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Report of the Austrian Court of Audit

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals,
Implementation of the 2030 Agenda in Austria

Executive Summary



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DISCLOSURE

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Scope of Responsibility of

the Federal Chancellery

the Federal Ministry of Europe, Integration and Foreign Affairs

the Federal Ministry of Sustainability and Tourism

the Federal Ministry of Transport, Innovation and Technology

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, Implementation of the 2030 Agenda in Austria

Executive summary

From June to September 2017, the Austrian Court of Audit (ACA) carried out an audit of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in Austria. The audit aimed in particular at assessing the legal framework conditions and the national recognition of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the responsibilities of the Federal Government and the coordination across all levels of government. A further objective was to evaluate the initial situation (stocktaking and gap analysis), the implementation plan and the target attainment monitoring system, as well as the inclusion of the civil society, the reporting system and the impacts of the SDGs. The audit was carried out at the Federal Chancellery and the Federal Ministry of Europe, Integration and Foreign Affairs – in their capacity as coordinating entities regarding the national implementation of the SDGs – as well as at the Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, Environment and Water Management and the Federal Ministry of Transport, Innovation and Technology – as federal ministries selected as examples by the ACA. The audited period largely spanned the years from 2016 through 2017.

Until 7 January 2018, matters related to environmental sustainability fell within the sphere of responsibility of the Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, Environment and Water Management. Since the amendment of the Federal Ministries Act 2017 (BMG–Novelle 2017) such matters have been governed by the Federal Ministry of Sustainability and Tourism. Consequently, the ACA uses the denomination "Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, Environment and Water Manage-

ment” for the audited period. The recommendations, however, are addressed to the Federal Ministry of Sustainability and Tourism.

The 2030 Agenda

In end–September 2015, the Member States of the United Nations adopted a comprehensive global development agenda entitled “Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” (2030 Agenda) for the next 15 years. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals, which entered into force on 1 January 2016, form the centrepiece of the 2030 Agenda.

The concept of sustainability, on which the 2030 Agenda is based, centres around the dimensions of environmental, economic and social sustainability. In combination with the instruments of mid–and long–term budgeting implemented in Austria, this concept can make an essential contribution to maintaining prosperity and safeguarding intergenerational equity.

As a member of the United Nations, Austria adopted the 2030 Agenda and the related goals and fully committed itself to sustainable development. In its work programme for 2017 and 2018 adopted in January 2017, the former federal government, however, failed to include a direct reference to the SDGs corresponding to this political commitment to a national implementation. Although mention was made to the 2030 Agenda in the new government programme for 2017 to 2022 adopted by the new federal government in December 2017, it failed to set a context for the concrete measures.

Governance and modus operandi

Based on a ministerial decision of January 2016, the Federal Government established an interministerial working group tasked with the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. However, despite its central role, it was only given the mandate to coordinate the reporting on the implementation. It was not mandated with coordinating the implementation itself or with guiding or managing a coherent nationwide implementation. Beside the interministerial working group, no other organizational entity or institution was tasked with coordinating the implementation of the 2030 Agenda or with providing advice to the Federal Government regarding implementation–related matters. This was in contrast to Germany and other European countries.

For the national implementation of the 2030 Agenda, the Federal Government chose the so-called mainstreaming approach: it conferred the responsibility for the implementation of the SDGs to the individual federal ministries, also leaving the interpretation of the goals to them. The „mainstreaming approach“ resulted in a fragmentation of the implementation process, especially as the Federal Government failed to set clear political priorities and did not provide for central and coherent management. Furthermore, Austria had no nationwide strategy for the implementation of the SDGs.

In the ministerial decision of January 2016, the Federal Government had tasked the federal ministries “to integrate” the SDGs “in the relevant strategies and programmes” (stocktaking and gap analysis) and “if need be to elaborate corresponding action plans and measures” (implementation plan).

The contributions of the individual federal ministries to taking stock as to which SDGs had already been addressed in strategies and programmes differed profoundly as regards quality and scope. The Federal Chancellery carried out merely the editorial assembling of the contributions. Contrary to the basic idea of the 2030 Agenda – a transparent implementation of the SDGs – the Federal Chancellery and the Federal Ministry of Europe, Integration and Foreign Affairs neither made the results publicly accessible nor did they report to Parliament. A coordinated and systematic gap analysis to be carried out by the Federal Chancellery and the Federal Ministry of Europe, Integration and Foreign Affairs, which was to identify discrepancies between the SDGs and the stocktaking result in Austria, was not available at the time of the audit.

