

ESDN Policy Brief 2

February 2019

Recommendations for Communicating Sustainable Development and the SDGs

Introduction

The European Sustainable Development Network (ESDN) is an informal network of national policymakers and other sustainable development (SD) experts working on SD policies and strategies. The ESDN's main aim is to advance SD and the implementation of the 2030 Agenda at the European, national and sub-national level by bringing together government representatives and expert stakeholders. The ESDN is the largest policy network on SD in Europe that facilitates the exchange of good practices and experiences across Europe by publishing Quarterly Reports, organizing flagship Annual Conferences, Workshops, and Peer Learning Platforms, which cover topics in sustainable development, of which the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are the recent driving force.

What can be done to better and more effectively communicate the SDGs?

The 16th ESDN Workshop took place in Berlin, Germany on November 19-20, 2018 and focused on **experiences and examples of how policymakers can better and more effectively communicate SD and the SDGs**. Its main aim was to reflect on the role of communication in the implementation of SD, in general, and the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, in particular, as they not only need to be embraced by policymakers and experts in the field, but also by all the different stakeholder groups, in order to achieve SDG objectives in practice. However, the 17 SDGs and their specific targets are still mostly known by only relatively small groups of people. Therefore, the Workshop featured **good practice examples of communication strategies and activities** from European countries, as well as other stakeholder groups.



Ms. Annika Lindblom, Ministry of the Environment, Finland &
Member of the ESDN Steering Group
©Marja Innanen, Prime Minister's Office, Finland

This experience of sharing and learning was done through a mixture of keynote speakers, who delivered presentations of practical examples about their country's SDG communication efforts, and the efforts of stakeholder groups to better and more effectively communicate SD. Keynote speeches and presentations were followed by interactive group sessions that involved 70 participants from 17 countries and allowed for deeper discussions on communication for SD.



Participants at the 16th ESDN Workshop in
Berlin, 19-20 November 2018
©ESDN Office

Policy Recommendations

The following policy recommendations for better and more effective communication of sustainable development were generated from the results of the ESDN Workshop. The recommendations are not presented in a ranked order, but are rather presented by thematic area:

1. **Identify and reach the target audience and call for action**
2. **Be positive and constructive in communicating**
3. **Good topic and professional storytelling**
4. **Connecting and mainstreaming the SDGs in everyday life**
5. **Allocate resources**

Each discussed theme offers steps that governments, policymakers, and stakeholders could use in their communication strategies and plans regarding SD and the SDGs to better ensure messages and desired objectives are taken up by the target group(s).

1. Identify and reach the target audience and call for action

One of the main needs that was identified by the keynotes and interactive groups at the ESDN Workshop was **the need to know to whom one was communicating, or to whom one wished to communicate, as knowing the target audience will ensure a greater degree of communication 'success'**, and to develop a specific communication strategy for the respective target group. For example, if policymakers wanted to communicate with the private sector and developed a communications strategy, but also attempted to use that same strategy to communicate to ordinary citizens, the results and success of the communication will most likely be very different regarding whether the objective of the communication was met or taken up by the target audience, as the information might have very little to do ordinary citizens. Therefore, when communicating, it is vitally important to know the target audience and their needs and identify how those needs can be addressed before beginning a communication process.

In the case of Finland, the desired objective of the Prime Minister's Office was for citizens to reduce their carbon footprints. To more effectively ensure that this desired objective would be met, Finland

recently developed a tool, the Sustainable Lifestyles Commitment- service, to help all Finnish people reduce their carbon footprints. The tool is arguably very unique, in that it informs people that they, and society as a whole, indeed have a need to reduce their carbon footprints. The tool is able to connect with citizens along many different pathways, from helping fight climate change, to being able to save citizens money by convincing them to turn down household heating: Even climate change deniers would most likely be hard-pressed to say no to the chance to save money.

This is a good case example of adjusting communication to the target audience, as the tool addresses all ordinary people. The Prime Minister's Office has developed an online tool that provides citizens with a test to show where their carbon footprints come from, as well as how they can go about reducing it. By knowing that the audience is ordinary citizens, the questions are tailored to everyone's everyday lifestyle, including travel habits, eating habits, living habits, etc. This connection of CO₂ emissions and carbon footprints to everyday activities better ensures that citizens can engage with an otherwise complex topic and contextualize it in their own worldview.

A more in-depth and practical application of this recommendation can be found in the 'Example in Action' box 1 about the success the Prime Minister's Office has had regarding knowing their audience.

