

Policy advice mechanisms in the frame of SDGs

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Asking how we should approach science advice in the frame of the Sustainable Development Goals, SDGs, of the United Nations is like asking how we can make complex, non linear, uncertain phenomena clear to people who have fled away from science from their very early years on. Indeed people holding the reigns of policy, but also finances, are most of the time from Jus, political sciences and the like. Most of them fled science and its mathematics from their early school years onward.

Science advice to policy requires independence from industrial, financial commercial and political interests. It requires freedom of thought and of speech, competence and humility –two characteristics that do not always go well together-. It needs the will to contribute time and effort to this activity, as well as charisma, even possibly charm, as one does not create trust relationships with anger and bitterness.

At EASAC, the European Academies Science Advisory Council, we approach science advice by synthesizing knowledge and formulating recommendations on subjects that are relevant to the European policy discussions. We then make all efforts, with the very modest means we, and academies in general, have in order to make our conclusions and recommendations heard where needed. Sometime we do this with a certain level of success.

These considerations are not really specific to science advice in relation with SDGs. But they are also relevant in this area. SDGs have found the ear of the political and of the scientific communities, as well as that of the the civil society (whatever this may be). They have therefore a strong appeal to focus a number of discussions in areas where sustainability is an issue. As the SDGs are relatively comprehensive, they are also very interdependent, a complexity that brings us back to the non linearities mentioned at the beginning of this intervention.

SDGs stem from the UN. This is the only planetary governance body we have. Many if not most of the topics raised in relation with SDGs deal with issues that do not know national boundaries. Think for example of oceans, climate, biodiversity, water and the like. We should, therefore, aim at making science advice on SDG related matters heard loud and clear in the different bodies of the UN as well as in other more familiar arenas, in order to influence policies also at the global level.

While SDGs are a very useful tool to focus efforts on a number of issues most relevant for the future of the planet, we should not let them prevent us from thinking and researching outside their frame. SDGs are the result of a very broad consensus in the UN organisation, and, as such, neither complete nor perfect. There is, for example and to my knowledge, not a word about the sterility of arms production in them. We must also remember that a number of questions in front of us, for example in areas of health, require large fundamental research efforts, in this example in wide areas of biology. Focused efforts oriented onto SDGs should therefore not be detrimental to the free research enterprise.

Often in the discussions of the last day or so was it mentioned that universities and in general the research establishment should be exemplary and make every effort to be CO₂ neutral. While this is a most laudable aim, I do think that it should not blind us to the point of dropping activities that, although they may not be ideal in terms of CO₂ emission, do bring most needed results. To take just one example, oceanic research using classical vessels do bring knowledge that is dearly needed to manage reasonably the planet. This activity should certainly not be abandoned for the reason that the vessels burn fuel and do not run on renewable electricity. Coordination efforts of the scientific and cultural communities within Norway, but also in Europe and worldwide, do require some travel. This coordination should also not be dropped because of the green gas emission related to the traveling required for this communication. While we must make every effort to make our activities green gas emission free, we must also remember that the research establishment, the universities and other learning organisations are but a very minor actor in green gas emission and a major one in understanding the physics of the planet and the functioning of societies. While this is no reason to not pay attention to the way we conduct our activities, looking at our activities may not distract us from looking at where the major problems lie in terms of sustainable development.