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# Public Opinion of the 2030 Agenda: A Mid-Term review

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DEval
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# PUBLIC OPINION OF THE 2030 AGENDA: A MID-TERM REVIEW


## Summary

- As per October 2023, nine percent of the population are familiar with the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set out by the United Nations (UN). This means that people have not become more aware of the goals since they were adopted in 2015.
- The general public is sceptical as to whether the goals can be achieved by 2030. They rate their own potential influence and actual contributions as moderate to low. The assessment is somewhat more positive for SDGs related to everyday life, for example goals related to consumption and environmental and climate protection. Compared to 2017, all assessments are more negative.
- If respondents are familiar with the SDGs, they are more likely to assume that the goals will be achieved by 2030; they rate their own potential influence more positively and are also more likely to report on their own contributions in everyday life.


The interim report of the 2030 Agenda (UN, 2015) in summer 2023 shows that the 17 Sustainable Development Goals cannot be achieved by 2030 with the progress that is currently observed (UN, 2023). In addition, the after-effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the numerous wars and conflicts as well as economic challenges are likely to further set back the achievement of the goals. In the year marking the half-way point of the 2030 Agenda, the United Nations (UN) is therefore calling on all countries to intensify their efforts. At the same time, all citizens continue to be called on to make their own contributions to sustainable global development.

Against this backdrop, it is important to continuously monitor public perception of the 2030 Agenda. This is the only way to enable evidence-based communication and education work and to get the general public more committed to sustainability. The German Institute for Development Evaluation (DEval) has therefore analysed how awareness of the SDGs has changed since 2015 and how the attitude of the German population towards the 2030 Agenda has changed compared to 2017. Based on the Opinion Monitor for Development Policy 2018 (see Schneider et al., 2018a, Section 6; 2018b), questions on the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs from 2017 were replicated in a representative online survey conducted by the Development Engagement Lab (DEL) in October 2023 and analysed for this policy brief. The analysis focused in particular on the following aspects:

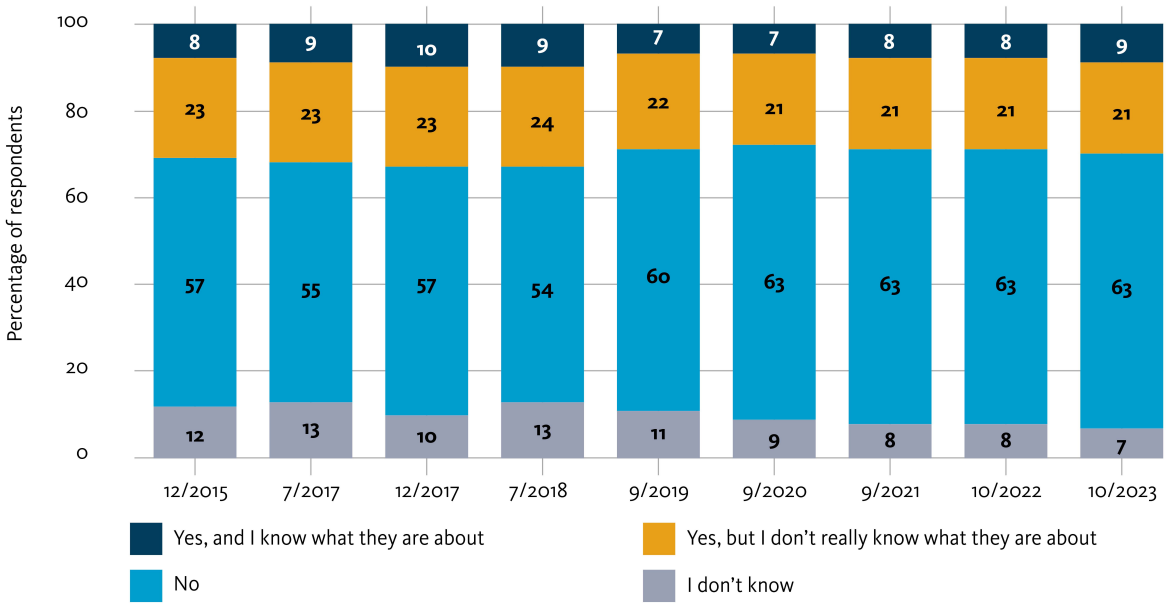
1. How well known are the SDGs among the general public?
2. How does the population rate the achievability of the SDGs as well as their own potential influence and contribution to achieving the goals?

## SDGs remain little known

Even eight years after the SDGs were adopted, only a small proportion of the population is familiar with them: 9 percent stated in 2023 that they had heard of the SDGs and knew what they involve (Figure 1, right-hand bar). 21 percent stated that they had heard of the SDGs but did not know what they involve. A clear majority of 63 percent reported that they had not yet heard of the 17 goals, and a further 7 percent chose the answer "Don't know". This distribution has remained virtually unchanged since 2015. As a result, measures aiming to increase public awareness of the SDGs have met with little response.

