2013, the approval of the new set of SDGs could lead to additional voluntary commitments and deliverables for the time period after 2016 (UNDESA, 2013). So far, this forecast proves to hold true, at least with regards to the national examples of Finland and France (please see chapter 3 for more details).

<sup>7</sup> Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform. Partnerships for SD – Multi-stakeholder partnerships. Available at: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdinaction>

## 1.2 European Approach

The European Union has been making use of voluntary commitments, negotiated or long-term agreements since the 1990s, primarily with the broad scope of improved energy and cost efficiency. Back then, **the voluntary agreements were considered as environmental agreements negotiated with industry**, thus forms of public voluntary programs in which firms can choose to participate. Those voluntary agreements include environmental agreements negotiated with industry, public voluntary programs in which firms can choose to participate. Furthermore, they describe a wide range of industry actions, such as industry covenants, negotiated agreements, long term agreements, codes of conduct, self-regulation etc. and their approaches differ in relation to their form, legal status and enforceability. Even though they were set up as policy instrument to supplement or replace regulations, taxes and tradable permits, they also have been regarded as controversial. Their environmental effectiveness and economic efficiency were often challenged (Rezessy et Bertoldi, 2005).

However, voluntary agreements still exist in one form or another. The following paragraphs outline **what role commitments play within the Europe 2020 Strategy delivery**. The Europe 2020 Strategy is a ten-year jobs and growths strategy launched in 2010 with the aim to create conditions for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. This strategy is currently impacting national policy making, also with regard to SD. In the framework of the Europe 2020 Strategy, seven Flagship Initiatives were launched in order to boost growth and jobs. The Flagship Initiative, “Innovation Union”, makes use of the so-called **European Innovation Partnerships (EIPs)** which are a policy tool for EU research and innovation, bringing together all relevant actors at EU, national and regional level. EIPs are launched in the following areas which display a great relevance in combining EU, national and regional efforts in SD issues – amongst others:

- ❖ Active and healthy ageing;
- ❖ Agricultural sustainability and productivity;
- ❖ Smart cities and communities;
- ❖ Water; and
- ❖ Raw materials.

The aim of EIPs is to streamline, simplify and better coordinate existing instruments to make it easier for partners to co-operate as well as to achieve the targets of the Europe 2020 Strategy quicker and more efficiently. In order to support their governance framework and foster the achievements of the 2020 targets, they make **use of commitments**. These commitments, or voluntary agreements, represent a vital part of the EIPs, following their governance structure and guidance, moreover bringing a variety of actors together in order to address societal challenges for the achievement of the Europe 2020 targets.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> EU COM. 2014. Innovation Union. A Europe 2020 Initiative: European Innovation Partnerships. Available at: [http://ec.europa.eu/research/innovation-union/index\\_en.cfm?pg=eip](http://ec.europa.eu/research/innovation-union/index_en.cfm?pg=eip)



For instance, in 2013, the **EIP on Raw Materials** started an open **call for commitments with the aim to involve a very large number of partners across the EU and the entire raw materials value chain**. The partners are supposed to contribute to the objectives of the EIP by carrying out actions. Therefore, the EIP's commitments are essential to achieve the objectives set out in the EIP's Strategic Implementation Plan. They aim to deliver innovative products, processes, services, technologies, business models or ideas for societal benefits. In the first year (2014), a total of 80 commitments were recognized as '**Raw Materials Commitments**'. They had to meet certain criteria in order to be eligible and are considered as joint undertakings by several partners who commit themselves to activities aimed at achieving the EIP's objectives, such as delivering innovative products, processes, services, etc. with the broad scope of bringing wider societal benefits<sup>9</sup>.

The call for commitments within the EIP on raw materials is a central part of the European Innovation Partnership approach which aims to mobilise the European raw materials community. Its goals are to:

- Raise awareness;
- Receive a quality insurance at European level;
- Get a guarantee of accordance with the EIP and the EU raw material policy;
- Potentially allow access to finance from various sources;
- Join forces with other partners; and
- Give access to contacts outside the EU.

