wissenschaftsplattform_ nachhaltigkeit 2030

Accelerating Change through Coordination: The Role of Inter-Ministerial Coordination in the Governance of Germany's National Sustainable Development Strategy

Empirical Insights from the Transformation Teams

Dr. Julius Rathgens

◢ Introduction

The 2023 Global Sustainable Development Report (GSDR) sends a clear signal: the world is off track in meeting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030. In Germany, this warning resonates deeply, as the country faces significant challenges in implementing its National Sustainable Development Strategy (NSDS). Despite its long-standing commitment to sustainability, Germany's federal governance structures are struggling to move beyond incremental changes toward the systemic transformations required.

This situation calls for reinvigorated governance. The federal government's adoption of a "whole-of-government" approach aligns with global calls for policy coherence and cross-sectoral collaboration. In this context, the pilot of seven inter-ministerial Transformation Teams (TTs) (November 2022 – mid-2024) marks a strategic attempt to overcome institutional fragmentation. These teams, composed of representatives from multiple ministries, aimed to accelerate implementation in six key transformation areas by coordinating joint policy recommendations

and action plans — the so-called transformation reports (*Transformationsberichte*)[1].

However, the effectiveness of such inter-ministerial coordination remains uncertain. While scholars such as Heinrichs and Laws (2014)[2] have examined the institutionalization of sustainability in German policy, empirical insights into how coordination across ministries for SDG implementation unfolds in practice are still lacking. This paper seeks to fill that gap by analyzing qualitative data from focus group discussions and 13 semi-structured expert interviews with TT members.

This study explores three central research questions:

1. What factors foster or hinder successful coordination in inter-ministerial teams?
2. How do institutional logics, goal-setting, and structural conditions shape the performance of the TTs?
3. What lessons can be drawn for future governance efforts in accelerating NSDS implementation?

By bridging theory and practice, this paper contributes to the discourse on sustainable governance. It identifies both barriers and enablers of coordination and offers practical recommendations for improvement.

◤ Theoretical Background

Efforts to implement the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by member states are fundamentally shaped by institutional and governance structures. The GSDR (2023) highlights governance and capacity-building as essential levers for achieving transformative change. Within this context, the "whole-of-government" approach is considered crucial, as it seeks to align policies and actions across departments and levels of government.

In Germany, however, the departmental principle (*Ressortprinzip*) poses a potential obstacle to such coordination. As Heinrichs and Laws (2014) note, ministries operate with significant autonomy, often prioritizing their sectoral mandates over cross-cutting sustainability objectives. This logic has

historically undermined attempts to mainstream sustainability.

To address these challenges, the Transformation Teams were created with two main goals, as outlined by former Minister of State at the Federal Chancellery for cooperation between the Federal Government and the Länder, Sarah Ryglewski:

- To prepare and inform the meetings of the State Secretary Committee for Sustainable Development as the key inter-ministerial decision-making structure for SD in Germany;
- To strengthen, mainstream, and institutionalize SD in the policies of all federal ministries.

The TTs operate within a complex governance environment. Their coordination mechanisms can be analyzed through governance theories such as "smart regulation," the "shadow of hierarchy," and network governance. Using a 5-W framework, we assess coordination in terms of:

- **Who** is involved and how well they fit together;
- **What** the teams aim to accomplish—from knowledge to action;
- **How** coordination is organized procedurally;
- **Through what** tools coordination is enabled or impeded;
- **Why** structural and motivational factors influence transformative outcomes.

Additional theoretical anchors include the typology of coordination modes (hierarchical, networked, market-like) and the concept of institutional logics, which helps explain the persistence of siloed thinking. Structural conditions — such as shifting political priorities, coalition dynamics, and bureaucratic inertia — further complicate coordination efforts.

