

SDGs: a legitimate basis for current European debates

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More than two years after their adoption at the UN, the European Union (EU) has not yet fully embraced the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In 2018 the Commission will publish a “reflection paper” on the intended follow-up to these seventeen major global goals.

Rather than a process of formal SDG implementation that only mobilizes the “sustainable development” community, this Policy Brief considers that the SDGs are a legitimate foundation – given that they have been adopted by all Member States – on which to base major current European debates, including the EU’s post-2020 priorities, its future multiannual financial framework, or the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP).

We briefly present the SDGs and the current progress of their implementation in Europe, and then propose ideas to support their meaningful contribution to these debates. These proposals are also intended to encourage consideration on the best ways to mobilize the SDGs on the EU scale.

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KEY MESSAGES

- Appoint a high-level panel—based on a European policy gap analysis to achieve the SDGs—to propose a number of policy priorities for the EU by 2030. These priorities must have targets to be achieved and monitoring indicators, and should be debated by the European Council and Parliament with a view to adopting a post-2020 strategy for the European Union.
- Use the SDGs as a template for presenting the next multiannual financial framework to make EU budget expenditure easier to understand, particularly for citizens. More generally, many countries have announced that they are using or intend to use the SDGs to develop and assess their budgets: the EU should analyse these initiatives and draw inspiration from them.
- Make the SDGs the guide for the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy. The Commission should: identify out of the 169 SDG targets those relevant to European agriculture and food; adapt them to the European context and set quantified goals to be achieved by 2030; and extract a set of indicators to assess the various reform options and monitor the implementation of the next CAP.
- Beyond these major ongoing debates, SDG implementation is an opportunity to improve other European mechanisms, for example by integrating them into the impact studies prepared by the Commission and into the European Semester.

The SDGs were adopted in September 2015 by all States at the United Nations. These 17 goals must be achieved by 2030, in areas as diverse as poverty reduction, education, health, the protection of natural heritage and international cooperation. They are divided into 169 targets of varying degrees of precision and are accompanied by more than 200 indicators intended to monitor the worldwide progress. SDG 10, for example, aims to reduce inequalities between and within countries; the first target under this goal is that by 2030 the income of the poorest 40 percent must grow faster than the average income in each country; the monitoring indicators are the income growth of the poorest 40% (bottom 40% of the population) and the growth of the average income.

Beyond this set of goals, targets and indicators, the SDGs are based on two major principles. Firstly, the principle of universality: all countries are committed to taking action to contribute - both home and abroad - to the achievement of the SDGs, whether they are developing, emerging or already industrialized. The second principle is that of indivisibility: all objectives must be pursued together, to ensure a “coherent” response. Thus, a country’s agricultural and food policies must ensure its food security, but also protect natural resources and health, ensure a decent standard of living for farmers, and not have negative impacts on the farming systems of other countries.

EU IMPLEMENTATION SO FAR

All States must “implement the SDGs” and account for their actions taken, particularly at the United Nations High-Level Political Forum (HLPF), which is held annually at the UN. Each State is expected to adopt a strategy that sets out the main priorities for 2030 and details the measures to be taken to achieve them. They are also expected to establish a high-level political governance to ensure the implementation of these measures, their coherence with each other, the monitoring of their effectiveness and, if necessary, their modification.

While several Member States have already started to implement the SDGs,¹ the EU is only just beginning. The European Commission’s Communication in November 2016² was intended to establish the broad guidelines for SDG implementation,

but only carried out a type of SDG repackaging: in essence, it explained that current European policies already contribute to the achievement of global objectives and that the Commission’s priorities are aligned with these broad objectives. This suggests that nothing new or additional is needed to achieve the SDGs by 2030. A multi-stakeholder platform was nevertheless created.

Before the summer of 2017, the Council³ and the Parliament⁴ called on the Commission to be more ambitious in SDG implementation, asking it, among other things, to evaluate current European policies and identify the changes needed to ensure that Europe reaches the SDGs by 2030 (policy gap analysis); and also asked it to propose in mid-2018 a strategy for SDG implementation.

In his letter of intent to the Council and the Parliament in September 2017, the President of the Commission committed to submit a Reflection Paper in 2018, entitled “Towards a sustainable Europe by 2030” on the follow-up of the SDGs. In November 2017, Eurostat released an evaluation report on the EU’s progress towards the SDGs, based on the trends of around 100 indicators. This report⁵ has been subject to much criticism, as it is merely a draft of the policy gap analysis requested by the European institutions.