A further analysis shows that the SDGs are more likely to be known among the following population groups: younger people (aged 18 to 39), men, people with the *Abitur* (higher school-leaving qualification), people who are interested in politics and people

**Figure 1 Awareness of the SDGs in Germany over the course of 2015–2023**




*Source: DEval, own visualisation. Up to 7/2018: Aid Attitudes Tracker panel. As of 9/2019 Development Engagement Lab panel. Per survey N ≈ 6,000. Weighted data.*

who are on the far left or far right of the political spectrum (although the goals are slightly better known on the left of the political spectrum than on the right).[1] These findings suggest that the SDGs are more likely to be known among sections of the population that already have a high level of political knowledge and follow political events.

## Scepticism regarding possible goal achievement is increasing

The general public is even more sceptical than in 2017 with regard to the question of whether the 17 SDGs can be achieved by 2030 (Figure 2, top diagram). On average, approval on a scale of 1 to 5 turns out to be 0.33 scale points lower in 2023 than in 2017. People are most confident when it comes to more everyday goals related to consumption and environmental protection (SDGs 6, 12, 14), although the mean values here are also well below the centre of the scale (dots to the left of the dashed line in Figure 2, upper graph). The general public is most pessimistic with regard to SDG 1 ("No Poverty"). The data suggests that confidence in the ability to achieve the ambitious goals of the 2030 Agenda has declined in the context of the crises in recent years. The shorter period remaining until the target year of 2030 compared to 2017 may have also played a role here.

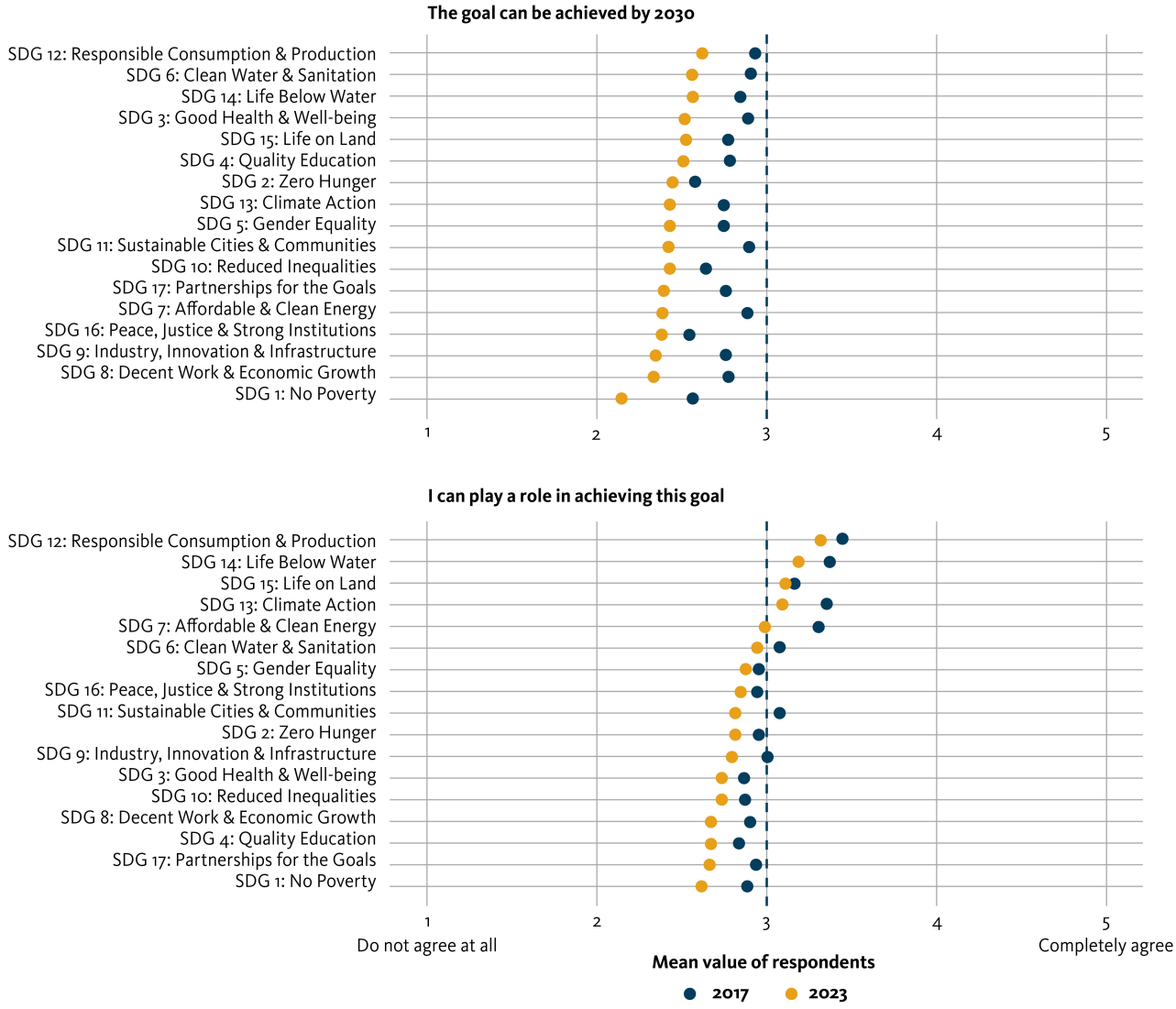
## Own potential influence and contributions seen especially in everyday areas

Overall, the population rates its own ability to influence the achievement of the 17 goals as moderate (Figure 2, bottom diagram). Compared to 2017, however, people estimate their own influence to be lower. Across all 17 goals, the average has decreased by around 0.18 scale points. As before, people still have a slightly positive assessment of their own influence on more "everyday" SDGs related to consumption and environmental and climate protection (SDGs 12, 13, 14, 15).

