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# Stakeholder Dialogue for Sustainability

## The Challenge of Thinking between Boxes

*saguf board members participated  
in a Stakeholder Dialogue initiated by  
the Swiss Federal Council to  
jointly elaborate its new  
Sustainable Development Strategy.*

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Between November 2014 and May 2015 saguf board members participated in the *Stakeholder Dialogue for Sustainability* initiated by the Swiss Federal Council (Bundesrat). The goal of this consultation process was to inform and jointly advance the elaboration of the Federal Council's *Sustainable Development Strategy 2016–2019*<sup>1</sup> (Swiss Federal Council 2016) that was adopted in January 2016.

This contribution presents and discusses the Stakeholder Dialogue from saguf's point of view. Its aim is to reflect on this experience and on the question of how an academic society dedicated to strengthening environmental research and education as a cornerstone for sustainability can contribute to processes such as the federal Stakeholder Dialogue. We argue that one central contribution is to make the case for an integrative approach to tackling sustainable development issues.

### The Sustainable Development Strategy 2016–2019

The *Sustainable Development Strategy* is the Swiss Federal Council's guiding document for the implementation of sustainable development in Switzerland. It provides a set of priorities and guiding principles for all sectors of the federal administrations. The main purpose of the strategy is to coordi-

nate the federal administration's actions in favor of sustainable development. This coordination is ensured by an Interdepartmental Sustainable Development Committee (ISDC). The first federal *Sustainable Development Strategy* was formulated in 1997. Since 2008 the strategy has been updated for each new legislature. For the revision of the strategy for the 2016–2019 legislature, the Federal Council opened up the process in order to include stakeholders from civil society, business, and science. This involvement by way of a Stakeholder Dialogue for Sustainability in the preparation of a strategic document is presented as strengthening the Federal Council's commitment to the principles of sustainable development as well as an attempt to anchor these principles more widely within society (ARE 2015, Swiss Federal Council 2016).

The core of the new federal *Sustainable Development Strategy* is its *Action Plan*, structured into nine action areas:

- consumption and production;
- urban development, mobility and infrastructure;
- energy and climate;

- natural resources;
- economic and financial system;
- education, research and innovation;
- social security;
- social cohesion and gender equality;
- health.

Each action area proposes a long term vision, mid-term goals to be reached by 2030 as well as concrete measures which the Federal Council has to implement during the 2016–2019 legislature to reach these goals (Swiss Federal Council 2016).

### Stakeholder Dialogue for Sustainability: Looking for Societal Inputs

The *Stakeholder Dialogue for Sustainability* informing and jointly advancing the elaboration of the *Sustainable Development Strat-*

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<sup>1</sup> Details on the Swiss Federal Council's strategy can be found at [www.are.admin.ch/themen/nachhaltig/00262/00528/index.html](http://www.are.admin.ch/themen/nachhaltig/00262/00528/index.html).

egy 2016–2019 took place between September 2014 and May 2015. It was organized and led by the Federal Office for Spatial Development (Bundesamt für Raumentwicklung ARE) and consisted of a series of three workshops for each of the nine action areas identified by the ISDC, as well as one launching and one closing event.

Saguf board members participated in the workshops for the action areas “consumption and production”, “energy and climate”, “natural resources”, and “education, research and innovation”. In each action area, the workshops were dedicated to making propositions for the *Action Plan* by successively discussing visions, goals, and implementation measures. These discussions were conducted independently from ISDC’s work. There was no direct interaction between the ISDC and the workshop participants. The results were communicated to the ISDC in a synthesis report at the end of the workshop series. It was made clear from the beginning that these results were not binding for the ISDC. ARE published a synthesis report (ARE 2015) compiling the results of the workshops as well as the participants’ evaluation of the process. Additionally, ARE commissioned an external scientific evaluation of the process (Christen et al. 2015).

### Reflecting the Stakeholder Dialogue

The workshops were conducted in parallel for each action area. There was no opportunity to discuss the results transversally within the Stakeholder Dialogue. Consequently, the synthesis report presents individual results for each action area. The scope of this communication does not allow for a detailed review of the proposed visions, goals, and measures. These are listed integrally in the synthesis report (ARE 2015).

The saguf board members who took part in the process agree with the view expressed by many participants and in the evaluation report (Christen et al. 2015) that the main contribution of the Stakeholder Dialogue was the process in itself. It was the first time that the federal administration led such a consultation to inform the implementation of a strategy. Many underlined the coherence of having a Stakeholder Dia-

logue in order to inform a sustainable development implementation policy. Alongside praising the very existence of such a process, stakeholders and observers of the dialogue criticized several aspects.

A recurring critique heard during the workshops and mentioned in the synthesis and evaluation report was the lack of representativeness of the stakeholders, and hence of the process (ARE 2015, Christen et al. 2015). In several workshops participants underlined that important stakeholders were missing. This was especially the case for those from business and science.

A possible cause can be seen in the mode of recruitment: previously known stakeholders had received personal invitations. These were complemented only after participants in the dialogue highlighted the lack of certain stakeholders, saguf having been one of them. The suggestion to invite saguf was met without opposition as a lack of stakeholders from science and academia was widely acknowledged at the opening meeting. The lack of representatives from science leads to the question of how the federal administration perceives the role of science in such a process. We do not think that this reflects a general disregard of science. It rather reflects a conception of scientists as furnishers of facts and figures – and not as partners that come to mind when the normative implications of those facts are up for discussion (Kläy and Schneider 2015). Such a conception is at odds with our conviction that knowledge for sustainable development needs to be co-designed by all societal stakeholders.

