

Turning Sustainable Development Goals into political drivers, in France and other European countries

Julie Vaillé, Laura Brimont (IDDRI)

In September 2015, the UN adopted a list of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Universal and ambitious, these goals aim to accelerate the transition towards sustainable development (economic, social and environmental) by 2030, in all countries including developed ones.

The sense of ownership of the SDGs within the political arena in OECD countries is currently very limited. However, governments will be accountable for their 2015 commitments and there will be mounting pressure among countries and from civil society through international comparisons.

This Issue Brief focuses on what the SDGs can contribute following 25 years' of national sustainable development policy implementation. We suggest practical modalities that European countries, and France in particular, could apply to fully harness the potential of the SDGs. This analysis is based on a review of academic and institutional literature, as well as around ten interviews with representatives from national and local governments responsible for the implementation of sustainable development strategies (Germany, Finland, France, Sweden and Switzerland).

1. Requirements of the Agenda 21 adopted at the Conference on Environment and Development in 1992.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- SDGs provide an excellent case study on the challenges of securing country ownership of international commitments. Two scenarios are possible. The first gives them a purely statistical existence, where states meet their commitments and report their progress to the UN, measured according to more than 200 monitoring indicators. The second scenario gives them a political status and paves the way for the strategic use of SDGs.
- There is an urgent need, associated with the “political development” scenario, for France and other European countries to define a strategy that includes: high-level coordination, an appraisal of the state of play, the definition of a framework document and the alignment of existing strategies. These elements must integrate civil society actors as soon as possible so that we move beyond a purely administrative exercise and allow other political actors to seize the agenda.
- The setting of long-term policies is a second priority: this issue brief suggests an approach involving the estimation of the long-term trends in each sector and identifying the policies needed to achieve the objectives.
- A third priority is the redefinition of responsibilities and forms of accountability of the public and private actors involved in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Sustainable development is not just about climate and international cooperation. The level of ambition and the multidimensional nature of SDGs require a rethinking of stakeholder roles.
- Finally, the strategic use of SDGs will only be possible if they are integrated into the legislative process and receive high-level political support.

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Institut du développement durable
et des relations internationales
27, rue Saint-Guillaume
75337 Paris cedex 07 France

The SDGs can be interpreted as the expression of a collective preference: an affirmation of a model of how to “live together”. In this perspective, France and other European countries have achieved the considerable feat of “imposing” their model of society onto the SDGs: although universal, the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development places a major emphasis on justice, social protection and legal equality, which are some of the leading principles of the European social contract. The text adopted in New York highlights the importance of climate in the 2030 Agenda, an element that is defended by the European Union and France in particular. The first international rankings in relation to the SDGs are revealing in this respect: the first ten places are occupied by European countries, with Scandinavia dominating the top of the table (Kroll, 2015; Sachs *et al.*, 2015).

While European countries are leading the way, there remains considerable room for improvement. In this regard, SDGs create an expectation and an obligation to attain results.

FOLLOWING 25 YEARS OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES, WHAT CAN SDGs CONTRIBUTE?

The 2030 Agenda calls for countries to develop action plans from their existing sustainable development strategies. Considering the varied effectiveness of these strategies (Steurer, R. and Hametner, M. 2013), what can the SDGs deliver?

A global ranking of sustainable development policies

The first innovation kick-started by the monitoring process of the 2030 Agenda is the establishment of an evaluation framework that is universal to all countries. This monitoring is carried out through an annual *reporting* system, under the aegis of the UN Secretary General, based on indicators and national statistics.

Certainly, France along with other European countries have for many years submitted their national sustainable development strategies to the critical scrutiny of other countries (“peer reviews”²), but these assessments have only had a limited influence on national policy. It is indeed particularly difficult to satisfy the conditions necessary for these peer reviews to have an impact:

2. Voluntary procedures for which the European Commission, the OECD and the Economic and Social Department of the United Nations provide guidelines.

high level political commitment, adequate budgetary resources, involvement of non-state actors, etc.

