

**Major Groups and other Stakeholders Questions and Answers as part of the Voluntary National Review of Austria at the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development under the auspices of the Economic and Social Council**

New York, July 2020

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**Question 1 – In your video you refer to the COVID19 pandemic and we have seen that also in Austria this crisis increases social and economic inequalities.**

**Now we are asking you:**

- **What measures will be taken to tackle these challenges - ensuring that no one is left behind, especially marginalized people.**
- **Further, how do you plan to achieve educational justice, especially quality education for all in Austria?**
- **How do you intend to ensure that the perspectives of young people will be given sufficient consideration in future policies, especially in regards to climate justice?**

In light of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, Austria has adopted a considerable number of various economic and labour policy measures helping to maintain social justice and to prevent social and economic inequalities caused by the crisis in the best possible way.

One example of such a measure is the introduction of an extensive short-term work program in order to prevent impending unemployment or loss of income. It is important to mitigate the socio-economic impact of the pandemic particularly on groups at risk of poverty and social exclusion.

In the area of social assistance (Sozialhilfe), bureaucratic simplifications have been introduced allowing faster and contactless access and contactless interaction.

Particular attention was and will continue to be paid to the situation of children and young people during the crisis. Investing in children, reducing child poverty and promoting social mobility have positive long-term impacts not only on children and their families, but also for our economies and the society as a whole.

Moreover, Austria has taken several measures to relieve the housing situation for its citizens and to support the homeless, such as protection in the case of arrear with payment, the suspension of evictions or the increase of assistance services and emergency shelters.

Regarding the social and economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is essential that we include a gender perspective in our response and recovery measures and that we take into account the needs of all women and girls of all ages. Finally, as social justice also incorporates

climate justice in the long-run, we must not forget that the economic recovery from the current pandemic should consider both social and ecological aspects.

In the educational system, comprehensive reforms aimed at increasing fairness and transparency are continued and further developed. The Austrian education policy specifically encourages basic skills development, with a special focus on acquiring German language skills from an early age on. Early childhood education and care – compulsory from the age of five – is being extended. Comprehensive German language support classes are provided during primary and secondary education. Schools facing special challenges will be supported on the basis of an opportunity and development index.

During the COVID-19 crisis, Austria has taken several measures to guarantee continuous schooling for all and to support pupils and parents. In this context, guidelines for education boards give detailed instructions on how to support pupils with a disadvantaged background and disadvantaged students were equipped with digital devices. Moreover, counselling services with school psychologists and social workers in 23 different languages were offered, and schools and kindergartens stayed open in order to offer child-care for children who could not be cared for at home.

Additionally, two-week long summer schools free of charge will be offered during the summer holidays for those pupils who need additional support. An action plan for digital teaching was also launched.

In Higher Education, Austria set immediate action in line with the evaluation of the Bologna Follow-up Group, based on national strategies. In this regard, particular attention is paid to activities in financial stimulus packages and student support, more flexibility in quality assurance requirements and capacity-building initiatives for online learning.

With regards to ensuring that young peoples' perspectives are given sufficient consideration in future policies, Austria believes that successful engagement of young people and appropriate inclusion require a certain level of trust and communication. To this end, Austria is committed to the participation of young people in a continuous dialogue on policy developments and processes, particularly in the field of climate action, at national and international level in which they can provide valuable contributions. Young people should be considered and involved as equal partners in these processes in order to foster genuine exercise in consultation and inclusion.

In early 2021, the European Commission will adopt a new, more ambitious strategy on adaptation to climate change in order to strengthen efforts on areas such as climate proofing, resilience building and prevention and preparedness. A public consultation will inform the design of the new strategy. Austria strongly supports this strategy and the efforts within the EU Green Deal as an important step towards a sustainable green future.

**Question 2 – Due to COVID-19, many political ad-hoc decisions were made in Austria, that will influence the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.**

- **what plans does Austria have to increase political coherence for sustainable development, particularly to ensure that laws and regulations in Austria are SDG-compatible?**
- **How will you make a long-term multi-stakeholder approach possible, which ensures that the perspectives of civil society are included?**
- **Will Austria be able to increase the funding for reaching the SDGs?**

Austria followed a transparent and broad stakeholder-approach when compiling its VNR. The broad multi-stakeholder process improved networking among actors and enabled them to learn from each other. The process also initiated a strengthening of the interfaces with the Federal States, cities, towns and municipalities, social partners, business, the scientific community and civil society. These efforts shall continue to ensure that no one is left behind, particularly in times of crises. To this end, the Interministerial Working Group, which was established in the process of SDG implementation in Austria, shall systematically complement the SDG Focal Points of the Federal States and representatives of the Austrian Association of Cities and Towns, the Austrian Association of Municipalities, the social partners, the scientific community, business and civil society.