Example in Action 1

'Sustainable Lifestyles Commitment - service'

Finland

By knowing their audience, the Prime Minister's Office is able to:

- **raise awareness** on the topic of reducing CO₂ emissions;
- make reducing citizens' carbon footprints **accessible and understandable to a large majority of people**;
- allow people to see how individual daily actions impact their CO₂ emissions, and thereby **anchor and connect actions that reduce carbon footprints to their daily lives**;
- use people's carbon footprint results to not only compare them to Finland's national average, thereby **potentially sparking a desire in citizens to do better to reduce the size of their carbon footprint**, but also offer

constructive advice on how they could further reduce their footprint instead of leaving them with an abstract number (i.e. tons of CO₂ emitted) without context;

- **encourage** citizens to use the knowledge they have gained and the advice they have received to become **proactive and commit to making changes** and more easily **allow participation** in “Society’s Commitment to Sustainable Development” (outlining the Finnish national objectives for achieving SD) and use what they have learned to **make their own commitment** by not only reducing their own carbon footprint, but also that of Finland’s, **which reinforces more positive feelings of togetherness**.

Recommendations for Policymakers

1. **Invest in knowing who the target audience is and discovering and attuning to their needs, which takes time and resources.**
2. **Define appropriate communication methods, strategies, and channels to best reach the target audience(s).**

2. Be positive and constructive in communicating

A representative from Netzwerk Weitblick (a German CSO founded by journalists who seek to impart knowledge to media and journalists about SD and the importance of showcasing it in reporting), who provided ESDN Workshop participants with a journalistic view of how to best communicate to one’s target audience, pointed to the importance of positive communication on audience behavior, especially with regard to taking up desired objectives. **Positive communication**, instead of communication based on fear and guilt, has **higher rates of success in motivating people to make a desired change**.

In addition to positive communication to reach target audiences, the way in which a particular communication may be delivered is also very important. Sometimes, more than communicating a message is needed for the target audience to be able to contextualize it and adapt whatever information is being presented to them into their daily lives. Positive communication, which can be a type of **constructive communication**, can pose issues and problems in a different light, where feelings of guilt can be assuaged by stories of people overcoming certain problems, or government’s

designing helpful tools that show how easy it can be to make changes.

To provide an example of positive communication, the German Government is approaching this concept in a very interactive manner, seeking to involve many actors in order to better communicate the government’s goals and measures. The government decided to do this, as the way in which the government decides on work programs, goals and policies is often very abstract and intangible to most people, as they are so far removed from the entire process.

In order to overcome that distance, Germany seeks to incorporate more **initiatives that are based on citizen inclusion, participation and active contribution in policy-making**. To address this, the German Government uses a range of different dialogue forums and groups to bring society and government together when striving to communicate and receive inputs and feedback regarding SD. By allowing citizens a more active role in the policy-making process, Germany seeks to positively spin the way the government communicates with its constituents.

In ‘Example in Action’ in box 2, there are more detailed descriptions of some of the initiatives the German Government is using to foster more positive communication.

Example in Action 2

Stakeholder participation in the political process, Germany

- **Forum “Sustainability”** was newly established in 2016. It serves as a forum for the Federal Government to **exchange views with key stakeholders** the status and future of the implementation of the German SD Strategy (GSDS) and the 2030 Agenda. Once a year, over 100 experts come together from civil society, business, science, churches, German Federal States, and municipalities to make sure that their voices are heard.
- The German Federal Ministry for the Environment and the Ministry for Development jointly organize the **“Dialogue Forum” on the 2030 Agenda**. In this forum, views are regularly exchanged with interested stakeholders on efforts to achieve SD at the international level.
- With the help of the newly established **“Dialogue Group”**, the Federal Government intends to **involve civil society more**

transparently in the preparation of the meetings of the State Secretaries Committee for SD.

- The **SDG Communication Campaign** of the Federal Press Office will be dealing more with the suggestion made in the German Peer Review of the GSDS to improve and intensify its communication regarding SD. The Federal Government will, therefore, continue its communication activities and has finally succeeded in **assuring a communication budget for sustainability**. The Federal Government will present one of the 17 SDGs every month and explain why sustainable action affects everyone and what the status of implementation is in Germany.

Recommendations for Policymakers

1. In communication strategies, focus on finding and sharing positive examples of people doing something that supports your communication objective(s) to show others that it can be done.
2. Do not focus on communication plans that cause the target audience to experience feelings of guilt or present them with seemingly insurmountable issues, as this causes apathy and inaction.

3. Good topic and professional storytelling

The characteristics that make up good storytelling were also discussed as these characteristics are very important in any form of communication, as **good stories have wide appeal and are more likely to garner attention**. A list of the 6 super ingredients to telling good and compelling stories was provided at the Workshop. One may notice that many of the policy recommendations focus on individual ingredients as they are essential to overall communication, regardless of whether stories are being told or information or knowledge is being passed along. A good example of a project that is and of itself a 'good' story is the Energy Observer Project, which is outlined in the 'Example in Action 3' box below.