The nature of this commitment is not binding and encompasses to deliver activities and expected results, annual report, commercial and societal benefits.<sup>10</sup>

Similarly, the commitments within the **EIP on Smart Cities and Communities** bring together cities, industry and citizens to improve urban life through more sustainable integrated solutions. Thereby, eligible commitments were submitted by over 3,000 partners.<sup>11</sup>

Screening through various literature on voluntary commitment, it can be assumed that the motivation of various stakeholders to join commitments might be manifold: they may offer the chance for lobbying, prestige, publicity, networking, they may open possibilities to certain communities and even European funding schemes, co-determination, more transparency, and are not binding at the same time. **The European Commission might draw benefits from these commitments at the same time by establishing partnerships which may help to attain their defined objectives** by involving relevant partners, collecting more perspectives, addressing various actors, and reaching the critical mass.

<sup>9</sup> EU COM. 2015. EIP Raw Materials: 2013 Call for commitments, Recognized Raw Material Commitments. Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/eip/raw-materials/en/call-commitments>

<sup>10</sup> EU COM. 2013. EIP on Raw Materials: Call for Commitments. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/eip/raw-materials/sites/rawmaterials/files/Call%20for%20Commitments%20-%20MG\\_0.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/eip/raw-materials/sites/rawmaterials/files/Call%20for%20Commitments%20-%20MG_0.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> EU COM. 2015. EIP Smart Cities and Communities. Available at: <http://ec.europa.eu/eip/smartcities/>

### 1.3 National Approach

According to Töller (2013), voluntary commitments on the national level, specifically in Germany, date back even to the late 1960s and early 1970s. A more widespread use of those commitments, however, was reached during the 1980s and 1990s, also in other countries, such as the Netherlands and Finland. However, it has to be noted that institutions, especially European law and its effect on national policy decision and policy actors, play a major role when it comes to initiating national voluntary commitments. Nevertheless, forms of commitments vary greatly among countries. In **Germany**, for instance, they were primarily set up as agreements between businesses and the federal government, usually presented by the Ministry for the Environment or even the Chancellery, to accomplish environmental objectives. They were considered as ‘gentlemen agreements’ because of their not-legally-binding character. In contrast, the commitments in the **Netherlands** were often private legal contracts, often called ‘self-obligations’, characterised by a low degree of force and high degree of interaction between societal and government actors<sup>12</sup>.

However, the variations of voluntary commitments on a national scale have run through diverse developments. During the development of such agreements as new policy instruments addressing environmental challenges, **the major aim was to bring together industry and policy in order to achieve environmental objectives on a voluntary basis**. Thus, the political aim was to provide incentives for companies to work together on policy measures and objectives. Nowadays, however, the main aim of introducing voluntary commitments is to include not only business, but the whole society including associations, NGOs, schools, to even individual citizen. Those ‘**modern voluntary commitments**’ thus **intend to address the society as a whole with the broad focus of awareness raising and extended stakeholder participation**.

To sum up, there is a variety of diverse commitments to SD in international, European and national contexts. Their definitions differ, but the main features run like a red thread through all definitions expressed: the **non-legally binding character** and the fact that they **address a diversity of societal actors**, such as ministries, educational institutions, NGOs, enterprises, public administration, provinces, towns, cities, businesses, schools, the society as well as individuals etc.

## 2 Integration of voluntary commitments in NSDS processes

This chapter briefly delineates the **different approaches of voluntary commitments in the NSDSs** of the two selected European countries: **Finland and France**. In order to provide background information on the two national strategies, their structure and their integration of the voluntary commitment approach is shortly outlined. By so doing, the focus lies on how the commitment is placed and planned in each

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<sup>12</sup> Töller E.A.. 2013. The Rise and Fall of Voluntary Agreements in German Environmental Policy. German Policy Studies Vol. 9, No.2, pp.: 49-92

strategy. The information of the following paragraphs is exclusively taken from the two NSDSs of Finland and France, respectively.

## 2.1 Finland

Already in 2013, Finland decided to set up a voluntary commitment approach in its NSDS: [The Finland we want by 2050 – Society's commitment to sustainable development](#). One year after its implementation, the ESDN Case Study "[Sustainability transition in Finland: Society's commitment to sustainable development](#)", portrayed the transformative character of the Finnish NSDS as well as the implementation processes of a national sustainability transition approach. The current case study aims to focus more on the **experiences of the approach and processes related to the voluntary society's commitment to SD**.

