



Study Commission on Growth, Wellbeing and Quality of Life



The German Bundestag takes decisions on what are at times highly complex and controversial bills and parliamentary initiatives relating to the entire spectrum of policy fields. Study commissions play an important role in the parliamentary decision-making process. They provide forums where Members, academic experts and practitioners deliberate on significant issues before presenting the results of their work and recommendations to the Bundestag in a final report.

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- 29** Prof. Gert G. Wagner
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- 34** Ulla Lötzer,
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- 35** Sabine Leidig,
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- 36** Prof. Ulrich Brand
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“It is the task of the Study Commission on Growth, Wellbeing and Quality of Life to examine how we could grow in different ways, so enabling us to improve our quality of life. It is seeking to identify strategies that will permanently decouple our consumption of resources from economic growth and reduce consumption in absolute terms. We want to jointly develop a holistic methodology for the measurement of wellbeing and progress, and make our lifestyles and the world of work more sustainable.”



Daniela Kolbe, SPD
Chairwoman of the
Study Commission
on Growth, Wellbeing
and Quality of Life

The Bundestag study commissions

Study commissions are special bodies of the Bundestag on which parliamentarians seek answers to urgent social questions in close collaboration with academics and practitioners ('experts'). The Bundestag sets up a study commission whenever a topic's ramifications are so broad that a plenary decision cannot be prepared adequately by the permanent parliamentary committees. In the study commissions, the experts members enjoy the same rights as the Members of the Bundestag. Study commissions are meeting points between the worlds of politics and academia. And they work towards a clear goal: to deliver their reports and recommendations to the Bundestag by the end of the electoral term for which they are established. These documents set out concrete proposals for policy action that can serve as the basis for legislation.

The establishment of a study commission requires a motion supported by a quarter of the Bundestag's Members. The Study Commission on Growth, Wellbeing and Quality of Life – Paths to Sustainable Economic Activity and Social Progress in the Social Market Economy was set up by the German Bundestag in December 2010. In the current electoral term there is one other study commission, which is looking at the Internet and digital society, and commenced its work in May 2010.

What are the characteristics of wellbeing and quality of life in our society in the 21st century? Will we succeed in protecting our environment and climate, while simultaneously maintaining our society's prosperity? How does our economy need to develop in order to guarantee wellbeing and social progress for all the people who live in Germany without further endangering our natural resource base? The mandate the Study Commission has to carry out by the end of the electoral term in September 2013 encompasses nearly all spheres of life. For anyone who wishes to answer these questions must also ask themselves what implications they have for the economy, the world of work, patterns of consumption, and the lifestyles of each and every individual, as well as what role policymakers can and must play in this context.

17 parliamentarians appointed in line with the relative strengths of the parliamentary groups in the Bundestag sit on the Study Commission under its chairwoman Daniela Kolbe (SPD) and her deputy Matthias Zimmer (CDU/CSU). They collaborate with 17 counterparts from academia, business and the trade unions, who enjoy exactly the same rights on the Study Commission as the Bundestag Members. The establishment of the Study Commission was the Bundestag's response to, among other things, widely articulated criticism of gross domestic product (GDP) as the sole indicator of wellbeing. GDP is calculated by adding up the prices of all the goods and services produced in an economy. It therefore reflects purely material aspects of human wellbeing. By contrast, ecological, social, educational or cultural aspects that contribute to societal wellbeing and quality of life are not recorded by GDP. This means that, for example, an environmental disaster may boost gross domestic product on account of the costs

incurred in cleaning it up, although it certainly does not enhance the wellbeing of society. The measurement of GDP also ignores unpaid labour, such as housework and volunteering. As long ago as 1968, Robert Kennedy commented of this approach that, 'it measures everything, in short, except that which makes life worthwhile.' In addition to this, the global economic and financial crisis has created great uncertainty about the further development of the economy, the labour market and the financial markets. Demographic change and rising levels of public debt worry people just as much as the dangers of climate change, the loss of biological diversity, a lack of intergenerational equity, and increasing social inequality at the global and national levels. Social exclusion and inadequate opportunities to participate in society considerably diminish individuals' quality of life. The Study Commission began by setting out an initial analysis of the situation: the working of

our economy is currently oriented very strongly towards quantitative economic growth, i.e. growth that can be measured and depicted in purely numerical terms. Our welfare system's finances are heavily dependent on growth. These points raise the question of whether, and if so how, Germany's economic and social model will be able to cope with the ecological, social, demographic and fiscal challenges we face over the long term, especially at the moderate growth rates to be expected in future. The members of the Study Commission also have to clarify whether, and if so how, it will be possible to permanently decouple economic growth from the degradation of our environment, nature and the global climate. What can technical progress do to help ensure we consume fewer resources, yet continue to benefit from growth? How can we avoid rebound effects, i.e. the phenomenon that efficiency gains are offset by higher consumption? What are the potential social impacts, in particular for low-income households?