A nationwide implementation plan, which was to take into account interactions between the SDGs and clearly define the responsibilities at the federal, provincial and municipal level, setting out concrete measures and providing a timetable for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda to close the identified gaps, was, at the time of the audit, not available either.

Structures for a systematic coordination across all levels of government, which would imply a nationwide coordination, lacked, as did structures for a systematic involvement of the civil society. Also lacking was systematic nationwide public relations with regard to the 2030 Agenda, although the Federal Government had requested the European Commission to set out such “ambitious communication and awareness-raising measures” at the European level.

Reporting

The Federal Government planned to present a first national progress report in the framework of the "United Nations High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development" as late as in 2020, and then subsequently only one further report until 2030. In comparison, 28 of the 24 EU Member States will present their national progress reports by end-2018.

In March 2017, the Federal Chancellery published a first national progress report on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. This report was to be presented as an outline of the SDGs for the public and at the same time it was intended to be a preparatory work for the Austrian report at the "United Nations High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development". The report, however, did not provide a concise overall overview of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in Austria and therefore neither contained any implementation measures of the provinces, the municipalities and the civil society (non-governmental organizations) nor any contributions by experts.

Impact

The majority of the federal ministries' outcome targets in 2017 – namely 81 of 102, some 80 % – already covered the SDGs in substance. In the explanations, however, none of the outcome targets expressly referred to the 2030 Agenda.

At the time of the audit the Federal Chancellery and the Federal Ministry of Finance were about to establish their own evaluation and a reporting systems targeted at the 2030 Agenda. This lack of coordination was especially due to the "mainstream approach" at the federal level and the failure to appoint an overall responsible person.

The fact that the federal ministries took account of the SDGs when they entered data related to outcome orientation in the corresponding application of the Federal Chancellery was merely voluntary. Consequently, the data on the 2030 Agenda was incomplete and not adequate for informative analyses. As regards the relation between the 2030 Agenda and the outcome-oriented impact assessment of the Federal Government, the Federal Ministry of Finance had conducted detailed analyses in the framework of an internal report. This created a link between the intended outcomes and their concrete benefits for the citizens regarding the 2030 Agenda for federal legislative projects and other projects of extraordinary financial importance.

Implementation in selected federal ministries

The ACA selected the Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, Environment and Water Management and the Federal Ministry of Transport, Innovation and Technology as examples to review the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in two federal ministries more thoroughly. Owing to the responsibilities laid down by the Federal Ministries Act 1986 (Bundesministeriengesetz), both federal ministries could be expected to have broader content-wise interconnections with the SDGs. Basically, the programmes, strategies and measures of the Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, Environment and Water Management and the Federal Ministry of Transport, Innovation and Technology took account of the 2030 Agenda, but failed to establish direct references to the SDGs.

The detailed stocktaking carried out by the Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, Environment and Water Management was a useful basis for a gap analysis. A systematic gap analysis comparing the target provisions with the status quo in all strategies, programmes and measures required for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, however, was lacking. Furthermore, the Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, Environment and Water Management used the stocktaking, and not a systematically performed gap analysis, as the starting point for the preparation of an implementation plan. The Federal Ministry of Transport, Innovation and Technology carried out a stocktaking, but neither performed a gap analysis nor established an implementation plan for the attainment of the goals laid out in the 2030 Agenda.

Recommendations

The most important recommendations of the ACA were the following:

- The interministerial working group should be set up as a national steering body for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda to manage a coherent, nationwide implementation. Furthermore, the responsible stakeholders should look into whether the interministerial working group could be chaired by one federal ministry only.
- The responsible stakeholders should encourage the preparation of a sustainability strategy that contains a structured and coherent nationwide mechanism and takes into account the provinces, municipalities and the civil society.

- Reporting to the "United Nations High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development" should be ensured as early as possible and from then on periodically – at least once per legislative period – and include the provinces and the civil society.
- As regards the amendment of the Federal Organic Budget Act 2013, the responsible stakeholders should encourage the legislators to embed the SDGs, in a mandatory way, – analogous to the equality target – in the outcome targets of the Federal Government.

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