DRAWING THE SDGs OUT OF THEIR NICHE

There is a risk that SDG implementation will take place within a niche, i.e. the sustainable development sector silo, which is often represented by environmental ministries, and has no impact on major policy decisions. In the same way that the European strategy for sustainable development has yet to demonstrate an influence on the fabric of European public policy.

This silo implementation, that is typical of the “resectorialisation” of sustainable development, would be particularly damaging, since effective SDG implementation comes at a particularly

1. Brimont, L., Vaillat, J., Demailly, D. (2016). SDG implementation: what are the countries doing? An assessment of the voluntary reviews submitted to the High-level Political Forum. IDDRI, *Issue brief* 17/16.

2. European Commission (2017). Next steps for a sustainable European future - Reforming Europe, implementing SDGs, 7 July 2017, https://www.eesc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/resources/docs/conference-sdg-7-july-ws-conclusions_lp.pdf

3. European Council (2017). EU response to the 2030 agenda for sustainable development – a sustainable European future, 20 June 2017, <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/23989/st10370-en17.pdf>

4. European Parliament (2017). European Parliament Resolution of 6 July 2017 on EU action for sustainability (2017/2009 (INI)), <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//NONSGML+TA+P8-TA-2017-0315+o+DOC+PDF+Vo//EN>

5. The choice of indicators has been criticized, particularly the lack of indicators to monitor the EU’s impact on the rest of the world. Moreover, the lack of targets to be reached by 2030 on a large number of subjects makes it impossible to say whether progress - if any - is sufficient. Finally, by analysing trends, this report remains silent on the effectiveness of current European policies and their ability to put Europe on track to achieve the SDGs by 2030.

important moment for the EU. In the run-up to the European elections and the appointment of a new Commission in 2019, the EU needs to start defining its main political priorities for the post-2020 period. Discussions are already underway regarding its multiannual financial framework (for the 2020-2027 period) and on CAP reform (2020-2027 period), all of which are structuring issues for European policy. Europe's future will be determined between 2018 and 2020, and if we want this future to be sustainable, the SDGs are both the affirmation of a political project and a framework of targets and indicators that can usefully contribute to the political debate. They can do this because they have been adopted by all Member States, without exception, and are therefore a legitimate basis for work. This does not mean that these global goals must establish themselves as the next goals of the EU, the budget and the CAP by 2030. But they can be used to launch, organize and fuel these major European debates.

We make several proposals below, addressed to both stakeholders in these debates and to actors interested in SDG implementation and in the Commission's future Reflection Paper on the subject.

Using SDGs to organize the discussion on post-2020 priorities

For the decade 2010-2020, the Europe 2020 strategy was adopted, with five priorities—employment, innovation, education, energy and poverty—with quantified targets. Then, in 2014, the Juncker Commission defined the ten priorities of its mandate. It is certainly too early to determine, ahead of the political changes in 2019, what will be the main political priorities for 2025 or 2030; but it is time to launch the debate.

The SDGs are a legitimate basis for organizing this discussion today. And the Eurostat report published last November is a first step. It identifies worrying trends in around 15 topics that could become priorities for the EU where it brings added value. Two more steps are needed from this point: a technical step, to fill the gaps left by Eurostat's work, particularly to produce a policy gap analysis (analysis of the gap between the objectives and results); and a political step, because the debate on EU priorities cannot be limited to a technical analysis, regardless of its precision. This analysis must fuel a high-level political process within the European institutions, and involve citizens.

How can we proceed? A group of recognized experts could for example be appointed by the Council and the Parliament, and be tasked with - on the basis of the policy gap analysis - proposing a number of policy priorities for the EU. These priorities would be accompanied by monitoring indicators

and targets to be achieved by 2025 or 2030. This group would report regularly on its work to the Council and the Parliament, it would consult citizens and civil society, and the final decision on the post-2020 Europe strategy could then be taken after the European elections at a special summit.