Moreover, to continue to be able to meet future social and demographic challenges, including those related to crisis response targeted measures will be necessary to keep Austria's social welfare and health-care system resilient. It contributes significantly to preventing and combating poverty and social exclusion and to ensuring high-quality health care. In keeping with the SDG principle of 'leaving no one behind', it is essential to ensure that all people, especially disadvantaged social groups, are included in the process of sustainable development. The aim is to support access to sustainable, high quality, balanced and generally accessible health care (universal health coverage) and ensure social inclusion. In addition to a focus on the further development of a sustainable health-care system, including the expansion of primary care, the promotion of women's health and the provision of high-quality care, special emphasis will also be placed in future on combating poverty among children, women and older persons.

**Question 3 – Finally, with reference to the correlations between the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the SDGs, in Austria there is the federal constitutional law in this regard, but for years it is completely incomprehensible why not ALL rights have been made constitutional.**

**In our view, the 2030 Agenda is an occasion to finally remedy this shortcoming.**

In 2011, the essential rights of the convention have acquired constitutional status through the Austrian Federal Constitutional Law on the Rights of Children. These include the best

interests of the child, the right of every child to participation, the right to a childhood free of violence and the right of every child with disabilities to protection and adequate care by which Austria is bound to implement the obligations resulting thereof.

These rights are enforceable and the constitutional court has used them in its legislation. While not all rights of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child are at a constitutional level, Austria has implemented all rights in its national law, partly by other constitutional rights like the European Convention of Human Rights and partly on a sub-constitutional level. Still, in order to ensure the effectiveness, our current government programme foresees to evaluate the protection of constitutional rights of children.

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**Switzerland: "What are the experiences with the mainstreaming approach that Austria has chosen for the implementation of the SDGs by the administration?"**

The decision of the Austrian Council of Ministers of 12 January 2016 lays the foundation for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in Austria. All Federal Ministries are advised to incorporate the principles of the 2030 Agenda into all relevant strategies and programmes, as well as to draw up corresponding action plans and take appropriate measures. All relevant government bodies and cooperation partners at Federal, state, city and municipal level as well as social partners, civil society, business and the scientific community are to be involved in this process.

The 2030 Agenda is being implemented by all Federal Ministries within their respective sectoral competences. This mainstreaming approach forms the strategic framework for the implementation of the SDGs in Austria. It ensures that the SDGs are being integrated at all levels and in all activities of Austrian politics and administration in an effective, goal-oriented and autonomous manner.

While a number of stakeholders consider the mainstreaming approach not to be suitable and have voiced the wish for a different strategic approach, the Austrian Government is of the opinion that the approach has proven to be successful.

The mainstreaming approach, which is currently being followed, requires all ministries and their respective stakeholders to contribute to the national implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Various action plans have already been drawn up and are in operation. Furthermore, we have observed a significant social commitment to and a strengthened "ownership" of the SDGs, particularly when preparing the VNR. We hope to further strengthen this commitment moving forward, which, of course, requires strong coordination. The VNR preparation process has been a valuable learning experience in this regard and has ultimately met this requirement very well. Nevertheless, it only marks the starting point on which we must continue to build on.

**Costa Rica: Costa Rica believes in the importance of setting strong foundations for a new economic model by creating a positive, innovative and inspiring vision of the future. On 2019, we launched the National Plan on Decarbonization, that sets the path to become a modern, green, emission-free, resilient and inclusive economy by 2050.**

**Austria aims to achieve climate neutrality by 2040, and we would like to know how does your country plan to match economic development with your carbon neutrality goals through innovative policy measures?"**

At the beginning of this year, the Austrian government agreed to put climate change at the centre of its work for the next 5 years and in this context decided to pursue a consistent path towards becoming climate neutral already by 2040.

Moreover, Austria is following a consistent decarbonisation path and is positioning itself as a frontrunner in the EU in this regard. For example, Austria agreed to achieving the ambitious target of 100% renewable electricity consumption (national balance) until 2030, certainly without the use of nuclear power, as it does not represent a viable option for Austria.

We also would like to highlight that investments in economy and climate do not contradict each other but rather create jobs, enhance regional value and contribute to a sustainable future.

The Federal Government agreed to a major climate investment package as part of the economic stimulus measures: we will invest one billion Euro each in the years 2021 and 2022, with the focus on

- Refurbishment of buildings and clean heating systems ("Getting out of oil")
- Renewable energy development (1 million roofs for solar and PV)
- climate-friendly future technologies
- incentives for repair services (by reducing the VAT rate) to contribute to circular economy
- We are supporting cycling and climate-friendly mobility, in particular e-mobility, public transport, green investments as well as additional support for nature conservation and biodiversity.

Facing the challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the question now is how to best build our common future. Currently, the focus is strongly on coping with the crisis. However, it is essential that we build on lessons learnt from the past and seize the opportunity to make the economic recovery green, climate-neutral and climate-resilient. We need to build back better.