In a nutshell, the Finnish NSDS is based on a long-term vision of a prosperous Finland within the limits of the carrying capacity of nature. It is a very lean document compared to the previous one, counting only seven pages. The strategy consists of eight shared objectives, based on four principles for SD as well as a section on operational commitments and monitoring of objectives. The **framework of the strategy** is based on the following principles for SD:

- Global responsibility;
- Cross-generational thinking;
- The limited carrying capacity of nature;
- Cooperation; and
- Creative use of knowledge and expertise.

In order to support the approach of a voluntary commitment, the principle of cooperation stresses that SD requires everyone to work together. Therefore, **operational commitments** are established with administrative sectors and other societal actors, such as companies, municipalities, organisations, educational institutions, and local operators. The various stakeholders are encouraged to commit themselves by contributing their part of attaining the shared objectives, such as equal prospects for well-being, a participatory society for citizens, sustainable work, sustainable local communities, etc. In order to **invite as many operators as possible to take part**, the Finnish National Commission on SD is responsible for bringing different parties together to negotiate required measures and the responsibilities that different operators are willing to promote. Moreover, according to the strategy, a **monitoring plan** with intermediate targets and actions should be drawn up and supported by the Finnish National Commission on SD, ministries and organisations. Eventually, the progress of society's commitment is planned to be monitored at annual meeting.

The **stakeholder commitment** works as follows: everyone from, e.g. NGOs, schools, the public sector, etc. can select goals out of the eight shared objectives, make a corresponding commitment, carry it out and measure the own success by finding out what the benefits are, such as waste management, social equality, resource efficiency, fewer emissions, better reputation, marketing, benefits of employees and

putting sustainable development into practice.<sup>13</sup> A more detailed account of the experiences in Finland with the voluntary agreements is described in chapter 3 below.

## 2.2 France

The new [French National Strategy of ecological transition towards sustainable development 2015-2020](#) was adopted in February 2015 by the Council of Ministers. It replaces the NSDS 2010-2013 and sets a new path to sustainable development by aiming at consistency of public policies and facilitating people's ownership. The latest French NSDS is based on a threefold ambition: (a) defining a 2020 vision, (b) transforming the economic and social model for green growth, and (c) creating ownership of the ecological transition. Each ambition is linked to three goals which are defined by priorities, implementation and follow-up plans, figures, and examples. The following box portrays the structure of the French NSDS 2015-2020:

**Box 3: Structure and contents of the French NSDS 2015-2020**

**→ Defining a 2020 vision**

Goal 1: Developing sustainable and resilient territories  
Goal 2: Engaging in a circular and low carbon economy  
Goal 3: Preventing and reducing environmental, social and territorial inequalities

**→ Transforming the economic and social model for green growth**

Goal 4: Inventing new economic and financial models  
Goal 5: Supporting the ecological transformation of economic activities  
Goal 6: Guiding knowledge production, research and innovation towards the ecological transition

**→ Creating ownership of the ecological transition**

Goal 7: Educating, training and raising awareness of the ecological transition and SD  
Goal 8: Mobilizing stakeholders at all levels  
Goal 9: Promoting SD at European and international levels

This case study especially focuses on the **ambition of creating ownership of the ecological transition** which is linked to Goal 8: Mobilizing stakeholders at all levels. This section of the NSDS is devoted to the **commitment of all stakeholders and aims at encouraging everyone to be responsible and at developing alliances and synergies through a reinforced public participation**. The implementation is planned to be carried out through **strengthening the participatory democracy**, corporate sponsorship in ecological and energy transition, Local Agendas 21 as well as with the governmental exemplary administration plan.