◤ Methodology

Research Design and Data Collection

This study adopts a qualitative case study design to explore the dynamics of inter-ministerial coordination within Germany's Transformation Teams. The research draws from three data sources:

[1] Bundesregierung (2023, 2024) Transformationsberichte: Ressortübergreifende Kooperation für nachhaltige Entwicklung: https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/service/archiv-bundesregierung/ressortuebergreifende-kooperation-fuer-nachhaltige-entwicklung-2306062 (last accessed: 20.11.2024)

[2] Heinrichs, Harald and Laws, Norman, (2014), "Sustainability State" in the Making? Institutionalization of Sustainability in German Federal Policy Making, Sustainability, 6, issue 5, p. 1-19.

- A focus group discussion during the "Ressort Workshop" on 13 February 2024
- Thirteen semi-structured interviews with TT members conducted between February and October 2024
- Document analysis of the six official Transformation Reports

Interviewees were purposively sampled from various ministries to ensure diversity of roles and perspectives. The conversations explored individual experiences, perceived enablers and barriers, and reflections on team dynamics. All sessions were audio-recorded, transcribed, and anonymized to preserve confidentiality.

◢ Analytical Strategy

Data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis in MAXQDA. The coding strategy was hybrid, combining deductive codes from existing literature with inductive themes that emerged from the interviews and focus group.

Four analytical categories guided the coding process:

- Mode of coordination over time
- Goal setting and topical framing
- Institutional logics
- Structural conditions

These were supplemented with sub-codes related to trust, leadership, procedural clarity, and internal communication. Chronological coding was also employed to track developments over time. In total, 636 segments were coded, allowing for thematic comparison across ministries and roles.

◢ Results

1. Mode of Coordination Over Time

Coordination within the TTs evolved dynamically. Initially characterized by uncertainty and role ambiguity, most teams gradually established more structured processes, including regular meetings and shared work plans. A common success factor was the appointment of "informal leaders" who facilitated communication and bridged inter-ministerial divides. However, coordination varied across teams, with some reverting to bilateral exchanges rather than collective problem-solving.

2. Goal Setting and Topical Framing

Clearly defined objectives contributed significantly to effective coordination. Teams with specific mandates and well-framed transformation themes (e.g., sustainable finance or circular economy) reported higher motivation and better alignment. Conversely, vague or politically sensitive topics led to delays and internal conflict. The framing of sustainability as a "shared responsibility" was particularly effective in fostering collaboration.

3. Institutional Logics

A key challenge was the persistence of divergent institutional logics. Ministries differed in their interpretations of sustainability, their time horizons, and their risk tolerance. Some interviewees noted a "defensive posture" from certain departments seeking to protect their turf. However, the TTs created new spaces for dialogue, which — over time — enabled a degree of convergence around shared goals.

4. Structural Conditions

Several external factors influenced team performance. Political uncertainties, such as the breakup of the coalition and budgetary constraints, disrupted momentum. Parallel initiatives within ministries occasionally led to duplication or confusion. Physical co-location (or lack thereof) and digital infrastructure also played a role, with teams that met in person generally reporting stronger bonds.

◢ Discussion

This study confirms and extends prior research on the limitations of Germany's departmental principle. While the Transformation Teams represent a promising institutional innovation, their effectiveness depends on multiple, interdependent factors.

The findings support governance theories that emphasize the importance of informal coordination, trust-building, and shared framing. Consistent with the "shadow of hierarchy" concept, soft steering by the Federal Chancellery proved effective in signaling political relevance, even in the absence of formal mandates.

However, the persistence of conflicting institutional logics underscores the limits of voluntary collaboration. Structural barriers — such as fragmented digital systems or political volatility — further challenge sustained coordination.

Several lessons emerge for policymakers:

- **Design Matters:** Teams benefit from clearly defined mandates and thematic focus.
- **Leadership is Crucial:** Informal champions can compensate for bureaucratic inertia.
- **Institutional Learning:** Continuous feedback loops and adaptive management are essential.
- **Trust and Time:** Coordination cannot be rushed; sustained engagement builds legitimacy.

Looking forward, embedding such teams within more formal governance structures could help institutionalize their function. Moreover, capacity-building programs that address inter-ministerial cooperation as a core competence may be necessary to scale up these efforts.

wissenschaftsplattform_
nachhaltigkeit
2030