

Will France pass the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) test?

An assessment of the new targets and challenges that SDGs will bring to France

Elisabeth Hege, Julie Vaillé, Damien Demailly, Laura Brimont (IDDRI)

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are the latest step forward by the international community: 193 States have committed to achieving a high level of environmental, economic and social development by 2030. Progress will be assessed annually through the follow-up of 17 objectives and 169 targets.

How can SDGs move from being a statistical reporting exercise at the international level to a policy tool at the national level? In some countries, governments have launched processes to monitor SDGs at the highest political level (Brimont *et al.*, 2016), while NGOs have seized this opportunity to hold their governments accountable for their international commitments. In France, however, official processes are only beginning, and civil society has little interest in SDGs, often ignored or considered as development issues for countries of the South.

This Policy Brief—derived from the study by Hege *et al.* (2017)—provides a first inventory of the achievement of these sustainable development objectives for France: will it pass the test by 2030?

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Our study indicates that France has been able to solve major challenges during its development process, however, the SDGs enable the identification of a significant number of challenges that remain to be addressed, and not only environmental ones. Our analysis of the 29 targets reveals that France is at risk of failing to achieve three-quarters of them by 2030, based on past trends.
- SDGs include eleven new commitments for France, that vary in their “aspirational” nature, for example on inequality reduction in terms of income and education, and also the fight against poverty. This represents an opportunity for civil society to strengthen its advocacy efforts and for the government to seize these new targets.
- France could disregard SDGs on the grounds that it has other priorities. This study shows that this would be a mistake, in both substantive and tactical terms. The most crucial priorities of France belong in the SDGs. And we can be reasonably certain that if the French government decides to push the SDGs to the margins of its political agenda, then the inescapable comparison with the failures and achievements of other countries will bring them back to the centre. Indeed, SDGs can be the impetus to keep the wheels turning.
- Being proactive begins with the realization of a public review of the strengths and weaknesses of France, based on, for example, an analysis of critical indicator trends, such as that of Hege *et al.* (2017). Further steps will be required: to evaluate current public policies; to ensure that the institutional process is able to influence the policies of all ministries; and to take advantage of the universality of the SDGs to find new levers for action in other countries that may be valuable for France.

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

1. IS THE GLASS HALF-FULL OR HALF-EMPTY: ON WHICH TARGETS SHOULD FRANCE FOCUS?

France remains in the learning phase regarding SDGs and the use of such an international accountability framework. In view of this, our study, which we summarize here, aims to answer two questions:

- *Is France on the right track* to achieve the SDGs by 2030, especially in terms of domestic performance? In other words, are SDGs an issue in France?
- *Do SDGs bring new objectives for France*, beyond those which it has already been able to adopt in its legislation, its national strategies or through European directives and international conventions? In other words, has France made new commitments that associations are able to seize in support of their demands for reform?

To answer these questions, we have assessed a selection of targets among the 169 SDGs. We do not describe our method of selection and assessment here; instead we refer the reader to the full report for more details. However, it should be noted that:

- We did not assess all 169 targets, not to mention all of the SDG indicators. We have limited our analysis to a maximum of two targets per SDG. We have not therefore made an exhaustive assessment of the state of France in relation to the SDGs.
- The selection of targets for assessment was made with the help of 12 experts on the basis of which seemed the most important in the French context. We thus tended to focus on the targets that are problematic for France, therefore taking a “glass half-empty” perspective. However, France is undoubtedly well positioned to achieve many of the targets; so the glass is also “half full”.
- For each selected target, we determined whether it had already been subject to “official” French quantifiable objectives. This step was fundamental, as it enabled to show the extent to which the SDGs are bringing new objectives to France, or more ambitious goals. We then compared the national commitment, if one existed, with that of the SDGs, to retain only the most ambitious, with the idea of “adapting” the SDGs to the existing French objectives, as advocated by the UN.¹
- In our assessment of the ability of France to achieve certain targets, we did not evaluate the public policies in place, especially those

implemented in recent years. We observed the trends over the last 15 years to highlight the risks of deviation from the 2030 target. Further evaluations of current and future public policies must be made on the basis of this type of preliminary work.

2. SDGS: A MIRROR TO FRENCH STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

Without an exhaustive review of the 169 targets of the SDGs, and without taking account of the multi-dimensionality of some of them, we were able to identify 22 targets for which the extension of current trends would not enable France to reach the 2030 objectives. The SDGs are therefore not only a matter for developing countries, they concern France not only in its external relations but also in its domestic policies.