A **stakeholder commitment mechanism has been envisaged in the strategy**. It is supposed to involve a voluntary commitments accession process with the aim to support stakeholders in structuring and

<sup>13</sup> Ministry of the Environment Finland. 2013. Society's commitment to sustainable development. Available at: [http://www.ym.fi/en-US/The\\_environment/Sustainable\\_development/Societys\\_commitment\\_to\\_sustainability](http://www.ym.fi/en-US/The_environment/Sustainable_development/Societys_commitment_to_sustainability)

amplifying their actions in favour of the ecological transition, enhancing individual and collective ability to act. This process is planned to involve the following steps:

- Call for commitment;
- Application of the NSDS voluntary commitment;
- Examination of the commitment by the Office of the Commissioner General for SD; and
- Validation of the commitment by the National Council of the Ecological Transition.

Thereby, public and private legal entities are invited to join the vision of the strategy for a 3-year period throughout the duration of the NSDS. The commitment is planned to be translated into concrete actions and measurable goals. Furthermore, state services are also encouraged to participate: every ministry should develop its own strategy or action plan, the state-region planning contracts should ensure the regional implementation of the NSDS, regional committees for the ecological transition should encourage local stakeholders, local authorities should develop and deploy positive energy territories for green growth, territorial SD projects and local Agendas 21. In terms of follow up, an annual progress report should be sent annually to the National Council for the ecological transition and to the National Parliaments as well as deliveries of the strategy and updated progress indicators. This report should gather initiatives from all players. However, the voluntary commitment approach in the French NSDS is not yet finalised and therefore it remains open how it will be implemented in practice.

### 3 Finland's experiences of voluntary commitments

In this chapter, we illustrate the results of the telephone interview, held in September 2015, with our colleague from Finland who is working for the General Secretariat of Sustainable Development and deals with voluntary commitments within the NSDS on a daily base. As mentioned above in chapter 3.1., Finland set up a voluntary commitment approach already in 2013. Therefore, the **main aim of the telephone interview was to learn more about the Finnish experiences and lessons learned in regard to voluntary commitments**. Please find the questionnaire for the telephone interview in the annex of this Case Study.

Finland can be considered as a pioneer when it comes to voluntary commitments as part of the National Sustainable Development Strategy. In fact, the Finnish NSDS *is* a voluntary commitment, also called “Society’s Commitment to SD” which acts as a common long-term framework for SD. Finland has a long-term experience with NSDSs. However, as our interview partner argued: “Finland has 20 years of experience with SD strategies which have developed knowledge and boosted a learning process of the society, but didn’t lead to action.” Besides, the last government dealt with 300 other policy strategies. “Due to this huge number, the policy coherence might not be very strong”, as our interviewee stated. Therefore, the **main motivation** for a shift in SD policy towards a voluntary commitment was **action** and **policy coherence**.

Our Finnish interviewee also mentioned that the turning point was in December 2013, when the National Commission for SD was aware that the previous NSDSs lacked actions and thus decided to try

something else than a traditional strategy approach. Therefore, they made a trip to Germany and consulted the German Advisory on Global Change (WBGU). Consequently, the WBGU's flagship report, **"World in transition – a social contract for sustainability"**, became – among others – **the main source of inspiration for the Finnish Society's Commitment**. Besides, when setting up this commitment as a new policy document, the intention was to design it according to the UN processes on SD and make it flexible enough to fit the new global agenda on SD.

### 3.1.1 Expectations and the role of the strategy in NSDS governance structure

As far as the **aims of the new commitment** – synonymously called 'framework or NSDS' – are concerned, the idea was to develop further the concept of the WBGU in a commitment paper with 6 pages. Our Interviewee stated that the **intention was to describe shortly what SD means and provide the main objectives and basic tools in order to achieve SD**. She also said that the 8 objectives of the Finnish commitment are in line with the SDGs, however, after the final launch of the SDGs, the objectives will be revised in accordance to the SDGs and complemented if necessary. Furthermore, our colleague talked about the **expectations** of the commitment process: "When developing the Finnish commitment, it was very important for us to define the goals not too narrow so that every party, every organisation can correspond to them in a practical way. **The aim was to reach as many stakeholders as possible and involve new actors from society we were not in touch with before, such as companies, research, parties, schools, local administration, church, labor unions, and different kinds of NGOs – a and not only government and administration.**"