Policy-makers need to change their way of thinking. After all, any framework that enables us to manage our economy sustainably will be created by means of political processes. How do we put in place the right regulatory structure in order to reconcile lasting wellbeing in which all have a stake, sustainable economic activity and an intact natural environment over the long term? The Study Commission has also been mandated to investigate how an approach to economic governance informed by the principle of sustainability can strengthen the polluter-pays principle, i.e. prevent the externalisation of costs, make polluters more accountable for the problems they cause, give sustainability risks the attention they deserve and prepare our economy for future shortages. In this respect, care should be taken to ensure that all the measures adopted are implemented in a socially balanced fashion.

As it seeks to identify ways of improving wellbeing and quality of life, the Study Commission will also look at the world of work, patterns of consumption and lifestyles. What forms of work will guarantee a decent standard of living in the 21st century? How can as many people as possible have access to such work? What incentives and parameters modify consumers' behaviour? And how can policymakers make sure that everyone will be able to hold a stake in our prosperity in future as well? This tremendously wide-ranging mandate is summed up by Bundestag Printed Paper 17/3853 in just under five pages. The Study Commission has until 2013 to produce its answers and present the plenary of the German Bundestag with concrete recommendations for policy action to promote economically, ecologically and socially sustainable economic activity.

Big questions demand big answers, but the Study Commission has very little time at its disposal: just two and a half years until the end of the electoral term in 2013. Its members therefore adopted a tightly structured programme of work right from the very beginning. The whole Study Commission meets once a month. In addition to this, five project groups are addressing the central themes of its mandate. As well as drawing on the experience of its expert members, the Study Commission holds hearings with other specialists and procures research on questions that remain unresolved. Thus, the members of the Study Commission have to familiarise themselves with a large number of topics in a very short period of time. In addition to the meetings of the Study Commission and its project groups, which have to be prepared and followed up in depth, their diaries are also packed with meetings of the parliamentary groups and their working groups, meetings with other experts, and academic and political conferences.

The Commission's members receive support from the Administration of the German Bundestag, including the Parliamentary Library and the Press Documentation Division, which evaluates media reports on a daily basis, while the Research Services can be instructed to carry out research on individual topics. The Study Commission's meetings are prepared by its Secretariat, which also arranges conferences and hearings with specialists the Study Commission wishes to consult. The Study Commission's work is centred on its plenary meetings, which are held in public and broadcast by the Parliamentary Television channel and online. At these plenary meetings, its members deliberate on the results reached by the project groups, and the studies, expert reports and opinions that have been received. This means the project groups are of great

significance for the preparation of the Study Commission's plenary deliberations, as well as shouldering much of the workload with which it has been entrusted. There are five project groups dedicated to the main thematic strands of the Study Commission's mandate. Each parliamentary group is represented with at least one Member on every project group and also holds the chair of one project group:

- Project Group on the Importance Attached to Growth in the Economy and Society, chairwoman: Claudia Bögel (FDP),
- Project Group on the Development of a Holistic Indicator of Wellbeing and Progress, chairwoman: Stefanie Vogelsang (CDU/CSU),
- Project Group on Growth, Resource Use and Technical Progress – Possibilities and Limits with Respect to Decoupling, chairman: Hermann E. Ott (Alliance 90/The Greens),

■ Project Group on Economic Governance Shaped by Sustainability, chairwoman: Edelgard Bulmahn (SPD),

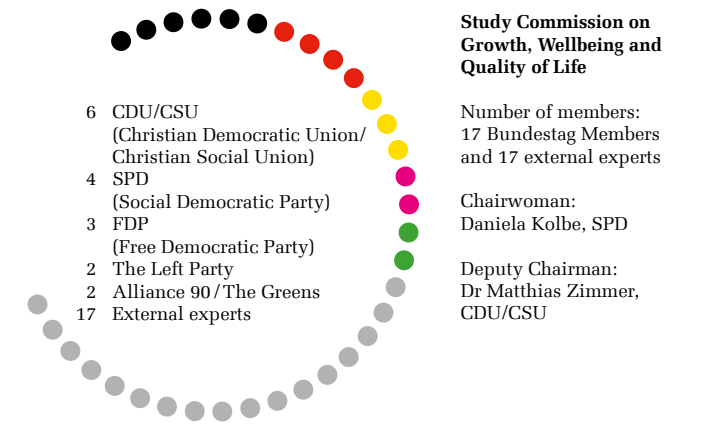
■ Project Group on the World of Work, Patterns of Consumption and Lifestyles, chairwoman: Sabine Leidig (The Left Party). The intention is for the Study Commission to adopt a final report with concrete recommendations for policy action to promote economically, ecologically and socially sustainable economic activity. This report will also include recommendations concerning a new methodology for the measurement of wellbeing, quality of life and social progress. Once the report has been completed, it will be submitted to the President of the German Bundestag, published as a printed paper and presented to the public in the plenary of the German Bundestag.

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Thinking outside the political box – the Study Commission's work in practice