Example in Action 3

'Energy Observer Project', France

The [Energy Observer Project](#) in France is a good case example of a good story, as it **takes the**

concept of more sustainable modes of transportation and has done something very unique to raise awareness and communicate about sustainable development and the SDGs.

The entire premise of the project has the markings of a good story, as it takes the audience with them along a **sailing journey across the world's oceans**. Energy Observer is also a good story, because it is able to make many further stories in the form of documentaries, crew logbooks, and short, but inspirational, short videos that deal directly with the SDGs, which further seek to take viewers onboard the project.

Recommendations for Policymakers

- Use the 6 Ingredients for telling a compelling story in communicating with a target audience:
 - 1) Have knowledge about the topic you wish to communicate.
 - 2) Know the target group and their needs.
 - 3) Find a good topic or hook for the topic that makes it relevant for people.
 - 4) Choose a storytelling method that will resonate with the target audience.
 - 5) Be constructive in communicating and provide solutions to issues that align with the communication's objectives.
 - 6) Use authentic role models and positive examples in communicating with the target audience(s).
- Tell great stories that feature:
 - Something that is of public interest.
 - Elements of good dramaturgy.
 - Telling the story in a simple and relatable way.
 - A good narrative that many people can identify with.

4. Connecting and mainstreaming the SDGs in everyday life

Another important need that was identified by Workshop participants was that the **SDGs were currently not very well-connected to people's everyday lives**, nor were they interestingly presented in mainstream media, meaning that the SDGs stubbornly remain a topic for society's elites.

Communication experts shared with Workshop participants that it is often difficult for journalists to write about SD, because they are not specialists in that particular field, nor do SD topics capture the public's general interest the way in which celebrities, drugs, violence, war, etc., does. This means the SDGs have a lot to compete with for attention.

However, making the SDGs relatable to people and to their everyday lives is a way to make these concepts more appealing. Projekt17, featured below in 'Example in Action' box 4, addresses these issues. Iceland also has a unique example in mainstreaming the SDGs in the media. A more in-depth look can be found in the 'Example in Action' 5 box.

Example in Action 4

Projekt17, Germany

Projekt17, being a magazine, attempts to provide **positive communication** about the SDGs and combine that with **good storytelling** by including diverse stories from diverse areas to **spark interest** and to foster emotional connections to the SDGs.

Projekt17 has made it its mission to draw attention to the positive change in the sense of sustainability and to promote the SDGs. Its first step in this direction is the publishing of the SDGs in a magazine issue, which shows surprising, positive stories about how people move the world. These are stories that motivate, because they show **where and how change is already happening**.

Example in Action 5

News campaign "Good News from the Future", Iceland

The Government of Iceland wanted to attempt a new way to reach its citizens regarding sustainable development and the SDGs.

The government, therefore, designed media campaigns that were called, "**Good News from the Future**", which transports viewers to the year 2030 and features a news anchor sharing how the world is at that time, or how everyone would like for it to be. Not only has Iceland experimented with the idea of featuring the SDGs in the mainstream news media, but they have even took a unique and very positive spin on it, as it portrays reaching the SDGs by 2030 as a very real possibility.

Recommendations for Policymakers

1. **Work with the mainstream media to create SDG communication strategies.**
2. **Have higher coverage in the mainstream media about the SDGs.**
3. **Use daily life examples of SD when designing and mainstreaming SDG education programs for students and other stakeholder groups including policymakers.**
 - a. **Be constructive**
 - b. **Use positive examples.**
 - c. **Be concrete**

5. Allocate resources

As with many aspects related to SD, **resources are always a primary need to doing anything; communication is no different.** For civil servants working on SD related topics and the SDGs those resources were time, more people, and **more expertise when it comes to communication, as many civil servants are not communication experts.**

The art of being able to have this need met is very challenging, as budgets need to be approved and those responsible for approving the budgets oftentimes do not necessarily have SD or the SDGs in mind when planning. However, designing a positive, constructive communication strategy that relates to people's everyday lives might be a convincing approach to show that investing budget into such a strategy or planning process might be worthwhile.

Recommendations for Policymakers

- **Earmark parts of ministry budgets for communications training for civil servants.**
- **Collaborate with a designated communications expert who is knowledgeable about communicating SD to different target audiences.**
- **Educate and communicate with politicians on the importance of SD and the SDGs for the government's work program and objectives to ensure political support.**
- **Start mandatory education programs that feature sustainability in the curriculum and start with young students.**