The personal contributions made in everyday life to achieving the 17 goals are rated as moderate to low overall (data not shown). The results show a similar pattern to the data on people's perception of their own potential influence. Again, the majority of mean values have decreased slightly compared to 2017, on average by 0.11 scale points. Once more, people are more likely to state that they have contributed to the SDGs themselves with regard to consumption or environmental and climate protection (SDGs 7, 12, 13, 14, 15). Their rating of their own contribution to global poverty reduction (SDG 1) is particularly low.

[1] *Data from a DEval online survey from July 2023 (N = 2,000) was used for the analysis.*

**Figure 2 Achievability of the goals and assessment of own opportunities to contribute**




*Source: DEval, own visualisation. Data basis: 2017: Aid Attitudes Tracker panel, wave 8 (July 2017; N = 6,096). 2023: Development Engagement Lab panel, wave 5 (September/October 2023; N = 6,050). Weighted data. Each respondent was presented with a randomly selected SDG. The dots represent the mean values for 2017 (blue) and 2023 (yellow).*

## Greater awareness of the SDGs goes hand in hand with more positive assessments

If respondents are at least vaguely familiar with the SDGs, they are more optimistic that they will be achieved by 2030 across all 17 goals. Respondents in this group also have a higher assessment of their own potential influence and report greater personal contributions in their everyday lives.[2] However, no reliable causal conclusions can be drawn by analysing cross-sectional data, as the observed correlation could also result from the fact that, for example, more educated people are both more familiar with the SDGs and more optimistic that they can be achieved. Education could therefore be a so called third variable that explains the correlation. Nevertheless, the findings at least suggest that more effectively informing the general public about the 2030 Agenda and its goals could be a suitable approach for promoting the perception of opportunities for influence and people's own engagement.

[2] *In the assessment of possible goal achievement and an individual's own potential influence, the differences are statistically significant for 12 out of 17 goals ($p < 0.05$). The picture is different for SDG 3 ("Good Health and Well-being"). Here, those who are not familiar with the SDGs report a higher potential influence and greater contributions of their own. In the assessment of individuals' own contributions, the differences are significant for 11 out of 17 goals. Two-tailed t-tests were calculated in each case, comparing agreement with the attitude question based on awareness of the SDGs (group 1: SDGs unknown/"don't know", group 2: SDGs known/known at least by name).*

## Implications: reflecting on the communication of the 2030 Agenda and identifying opportunities for action

The low level of awareness of the SDGs among the population suggests that we need to critically reflect not only on the reach of the corresponding communication to date, but also on its comprehensibility and consistency. In terms of reach, the question arises as to whether the communication up to now has been suitable to reach the entire population, for example older people and people without a high level of formal education. With regard to comprehensibility, it is necessary to examine how the complex issue of the 17 goals and their 169 targets can be communicated in such a way that the general public can actually process the content. In terms of the consistency of communication, the question arises as to whether a higher level of awareness can be expected as long as the SDGs are not consistently used in the communication for various policy areas.

At the same time, the influence of the news environment on the efficiency of communication must be taken into account both when assessing SDG awareness to date and when designing future communication strategies. The multiple crises of recent years have almost completely captured media and public attention in the field of international politics.

The capacities of the general public to address a complex issue such as the 2030 Agenda, which is also likely to be perceived as less relevant and urgent in the context of current crises, are correspondingly low. This will most certainly continue to be the case in the foreseeable future. It is therefore unclear whether awareness of the SDGs can be increased in the future, even with a high level of communication effort.

There are only a few years left until 2030. In view of the major challenges associated with this and diverse setbacks, the population's belief that the SDGs can be achieved may continue to decline in the coming years. Accordingly, people's perception of their own potential influence may also continue to decline. However, "self-efficacy" is an important prerequisite for engagement. In order to counteract fatalism and strengthen civic engagement in areas related to everyday life, it is necessary to offer people even more specific solutions that present them with feasible steps. New strategies are needed for goals that are more distant from everyday life, such as global poverty reduction efforts. Whether it is expedient to emphasise the threat of failure in communication, to convince people that action is now more important than ever or to focus on the time after 2030 must be weighed up and tested as appropriate.

## Literature

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The German Institute for Development Evaluation (DEval) is mandated by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) to independently analyse and assess German development interventions. Evaluation reports contribute to the transparency of development results and provide policy-makers with evidence and lessons learned, based on which they can shape and improve their development policies.

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