As far as the **role of voluntary commitments** is concerned, our interviewee is of the opinion that such **commitments can be very significant**: "Even though we are at the very beginning, we can see that many organisations are very keen on getting involved which were not involved before, such as big companies and other organisations. They all want to do their share". The role of the commitments is expressed by the **variety of organisations involved** (i.e. companies, schools, various organisations) as well as by the **diversity of topics of the given commitments**. Furthermore, our colleague added that the operational commitments made the commitment in the policy paper real and lively and put SD and the objectives into practice. According to our interview partners, all four major industrial sectors in Finland (trade, finance, energy and forestry) have made so called sectoral commitments: "These sectors are really big because they cover a big part of the value chain and can, therefore, influence a lot. The main idea is that every commitment contributes to one or more of the 8 goals with concrete actions. If we had 1000 commitments, we could then check how much CO<sub>2</sub> emissions have been reduced etc.". To learn more about how a specific action of such a commitment looks like, please find examples in the following box 4:

## Box 4: Examples of actions expressed in a voluntary commitment

- (1) *Finland's biggest trade group is a retailing cooperative organisation with more than 40,000 employers. It has made a commitment that in 2016, half of the energy they use will be derived from wind energy. Furthermore, they plan to develop sustainable working practices and promote the employment of young people. Furthermore, they intend to set up energy targets for every store and they have almost 2000 stores in Finland. Therefore, this commitment can have a great impact towards SD.*
- (2) *A small company in Finland has made a commitment to plan buildings which last for over 500 years. Consequently, many big other construction companies are very interested in this commitment too and now they are discussing how to realise their plan. Even research organisations and third sector organisations have joined and the commitment grows.*
- (3) *One of the largest Finnish food corporations committed itself to reduce food waste in bakeries, confectioneries and food service businesses in all eight countries where they operate. Waste reduction should bring cost savings and enforces environmental action at the same time.*

One of the main roles of voluntary commitments is, therefore, to engage many actors of society, increase their actions towards SD in order to increase the impact of work in achieving the eight SD objectives in Finland's Society's Commitment.

Our Finnish colleague argued, however, that **those commitments are only small products at the moment, but they have the potential to increase** their importance for SD. So far, **the main work on SD is still done by the government**, legislation, administration and the National Commission for SD. She also said: "I really want to see that one day those commitments can influence even more than the business-as-usual work and I hope that they increase and succeed so that clusters develop and more impact towards SD is achieved".

### 3.1.2 Experiences and lessons learned within the Finnish voluntary commitment approach

As far as the **status quo** of voluntary commitments in Finland is concerned, **160 commitments** have been made in Finland since 2013. They involve the **following stakeholders**: approximately 35 companies, 10 ministries, 17 administration organisations, 40 educational institutions (i.e. schools, kinder gardens etc.), a few dozen labour unions (i.e. green organisations), 12 NGOs (i.e. consumer NGOs etc.), 7 other organisations, and 2 cities.

The **most chosen objectives** for commitments done by the stakeholders are – starting with the most popular one:

- ❖ Lifestyle that respects the carrying capacity of nature (objective 7)



- ❖ A carbon neutral society (objective 5)
- ❖ An economy that is resource wise (objective 6)
- ❖ A participatory society for citizens (objective 2)

According to our Finnish colleague, an open data base serves as **monitoring platform** where commitments are uploaded by organisations that give a commitment. Furthermore, yearly reports are requested from the stakeholders. For every commitment, indicators for measures or actions have to be chosen and their success has to be reported once a year. However, there are two levels in the monitoring system: on the one hand, the commitment level with the open data base and, on the other hand, the [indicator system](#) which provides up-to-date information on key social indicators and aims to give the big picture of Finland in regard to SD.