The absence of some important stakeholders might also be explained by the non-binding character of the dialogue. The moderators emphasized that the ISDC was not obliged to take the workshop results into account when elaborating the *Action Plan*. Rather they underlined that the process ought to be understood as a dialogue between the administration and society. However, the organizers requested that participants formulate their goals and visions concretely and in line with current legislation and actual figures. This implied high levels of expertise or additional preparatory work and thus seemed at odds with the consultative nature of the process. In light

of the high involvement required, some stakeholders may have judged the outcomes as insufficient in terms of the capacity to influence policy. As noted in the external evaluation, the continuously decreasing number of participants from one workshop to the next might reflect this perception (Christen et al. 2015).

Furthermore the scope of the dialogue was not totally clear. Some stakeholders interpreted “federal strategy” as equal to “national strategy”, meaning a nationwide strategy in which the role of all actors must be detailed (Christen et al. 2015). As a consequence, discussions within the workshops drifted towards what should be done by different stakeholder groups, instead of focusing on actions to be taken by the federal administration. Therefore, stakeholders’ attitudes were oscillating during the workshops: 1. defending their own interests when discussions were taking a general turn in which some stakeholders were asked to make specific efforts, and 2. contributing to common goals with their expertise when discussions focused more on propositions for the federal administration.

These critiques signal that in order to have participants functional to the goals and scope of the process, the organizers need to conduct structured stakeholder identification and disclose the selection criteria, since the way in which initiators of participatory processes conceive of stakeholders also shapes the latter’s attitudes (Ejderyan et al. 2006). Additionally, in such a format, the process’ scope and requirement should match the stakeholders’ capacities both in terms of expertise and level of involvement.

Despite these critiques, the Stakeholder Dialogue was rather well received. As a consultation process, it generated a pool of ideas that can be taken up in order to support sustainable development in Switzerland. This strength of the process has also been underlined by the external evaluation that suggested that one way to sustain the Stakeholder Dialogue would be to build on its quality as a think tank (Christen et al. 2015). The hostility with which the Stakeholder Dialogue was met in circles critical of sustainable development (Schär 2016) is a further indicator of the relevance of

such processes to incorporate sustainability in administrative practices.

### Outlook: Thinking between Boxes

Saguf board members who participated in the Stakeholder Dialogue welcome the initiative and wish that such processes become standard when dealing with policies in relationship to sustainable development. The critical points reflected above are typical of a first attempt. The active collection of feedbacks from the participants as well as the commissioning of an external study testify for the ARE's will to learn from that experiment. Experiences from the Stakeholder Dialogue have already contributed to the *2030 Dialogue for Sustainable Development*<sup>2</sup> to promote the implementation of the *Sustainable Development Goals (SDG)* of the UN's *2030 Agenda*.

Processes such as the Stakeholder Dialogue provide an opportunity to tackle one of the main challenges for institutions progressing towards sustainable development: the challenge of thinking and acting across sectors and disciplines. The action areas proposed in the federal *Sustainable Development Strategy* were an attempt to leave behind the "boxes" of sectoral policy thinking in order to tackle urgent issues such as consumption and production, health, energy or natural resources. However, during the course of the workshops, the inter-sectoral action areas started operating as new boxes, thus preventing other issues from being treated in an integrative way. The issue of food, for instance, was sliced into the action areas "consumption and production", "urban development, mobility and infrastructure" and "natural resources". New boxes are welcome as they signal a sensitivity to new problems and constitute ways to cut across existing sectoral boundaries. However, a process dedicated to implement sustainable development should not be limited to replace old boxes with new ones, but also to learn to think and act between boxes. In the case of the Stakeholder Dialogue, this would have meant finding ways for a better exchange between action areas.

This confirms the relevance of saguf's commitment to continue promoting and developing innovative approaches such as future-oriented technology analysis (Car-

bias-Hütter and Haegeman 2013), integrative research (Wäger et al. 2014) or new ways of looking at environmental issues as proposed by the environmental humanities (Hall et al. 2015). Implementing these new integrative tools and ways of thinking into policy processes for sustainable development requires further efforts to challenge current views of science (Kläy and Schneider 2015). As an academic society committed to inter- and transdisciplinarity, saguf will continue to make the case for such conceptions when participating in processes like the Stakeholder Dialogue.

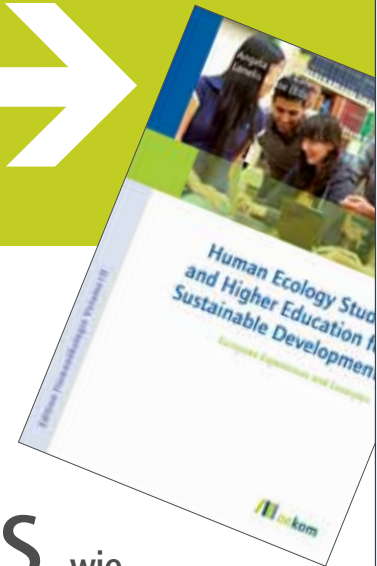
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<sup>2</sup> [www.eda.admin.ch/post2015/en/home/aktuell/news.html/post2015/en/meta/agenda/dialog2030](http://www.eda.admin.ch/post2015/en/home/aktuell/news.html/post2015/en/meta/agenda/dialog2030)

## Nachhaltigkeit

# A-Z



## S wie Synergien

Higher Education for Sustainable Development (HESD) and Human Ecology (HE) Studies both focus on the interrelationships between people and the environment. Both approaches represent innovative academic cultures that aim at qualifying future professionals and decision-makers. Nevertheless, potential synergies between HESD and HE Studies have not yet been explored. This compilation stimulates European exchange and cooperation. Sharing the same aims, the two approaches could complement each other and provide valuable experiences for more sustainability in higher education policies.

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