Using the SDGs to create the next European budget

The Commission's proposal for the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), starting in 2021, is expected in the first half of 2018. What will be its overall budget? Will it be stretched over seven or five years? What flexibilities will be allowed from one year to the next? Will there be new specifically allocated resources? All these questions are crucial, but should not put the political priorities of this budget onto the back-burner: what are the economic, social and environmental challenges that it aims to tackle?

Clearly, the MFF debate should be closely linked to the debate on Europe's top priorities for 2025 or 2030. The process outlined above to illustrate how the SDGs can fuel the debate on these priorities should also be linked to budget discussions. In the very short term, the Eurostat report - even though imperfect - should be discussed in the forums where the MFF is debated.

The SDGs can also help the EU make its budget more understandable, particularly for citizens. The report of the High-level group on own resources, chaired by Mario Monti, proposes to restructure the budget to organize spending per goal. The SDGs can provide a suitable template for presenting the budget. More generally, many countries around the world have announced that they are using, or will use, the SDGs to develop and evaluate their budgets: the EU would be well advised to analyse and draw inspiration from these initiatives.

Using the SDGs to frame the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy

The CAP is a key EU policy, accounting for almost 40% of its budget. The post-2020 CAP reform was recently launched in a Commission Communication. The SDGs are a legitimate basis for assessing the current CAP and avenues for reform, and it is interesting to note that this communication explicitly refers to the SDGs and lists the objectives to which the CAP contributes, which is almost all of them.

But the Commission does not go further in the use of SDGs as a framework for analysing the CAP. As early as the first half of 2018 in the expected impact study, it could:

- provide details on these major global objectives and identify among their 169 targets those that

are relevant for European agriculture and food, and in particular its impacts on the rest of the world;⁶

- adapt these targets to the European context, and possibly set quantified goals to be achieved by 2030;
- define a set of indicators that will make it possible to assess the different options for reforming the CAP and then, once this reform is complete, to monitor – in conjunction with civil society in particular - its effectiveness and the progress in terms of the transformation of European agriculture.

Using the SDGs in other European policies

We have discussed above three ongoing European debates in which the SDGs could be used. But many other European policies could benefit from this analysis framework. These include:

- the Better Regulation Agenda, for which proposals exist to “mainstream” the SDGs,⁷ particularly in impact studies;
- the European Semester, which could become the mechanism for monitoring each Member State’s progress towards the SDGs, and not just macroeconomic and budgetary reforms;
- the circular economy, whose indicators for monitoring Europe’s progress could be enriched by the SDGs, if only to integrate Europe’s impacts on the rest of the world;
- more generally, SDG implementation is an opportunity to improve the functioning of European institutions, to go beyond thematic silos, and thus to ensure the coherence of European

policies and in particular the coherence between domestic policies and external actions.⁸

SDGs: A TWOFOLD OPPORTUNITY FOR THE EU

The SDGs are therefore an opportunity to make progress in many European debates and more generally in the fabric of EU policies. And if the EU implements them seriously, it is also an opportunity for it to affirm its commitment to the multilateral system and its position within it, and to emphasize the importance of the political project of sustainable development that the SDGs embody.

Indeed, at a time when multilateralism is under pressure, the SDGs open up a political space that must be defended, in that they allow for issues of poverty, inequality, education, health, ecological transition, and development assistance to be addressed. This space is all the more important for Europeans given that this international agreement embodies their development model: while all Member States still have progress to make to achieve the SDGs, eight of them are nevertheless among the ten most advanced countries in the world on this matter.⁹ The SDGs should therefore act as an engine to drive other countries. Unfortunately, the EU, which recognizes the importance of the Paris Agreement in its diplomacy, still tends to ignore the SDGs. This could be solved if the EU implements the SDGs in an ambitious way and presents its actions at the 2019 High-Level Political Forum (to be held under the auspices of the UN General Assembly) – as suggested by the Council. ■

6. See the identification work carried out by IDDRI: Schwoob, M.-H. *et al.* (2018). Making the SDGs count in the CAP reform: an analytical framework, IDDRI, Issue Brief 04/18.

7. CEPS (2017). How can Sustainable Development Goals be ‘mainstreamed’ in the EU’s Better Regulation Agenda?

8. ECPM (2016). Implementation of the 2030 Agenda in the European Union: constructing an EU approach to policy coherence for sustainable development. ECDPM Discussion Paper

9. SDGs index of the Sustainable Development Solution Network: <http://www.sdindex.org>