Figure 1 shows targets in red or orange that correspond to issues where current trends must be reversed or accelerated. For some, measures have already been taken in recent years—for example on climate and renewable energies—and it remains to be seen whether such changes will be sufficient. For others, an acceleration of action is certainly necessary, or even a challenge to the current political trade-offs or a paradigm shift in the modalities of action.

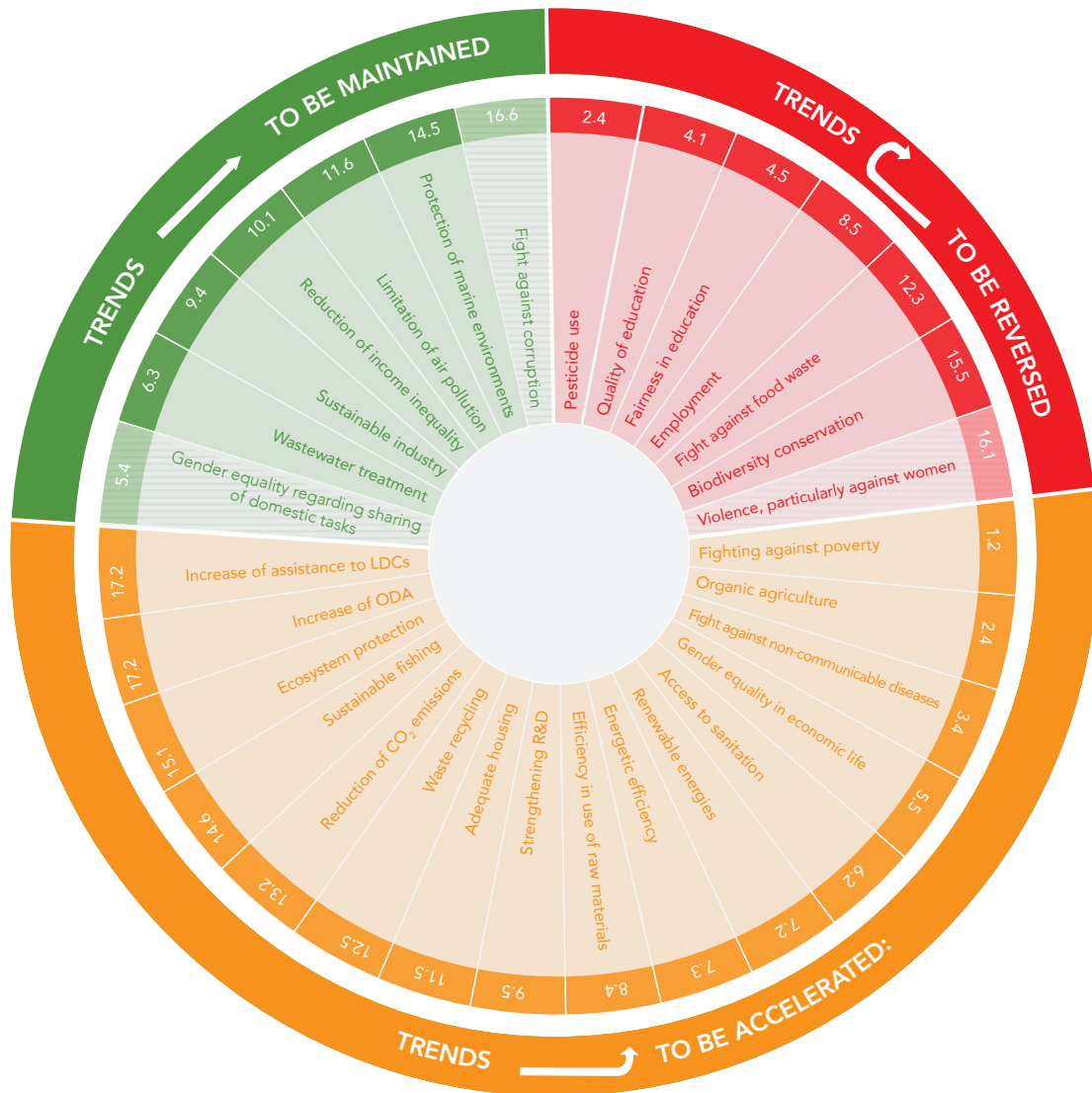
These targets illustrate the fact that SDGs are not—primarily or only—a matter of environmental protection in the French context: half of the targets that will be difficult to achieve concern economic and social issues such as employment, poverty, educational inequalities, gender equality and official development assistance.

