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Towards a sustainable Europe in 2030? An analysis of the European Commission's Reflection Paper

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The European Commission has just released its Reflection Paper on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), entitled "Towards a Sustainable Europe in 2030"^{[1](#)}. The late release of this document, which has been postponed many times since mid-2018 and as the SDGs were adopted more than three years ago, is to be deplored. Moreover, the current Commission, which will be replaced following the May 2019 elections, will not have the necessary political time to put in place a strategy for the implementation of the SDGs as requested by the European Council in its conclusions of 18 October 2018^{[2](#)}. The ball is now in the court of the Member States and civil society to launch a debate around this paper and ask the next Commission to

act. But there is no guarantee that the Commission will want to work on the basis of a document that it did not produce. However, it should. This paper provides a fairly accurate—and at the same time alarming—diagnosis, summarises the state of the debate and proposals on the implementation of the SDGs at European level, and contains some interesting ideas for the future.

The diagnosis: historical advantage, but fragile

The Reflection Paper begins by recalling the leading role that the European Union and its Member States have played in the negotiation and adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the SDGs. It highlights the presence of European values in this agenda as well as Europe's historical achievements in the field of sustainable development: according to the global ranking produced by the Bertelsmann Foundation and the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN)³, the European Union is doing better than the rest of the world in terms of poverty eradication; it is also very well placed in terms of social protection, health and well-being; there are seven EU Member States in the top 10 countries.

On the basis of this positive diagnosis, the authors examine the challenges to be met, but also the fragility of the achievements. There are some rather alarming passages in the paper on the cost of inaction, particularly in the areas of climate, biodiversity and social cohesion. The decline in the fight against inequalities, particularly gender inequalities (see equal sharing of domestic tasks), is also mentioned. And the report notes Europe's very poor performance in the areas of sustainable consumption and production and the protection of the oceans.

But isn't it time to move from diagnosis to action? This is the meaning of the intervention of the Swedish high school student Greta Thunberg in Davos⁴ - although Sweden regularly occupies first place in the rankings on the implementation of the SDGs.

Three scenarios that summarise the status of the proposals

The main advantage of the Reflection Paper is that it makes transparent the approaches that different stakeholders propose to the challenge of implementing an agenda as broad as the SDGs. The paper explores three scenarios for the future that summarise these approaches well.

Scenario 3 proposes to focus efforts on the Union's external action, thus reflecting the classic narrative of the SDGs for development, and assumes that little further action is needed at the domestic level given the European Union's good position in the SDGs rankings. The paper highlights the inherent risk in this scenario of losing credibility and leadership on sustainability issues.

Scenario 2 is the improved status quo scenario, based on a mainstreaming approach: it is up to Member States and the various Commission Directorates-General to integrate the SDGs into their activities, without binding guidelines. This scenario is similar to the current approach, but still suggests some areas for improvement while remaining rather vague: for example, it proposes that some SDGs guide discussions on the post-2020 growth strategy and that progress on these SDGs be monitored by the European Semester. The main advantage of this scenario is that it is intended to be operational and effective through sectoral approaches; its main disadvantage is that it does not provide an answer for better coordination between States and the Union or for better policy coherence.

The most ambitious scenario is scenario 1, the one that would require the most additional effort. It proposes a transversal strategy for the implementation of the SDGs with concrete targets and deadlines and consistent monitoring at European and country level. This is the option for which the authors identify the most advantages: an ambitious strategy, leaving no one behind, could give a positive vision for Europe, and send a strong signal at international level. In this scenario, Europe would take a leadership role in relation to a 2030 Agenda pulling international ambition, for the moment too weak, upwards. Its disadvantage: this is the most complex scenario, as agreeing on concrete targets between countries takes time.

Good ideas for the future

Overall, the paper remains at the reflection stage and does not commit to immediate action. Scenario 2 offers some interesting ideas, such as those mentioned above; Scenario 1 goes even further, and proposes to:

- bring sustainability issues to the highest political level and make them the EU's strategy;
- integrate the principle of "sustainability first" into Better Regulation Agendas⁵ ;
- give a follow-up mandate to the Commission's Multi-Stakeholder Platform⁶ ;
- strengthen the EU's external action and its alignment with the MDGs.

This scenario would be the most transformative, provided that it constitutes Europe's strategy for 2030 and the basis for the priorities of the new Commission.

The paper also identifies policies that contribute to the SDGs and that should be strengthened (e.g. the circular economy, the transition to a sustainable food system, etc.) as well as a number of means of implementation (taxation, policy coherence). However, some ideas are missing, for example a real strategy to reduce negative impacts on third countries, or a coherent decarbonation strategy in the medium term, as analysed by the IEEP and the Think2030 coalition⁷.

Now that the diagnosis has been made, who will take it on? And when? The paper says it wants to inform the debate on the 2019-2024 strategic agenda and the priorities of the next Commission. Shouldn't this be discussed at the Sibiu Summit (early May 2019) and in advance of the European elections? Will Scenario 1 be the scenario defended by the new Commission? Spain has launched an informal group of countries in favour of ambitious implementation of the MDGs. What about civil society? The Multi-stakeholder Platform (companies, NGOs, etc.) has already made its proposals, very close to scenario 1; we can expect civil society to continue to mobilise in this direction.

¹ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/publications/reflection-paper-towards-sustainable-europe-2030_en

² <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/36775/18-euco-final-conclusions-en.pdf>

³ <http://www.sdgindex.org/>

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/jan/25/our-house-is-on-fire-greta-thunberg16-urges-leaders-to-act-on-climate>

⁵ https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/law-making-process/planning-and-proposing-law/better-regulation-why-and-how_fr

⁶ https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/international-strategies/global-topics/sustainable-development-goals/multi-stakeholder-platform-sdgs_en

⁷ <https://ieep.eu/news/commission-s-reflection-paper-on-a-more-sustainable-europe-by-2030-ieep-reaction-and-recommendations>