The education survey known as the *Program for International Student Assessment* (PISA) is enlightening regarding the impact of international rankings. Without exaggerating its virtues, PISA has had an indirect influence on the development of education policies in the majority of developed countries (Breakspear, 2012) for several reasons: this type of survey promotes exchanges between policymakers and experts and allows the strategies of leading countries in an area to be used for comparative studies (including between countries with similar socioeconomic characteristics); it legitimizes ongoing reforms (for example the UK has used the PISA ranking to support reforms outlined in its national strategy); it strengthens the quality of national assessments (expansion of the scope of evaluation, further improvement of indicators, etc.); it enables policy decisions to be better informed according to national and international requirements (Scotland viewed the PISA ranking as a way to measure its relative decline and to influence policy decisions, while focusing on the national context) (Breakspear, 2012).

These benefits are maximised when stakeholders recognise the indicators as legitimate, when monitoring and reporting mechanisms are in place—as planned in the 2030 Agenda—and when the results of the evaluation exercises are disseminated to the media (McGee, 2010).

A coherent national policy framework for greater efficiency

The second innovation of the SDGs is in its level of ambition and the multidimensional nature of the targets. Each goal (education, health, climate, etc.) is based on targets that combine different dimensions of sustainable development. The SDG on infrastructure and industrialization, for example, refers simultaneously to the SDGs on inequality (equal access to infrastructure), on sustainable production and consumption (resource efficiency) and on growth (access of SMEs to financial services). The SDG relating to health is linked to education (health education), environment, water (reducing deaths related to water pollution), inequality (universal health care) and cities (transport safety).

This integration clashes with the reality of national governance systems that struggle to overcome silo approaches: each country has its own ministry for the environment, economy, education, etc. However, sustainability is a cross-cutting issue (encompassing, for example, both inequality and sustainable consumption) that has no relevant ministry of its own.

In response to this challenge, the SDGs provide a reference framework to enable governments to monitor and evaluate public policies in terms of the three dimensions of sustainable development and their interrelationship.

HOW TO TAKE FULL ADVANTAGE OF THE POTENTIAL OF SDGs?

Prioritizing

A first option is to simplify and prioritize the goals, as well as to identify the means to achieve the targets of greatest importance. Such prioritization is not easy. It is diplomatically sensitive to the extent that some countries, including France, have emphasized the indivisibility of the agenda. Without disagreeing with this viewpoint, this indivisibility will have to adapt to prioritization. Most European countries have introduced—or are about to initiate—diagnostics to describe the status of various SDGs in each country (Finland, France, Switzerland etc.). This provides, firstly, the knowledge of one's position in comparison to other countries, and secondly to identify the most “sensitive” and therefore the highest priority objectives and targets.

Developing long-term plans and strategies

The logical next step in this exercise is to develop strategies and action plans. In this regard, European countries have differed slightly in their choices: France is planning to produce a “framework document” or “national agenda” (its name and content are yet to be defined) that is specific to the 2030 Agenda and would complement the national sustainable development strategy (NSDS) adopted in 2015, while Germany and Switzerland plan to integrate SDGs into the next revisions of their NSDS.

Whatever options are chosen, existing strategies must be consistent with these action frameworks, otherwise they will only be subsidiary strategies, which is contrary to the requirement for consistency in the 2030 Agenda.

The implementation of this agenda means that these exercises should be part of a long-term perspective and should exceed the usual time frame of the NSDS (5 years). A fundamental step is to estimate the future trajectories of different SDGs, both through forecasting ahead until 2030 by the extension of historic trends (Overseas Development Institute, 2015) and through a planning method known as backcasting (Voituriez, 2015),

which involves starting from a desirable future (a target defined by an SDG) and then analysing the gap between the steps needed to attain this goal and the business as usual scenario. The aim is to define policies and programmes that would need to be implemented to connect the desired future to the present.

In France, foresight exercises already exist in the legislation governing public finance (LOLF), which requires parliament to assess government performance in advance of the budget. These foresight exercises are, however, very short term (2 years) and are not included in the development of strategies for agriculture, education, health and sustainable development.

