

BLOG POST April 28th 2016

Why SDGs should become a crucial issue of national policy debates

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🕒 Reading time: 4 min



The appropriation of the SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals) by policy makers is still very variable, and even rudimentary in the developed countries, compared to that of the commitments made during COP21. However, the SDGs do not concern only the countries of the South; they address issues that are also critical in Europe (income inequalities, global warming, unemployment, and quality of education, among others). These goals could become

tools for change for all economic sectors and for society.

In New York on September 25, 2015, the UN member states adopted a new [sustainable development programme](#) that includes a set of **17 global goals** aimed, in particular, at ending poverty and hunger, reducing inequalities and tackling climate change by 2030. This agenda is universal—it applies to the countries of both the North and the South—and ambitious, as it covers all aspects of social, economic and environmental development. But with 169 targets and more than 200 indicators, **two scenarios** are emerging:

1. the first gives the SDGs a statistical existence, limiting them to a reporting exercise by each country towards a UN body, without any real scope in terms of domestic policy;
 2. the second gives the goals a real political existence, making Agenda 2030 an opportunity to transform development paths.
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So why do the SDGs deserve far more attention in Europe?

The first studies ([Sustainable Development Goals: Are the rich countries ready?](#) by Christian Kroll; [Preliminary Sustainable Development Goal \(SDG\) Index and Dashboard, SDSN WP](#)) show that no country can currently prejudge its ability to achieve all of the targets—“[business as usual](#)” scenarios imply an incompatibility between current paths and the 2030 goals. This is as true in France as it is in Burkina Faso, Germany or Colombia. The European countries, just like the other countries, need to transform their economies if they are to achieve the SDGs. This is particularly the case for gender and income inequalities, employment, and the protection of marine resources, among others. The list varies in length depending on the country. In many respects, the EU countries have an advantage—especially in terms of social justice—but they cannot prejudge their future performance based solely on their past performances, since the agenda is more vast and ambitious than any common agenda ever negotiated. The SDGs, which have been adopted by every country in the world, attach great importance to values such as good governance, gender equality and the reduction of inequalities that are central to the European social contract. The SDGs thus create expectations and an obligation to achieve results for Europe, especially since they are the outcome of lengthy negotiations that should not be eclipsed by the apparent ingenuousness of Agenda 2030.

On the demanding condition that it is able to lead by example, Agenda 2030 provides the EU with the opportunity to enforce the universality of values of justice and progress in a world in which these values are regularly trampled by geopolitical and ideological conflicts.

In Agenda 2030, the governments are invited to draft their plan of action based on the national sustainable development strategies defined over more than 15 years: what more do the SDGs offer? One major innovation lies in the creation of a **framework for the evaluation of progress made** in terms of sustainable development for every country in the world, through a system of annual reporting of country performance, under the aegis of the Secretary-General of the United Nations. The literature ([The Policy impact of PISA: an exploration of the normative effects of international benchmarking in](#)

[*school system performance – OECD Education Working Paper N°71*](#); and [*Beyond Copenhagen: next steps*](#)) shows us that international rankings foster exchanges between policy makers and experts on leading countries' strategies in a given field, especially between countries with similar socioeconomic characteristics, and thereby create an [incitation for reform](#).

The SDGs also provide a **framework** for governments to **improve the coherence** of their public policies and to **ensure convergence between the different dimensions** of development (social, economic and environmental). National governance systems based on specialised ministries (ministries of environment, economy, labour, health, etc.) are struggling to break down “silos” and to ensure their strategies contribute jointly to the different aspects of sustainable development. The SDGs can therefore be considered as a tool for reflecting on the [interdependence of public policies](#). Consequently, the policy debate must put them back at the centre of the vision of what each country's society wants to become and should not restrict them to just another relatively marginal sectoral discussion.

Finally, the SDGs propose a **long-term vision**—the time horizon being 2030—contrary to [national sustainable development strategies](#), which in most European countries cover a period of five years. Since no country can pride itself on having a model that reconciles economic, social and environmental development, more than 10 years will be needed to come closer to achieving this goal, and will also help to avoid the political *volte-face* resulting from electoral processes. The SDGs therefore have real potential. But this requires moving from theory to practice. How can their potential be unlocked? >> Read our second article on [ODD implementation](#).

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