Regarding **lessons learned** our interview partner believed that 160 commitments are far too little to give a lesson on the whole process. However, these are the most important lessons learned so far:

- “A commitment is not an easy task and giving a commitment is not like clicking on a Facebook like button. **It has to be taken seriously and it takes time**”, our interviewee argued. It is a big decision and if an organisation has decided what kind of commitment it wants to give, it has to consider whether the commitment is only a communication tool or a tool that should change something and enhance the NSDS. For instance, if a company decides to take on a commitment, it can take one year because it should be supported by the highest levels and it requires time to evolve.
- “**Another lesson is hope.** Due to the bad economic situation, Finland is facing difficulties and the society wants to see hope in this situation. People need to see long-term perspectives. Therefore, commitments should be considered as long-term promises. Yet, if we really want to achieve something, we need to make it together”, our interviewee stated.
- **A commitment should really belong to the national framework as well as to the global UN framework.** Our Finnish colleague had the impression that most organisations are very proud of and keen to take part and belong to SD processes and seeing results.
- “The tricky thing is, however, that **commitments need to be communicated** and sold in a certain way in order to spread them forward. Therefore, efficient communication is required”, as our colleague mentioned.

A part from lessons learned, our interviewee provided us with **three pieces of advice** for those countries that consider following up a voluntary commitment approach:

- **Objectives shouldn't be too narrow** so that they can address a variety of stakeholders. Moreover, **they should be ambitious.** You should be aware that big companies can have big influences such as small school can have big impacts for the future.
- In the first stage, every commitment is welcome, however, the **level of ambition should be raised with the number of commitments and eligibility criteria have to be developed.** A criterion should be that the commitment should be new because the business-as-usual is not an



option anymore, therefore, new criteria are required. Furthermore, it is important to know how to measure and check the process.

- Thirdly the **process has to be visible and transparent for everyone**. For example, all changes, actions and plans have to be visible at webpages of companies in order to prove that the commitments fulfil the eligibility criteria.

In Finland, voluntary commitments are considered as an appropriate tool to put not only the national SD framework, but also the SDGs in action. Our interview partner also welcomes companies to participate because it is a good tool for them belonging to the national and to the international agenda. She also mentioned that other countries, such as Norway have increasing interest in setting up such processes. “However, of course, not the same process is suitable for everyone”, she added.

## 4 Conclusion

This case study showed that voluntary commitments are very different in nature as regards the international, the European and the national level. On the international level, the Rio+20 Outcome Document as well as the 2030 Agenda for SD strongly support and suggest the implementation of voluntary commitments for the achievement of SD and implementing the SDGs in every form. On a European level, they are mainly used in order to bring industry and policy together for achieving environmental objectives and support partnerships for SD. The national approach of commitments in NSDS processes is so far only in Finland well elaborated. France has envisaged a voluntary commitment mechanism for implementing their NSDS. The Finnish experience shows that voluntary commitments can act as drivers for change if all actors in society are addressed, work together, and take their role in the commitment process seriously. However, the evolvement of impact for SD requires time, common commitment, and devotion – for instance, the process in Finland is still only at an early stage.

## Annex

### QUESTIONNAIRE

#### Expectations and experiences of voluntary commitments within NSDSs

##### I. VOLUNTARY COMMITMENTS AS PART OF THE NSDS

1. Why did your country choose to set up voluntary commitments as part of your NSDS?  
What was the **main motivation** and where does the idea come from?
2. What specific **role do the voluntary commitments play in your NSDS governance structure?**
  - a. How do the voluntary commitments **contribute** to achieve the NSDS objectives?
  - b. How do you see the **balance** of the work done by voluntary commitments and the daily activities of the ministry in achieving the NSDS objectives?
3. What were your **expectations when integrating voluntary commitments** in your NSDS?  
What do you think can be changed with voluntary commitments?

##### II. EXPERIENCES

4. How **many commitments for what objectives** have you experienced since 2013? Which **stakeholder groups** are mainly involved?
5. Are there **monitoring mechanisms** or processes in place to **measure the achievement of targets?** How do these processes look like?

##### III. LESSONS LEARNED

6. What did you **learn from the implementation** of voluntary commitments and from multi-stakeholder partnerships? What did the multi-stakeholder approach **add** (new knowledge, capacities?) Please provide us with the most important lessons learned since 2013.
7. According to your opinion, how can voluntary commitments **act as drivers of change** (in regard to SDGs/ to boost SDGs)?
8. If another country would like to set up similar processes, what **three important pieces of advice** would you give?



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