In addition, we identified 7 targets that are politically important for France and that should be achievable if it maintains its momentum of improvement that has been ongoing for the past 15 years (shown as green targets in Figure 1). For example, France has already been able to implement policies to limit income inequalities, and if it maintains the current trend, will achieve the 10.1 target that “seeks to ensure that income growth among the poorest 40 per cent of the population is more rapid than its national average” (Chancel and Voituriez, 2015). In no way does this observation suggest that efforts should be relaxed, nor that we should only focus on this UN target at the expense of other economic inequality indicators, for example those concerning the 1% of the population with the highest incomes in France.

Figure 1 can be seen as a draft of an SDG dashboard for France, aiming to encourage all actors to carry out—either together with government leadership or individually—an inventory of France and to identify priorities for action.

1. §55 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development stipulates that it is up to “each Government to set its own national targets guided by the global level of ambition but taking into account national circumstances”.

Figure 1. Assessing trends relating to SDG achievement in 2030



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Assessing the trend compared to the most ambitious quantified target (UN/France):

- The trend is in the right direction.
- The trend is in the right direction but its pace, if continued, will not enable the 2030 target to be met.
- The trend is in the wrong direction and would need to be reversed to meet the 2030 target
- ⚡ Assessing the trends although target does not specify quantified objectives

3. NEW COMMITMENTS

For the 29 targets that we assessed in detail, just over half are already covered in France by quantifiable official objectives that are at least as ambitious as the SDGs. In particular, it appears that almost all environmental SDG targets are already covered by quantifiable objectives in France. In other words, what SDGs can bring to this subject, in the absence of new commitments, is a new political impulse to achieve the objectives already targeted—which is much needed in France in the light of current trends.

Table 1. New commitments that the SDGs bring to France

Challenges for France	Trend
Quality Education	●
Fight against educational inequalities	●
Full employment	●
Access to sanitation	●
Gender equality in economic life	●
Adequate housing	●
Development assistance	●
Assistance to LDCs	●
Fight against poverty	●
Fight against non-communicable diseases	●
Reducing income inequality	●

We also identified 11 “new commitments”, i.e. quantifiable objectives derived from the SDGs that are new to France, or more ambitious than the existing French objectives (Table 1). These new commitments include targets for reducing inequalities, improving the school system, tackling poverty and unemployment. These issues of an economic and social nature are already at the heart of French concerns and of the political agenda of the country, France has already developed follow-up indicators and even overarching policy objectives (gender equality for example), but it is remarkable that France is devoid of quantifiable objectives, and it is equally remarkable that the SDGs provide some. Furthermore, these quantifiable objectives seem very difficult to achieve because, with the exception of the goal of reducing income inequality, they will not be attained if there is a continuation of current trends.

These new commitments constitute new “political weapons” and provide new support for action by associations and trade unions in their advocacy activities, for the monitoring of the performance of France and for making comparisons between countries.

They also constitute a real headache for France, its government and its administration. Will these new commitments be adopted by the National Assembly? Will the government include them within national strategies and action plans? Will it adapt them to the French context and to the national political debates?

4. A TOOL FOR ACTION

Neither bottom of the class nor high achiever, France, like most developed countries, cannot be content with a position on sustainable development that it has already adopted. The SDGs allow France to see itself as it is, and to measure the successes and limitations of its action, and to anticipate the challenges of tomorrow.

SDGs are also a tool that can be seized by national actors, starting with the government. As in other countries, the French government can organize an institutional process of SDG implementation: characterized by a political influence over the necessary trade-offs, and the coordination of traditional institutional silos to take into account the indivisibility of SDGs and sustainable development issues; and is also open to civil society and society as a whole, and open to cooperation with other countries (Vaillé and Brimont, 2016; Brimont *et al.*, 2016).

Useful and necessary for the establishment of a diagnosis and the sharing of priorities for a country, the SDGs would say nothing about the actions to be carried out? It would be both right and wrong. SDGs are not normative and do not prejudge the best means to achieving a given target or objective. On the other hand, by putting figures on intentions, by allowing a dynamic reading of the trends and potential gaps towards the objectives, they predispose to action more than the previous international agreements and, in the case of France, domestic policies when they did not set themselves any measurable ambition. ■

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