

Preface

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On December 2nd, 2020, UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres gave a brief address at Columbia University. It was published in the environmental newsletter „Sonnenseite“ in Germany in a slightly abbreviated form, transcribed from the video and summarized by Udo Simonis.¹ The poignant speech is an urgent call for action and re-iterates that the Agenda 2030, the Sustainable Development Goals, remain the blueprint for such action: „This is a moment of truth for people and planet alike. COVID and climate change have brought us to a threshold. We cannot go back to the old normal of inequality, injustice and heedless dominion over the Earth. Instead, we must step towards a safer, more sustainable and equitable path. And we have a blueprint for all that: the 2030 Agenda, the Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Agreement on climate change.“

In 2018, three years into the Agenda 2030, the Commission for Interdisciplinary Ecological Studies of the Austrian Academy of Sciences brought together a group of experts to analyse the challenges for implementation of the SDGs in Austria. As Chairperson of the Commission, I also served as one of the authors. The Presidency of the Austrian Academy of Sciences decided that the Academy should use its means to contribute to the implementation of the goals and organized the hitherto largest congress on the SDGs held in this country. The congress was special also for its focus. The issue of making sustainable development possible in a mediatized, and globally connected world dominated by mass and social media was chosen as an under-researched topic to be the main

focus of the plenary program. In April 2019, more than 300 people gathered to listen to a cast of international speakers and share their own research and ideas. While the highly interactive congress was not easy to document, a publication resulted that captured at least the keynotes and documented the results from the many working groups². After the congress, many colleagues held high hopes that the gathering would be an important step in mainstreaming the SDGs in Austria.

But the voluntary progress report by the Austrian government, published in 2020, was rather disappointing, cherry-picking rather than encompassing, and focussing on achievements while glossing over challenges³. Since 2015, I had had many conversations with colleagues and students about the Agenda 2030. I also taught several university-level courses on the SDGs. Some of my partners shared their frustration, pointing me e.g. to the fact that the SDGs would not address extreme poverty, that the indicators were so vague that practically everything that was already done could be sold as a success with regard to the SDGs.

Guideline documents by the UN are necessarily chimerical, boundary objects between political and expert realms. They are the result of compromises and that quite unavoidably earns them critique. But the SDGs were not just a guideline document. They were widely successful as a graphical marker for anyone who wanted to decorate and thus legitimize their activities as pertaining to the SDGs. The webpages of

1 <https://www.sonnenseite.com/en/politics/the-state-of-the-planet-is-broken/>

2 https://www.oeaw.ac.at/fileadmin/NEWS/2020/PDF/Webversion_AiD_18.pdf

3 https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/26512VNR_2020_Austria_Report_English.pdf

the UN themselves are forerunners in such labelling, which is greatly facilitated by the official graphical representation of the SDGs as a series of brightly colored, unconnected quadrangles.

This representation, I speculated, might well play a role in the apparent failure of the Agenda 2030 to transform society at large. There was so much energy in so many people, so many I had met saw the SDGs as a fantastic opportunity, and yet, it seemed that their efforts ended up in a lot of guidelines, reports, discussion papers, but in little action. What kind of representation could spur a transformative practice? What kind of learning would stakeholders need to be able to put knowledge into practice?

Local and regional transdisciplinary attempts at using the framework to foster desirable developments often fared a better fate than big schemes, or so, was my impression.

Several publications on the networked nature of the goals and targets had shown how connected the agenda was and I had been teaching a networked approach. Thinking about networks made me think of woven fabric. When I came across the work of Ellen Harlizius-Klück, I was fascinated. Weaving could perhaps instil the networked thinking that the goals in their boxes would not yield? I taught myself the basics of tablet weaving in a holiday apartment over the summer. It was taxing, but without the knowledge I acquired by weaving, I could not have co-operated with Ellen or later, Charlotte. Ellen was kind enough to visit me in Vienna, and we discussed my attempts. By then I was dreaming of workshops for decision makers, letting them not only experience the interconnectedness of the goals, and the challenges of the

paths towards their implementation, I also had produced objects that could perhaps serve as trinkets, as take-home products of such a workshop. It turned out that my attempts were short-sighted and not true to the essence of what „Weaving the SDGs“ actually was about.

Charlotte Holzer, whose reflexive CV is part of this volume, as those of Ellen Harlizius-Klück and myself, transformed herself into a tablet weaver over long months of experimenting. I followed her journey and after several meetings, we presented her work and my thinking, which had greatly benefitted from our exchanges, in March 2020, at the Deutsches Museum, speculating that in the context of SDG-themed exhibitions, weaving might become part of the programs of the museum. The positive feedback energized us, but it would take almost one more year to write up our journey so that others could follow. Each of us is speaking in her own voice, but we have commented extensively on each other's writing. To allow readers a better understanding of the perspective we take, we have written CVs exclusively for this publication. We invite comment and discussion.

The KIOES Opinions are designed for different formats. This issue of the „Opinions“ is hopefully more than just a project documentation, although it allows us to thank the Austrian Academy of Sciences for their financial support, which was essential. Thanks are also due to Karin Windsteig and Viktor Bruckman, who create the product from the manuscripts.

We wish our readers an inspiring journey through the text and hope that we could contribute in our special way to the implementation of the Agenda 2030.

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