Involving civil society

SDGs also constitute a driver for action that can be used as a reference point for actors in the public sphere. Social mobilisation is a crucial factor in the implementation of international agreements, in particular to challenge elected representatives and to disseminate the results of evaluation exercises (Simmons, 2009). Civil society participation is not new and a number of European governments are launching or re-launching public consultations to encourage the emergence of proposals and the ownership of international-level commitments. It is necessary to involve civil society as early as possible in the decision-making process, moving beyond the idea of public consultations once decisions have been taken, to allow real debate and to define national priorities in a concerted manner.

The challenge is then to increase the understanding of the objectives: to clarify the discourse, a long-term vision, that eventually goes beyond 2030, which is essential if we want to enable social actors to seize the agenda.

Redefining responsibilities

A second requirement to enable the development of the political application of SDGs is to redefine the responsibilities and forms of accountability of the various public and private actors involved in SDG implementation.

The environment is often presented as the main sustainable development challenge for developed countries. However, the SDGs also encompass other crucial issues: according to the “SDG Dashboard” established by the SDSN (Sachs *et al.*, 2015), the SDG that is most problematic for France is the one relating to economic growth and unemployment rates; while according to Kroll (2015) the main difficulty regards social justice (education opportunities related to socioeconomic status).

There is a risk of sustainable development being fully absorbed by the climate issue, which could cut off SDGs from their mainspring, and this assimilation can be seen in the way that national sustainable development strategies are dealt with by institutions. Half of the EU's member states choose to give their environmental ministries the role of guidance.³ However, the cross-cutting nature of the SDGs and the need to strengthen policy coherence raises doubts over the suitability of this choice. Finland provides a good case in point: one of its first decisions relating to the SDGs was to transfer responsibility from the environment minister to the head of government. This highlights the fact that SDGs should not be confined to an additional sectoral discussion, but rather be placed at the heart of a broad vision of what society should aim to become.

The institutional organisation issues also concern the redefinition of civil society stakeholder responsibilities (NGOs, companies, research, etc.).

New forms of responsibility and accountability for national and local authorities are yet to be invented because attention so far has focused on the mobilisation of actors to develop strategies or draft laws—such as the “Grenelle Environment”—rather than on the monitoring of implementation. In Switzerland, civil society is planning to create an SDG Watch, a mechanism to monitor the development of SDGs, and will draft a shadow report to counterbalance the government's report, to launch a structured political debate around the differences in strategic and political opinion between government and non-government reports.

The responsibilities of businesses have yet to be defined. Without any clarification of these points, the policy setting will remain only an intention.

Giving political weight to the SDGs

So far the SDGs have received little media coverage, particularly in France where they were overshadowed by COP21. Political speeches on the subject remain relatively scarce. Nevertheless, European countries are driving the issue at the international level: we count six European countries (Germany, Estonia, Finland, France, Norway and Switzerland) among the 21 countries that volunteered to submit their national strategies at the next high-level political forum (July 2016).

As a legislative and supervisory body controlling government action, parliament has a key role to play in increasing the political weight of the SDGs.

In France, it is conceivable that SDGs could be integrated into the nomenclature of the LOLF.⁴ Germany has also outlined this type of reform through the introduction in 2009 of a sustainability criterion for impact assessments of new laws and regulations. Strengthening the role of sustainability indicators in the legislative budget allocation process would be an important lever for the implementation of sustainable development.

In conclusion, the SDGs create expectations that no government can satisfy without extra effort. There are already some reports in circulation⁵ that assess national performance on a few selected indicators. In response to these reports and the potential shortcomings, governments should not respond defensively, but rather seize the opportunity to use SDGs as political levers. However, there remains a gap between the ambition of the 2030 Agenda and the current commitments, and an even larger one between these goals and the actions that have been implemented to achieve them. This is the challenge for the years ahead. ■

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3. Source: European Sustainable Development Network.

4. Since the Law on Budget Acts (LOLF) of 2001, the government is required to submit to Parliament during the deposition of the finance bill a report on the economic, social and financial outlook, based on performance indicators.

5. Kroll (2015); Nicolai *et al.* (2015); Sachs *et al.* (2016).