



## Steering the EU towards a sustainability transformation

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### KEY MESSAGES

- The approval of the SDGs was a success for EU diplomacy – but the EU is not taking them as seriously as it should; nor is the EU doing as well as it might think in delivering the SDGs for Europe – though a much better gap analysis is needed.
- The EU should prepare an EU2030 strategy based on the 2030 Agenda and SDGs. As Europe thinks about the SDGs, it must strategise globally, and consider the spill-over effects of internal policy for third countries.
- The next Multi-Annual Financial Framework should integrate the 2030 Agenda and SDGs in all budget headings.
- The prize is a Europe – and a Europe in the world – which meets all three pillars of the SDGs: economic; social; and environmental.



## INTRODUCTION

In 2015, the European Union strove to shape – and indeed succeeded in shaping – two major global deals: the 2030 Agenda and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. Thanks to the efforts of EU diplomacy in particular, aspects such as peace, accountable and inclusive institutions, the reduction of inequality, a just transition in climate action, gender & sexual rights (all hallmarks of the EU social contract) are now part of the global commons.

The EU has committed itself to implementing the global Agenda. Today, however, almost three years down the road, it still lacks a proper strategy for doing so. A reflection paper has been promised by the end of 2018, which is supposed to prepare the ground for a much-needed SDG implementation strategy that the Council insisted should be produced back in June 2017. The EU will also report on progress to the UN at the High Level Political Forum in 2019. At the same time, ownership of the SDGs remains fairly limited across the EU institutions and in many member states.

The EU seems to be trapped in a paradox: the EU's values have never figured so high on the global agenda, yet EU ownership is hesitant and weak. Is the EU stunned and mesmerised by what the diplomats have accomplished? Or has the EU actually lost interest in its own values?

In this paper, we first suggest that the SDGs are misunderstood and that the EU needs to debunk fallacies about them and focus on what they are really about, i.e. transformation (see sections 1 and 2 of the paper). We then identify five concrete ways in which the EU could use the SDGs to resolve this paradox and lead the way in terms of SDG implementation (see section 3):

1. prepare a Europe2030 strategy;
2. measure how far there is to travel;
3. make the next EU budget truly sustainable;
4. foster peer learning and the exchange of best practices among EU institutions and member states;
5. empower local actors in Europe and third countries.

As this paper shows, becoming a global leader in implementing the SDGs is not just an opportunity to sustain Europe's diplomatic profile for global development,

environmental protection and climate change mitigation. It is also an opportunity to make progress on the most pressing European debates, and to empower those parts of European society that have been left behind.

## 1. DEBUNKING THE FALLACIES ABOUT THE SDGS

### *The SDGs are not the lowest common denominator*

The SDGs are actually a compromise. As such, they should elicit sustained political traction from the countries, which supported them throughout the negotiating process. The SDGs are the outcome of tough negotiations and debates, which ultimately formulated many goals or targets that are at the core of the European project. For instance, the Treaty on European Union states that the EU "should work for sustainable development based on balanced economic growth and price stability, a highly competitive social market economy, aiming at full employment and social progress, and a high level of protection and improvement of the quality of the environment." (Article 3 (3)). The SDGs emphasise decoupling economic growth from unsustainable resource use and pollution. They seek to achieve gender equality, universal health coverage, and fair access to quality education. They also call for a reversal of the trend towards greater inequality within and across European countries.



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These objectives are not technical. They express values and reflect political choices in favour of strong welfare systems and a social market economy reconciled with planetary boundaries. None of them was easy to agree, and none would have been retained as part of the 2030 Agenda without the constant involvement of the EU and key “progressive” countries.

These values are contested in the international arena and even within the EU. As they have been endorsed by all UN member countries, they provide a solid foundation on which to further advance a strong welfare system and an environmentally sustainable social market economy.

### *The SDGs are for advanced economies as well as developing countries*

One leading misconception about the SDGs is that they are the successor to the Millennium Development Goals and are therefore primarily relevant to developing countries. Studies that have assessed and compared the distance to the SDGs across countries unequivocally show that advanced economies, including EU member states, cannot claim to be on track towards attaining many of the SDGs.<sup>1</sup> A Eurostat report points to “significant movement away from sustainable development objectives.”<sup>2</sup> It highlights alarming trends related to poverty, gender inequality, underachievement in basic skills, and loss of biodiversity. An OECD report finds that OECD countries “have the greatest distance to travel in relation to gender equality, education, the economy and jobs, and institutions.”<sup>3</sup> The SDG Index and Dashboards suggest that most EU countries are performing worse than the global average in relation to climate protection (SDG13), sustainable consumption and production (SDG12) and the sustainable management of the oceans (SDG 14). The SDGs are a reminder that “business as usual” is not an option. They can act as a compass showing how the EU can fulfil its responsibilities to its constituencies, and also to its external partners.

1. Bertelsmann Stiftung and SDSN (2017), IDDRI (2017), SEI, Eurostat (2017) and OECD (2017).

2. Eurostat (2017).

3. OECD (2017).

4. United Nations. 2012. Rio+20 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development Outcome of the Conference: The future we want.



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including EU member  
states, cannot claim to be  
on track towards attaining  
many of the SDGs.



### *The SDGs are not a roadmap to sustainable development*

Despite providing an inspiring vision of the “future we want”, the SDGs are not suited as a roadmap for how to get there—and both intentionally and rightly so. The point was to avoid cookie-cutter prescriptive policy blueprints. Csaba Körösi, the co-chair of the Open Working Group, which drafted the SDGs, acknowledges that the SDGs by themselves “Will not generate a movement of capital and knowledge. Only national and local plans and projects can achieve this redirection of funds. Banks and institutions will not finance the SDGs; finances and other implementation means will be targeted at actual, tangible projects.”<sup>4</sup> On this aspect, there is still much work to be done. The SDGs are in place, but most countries do not have national plans and there is certainly a lack of projects. The SDGs paint a “broader picture” about a sustainable world in 2030. They set out ambitious principles and targets like “leave no one behind” and “halve global food waste by 2030” (SDG12.3). To be fair, they even set some very concrete targets for the means of implementation in relation to finance, ICT and trade. Although these concrete targets are limited (e.g. SDG 14.6 bans subsidies to the fishing industry that encourage unsustainable fishing practices), they should

be regarded as the non-negotiable first building blocks of a future implementation strategy.

The SDGs leave it to local, national and EU authorities to design these implementation strategies in accordance with their own contexts. Once these local, national and EU implementation strategies have been formulated, the use of common metrics, peer pressure and learning among countries will make it easier to reach the targets.<sup>5</sup> This idea is broadly similar to that underpinning the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, which connects a limited number of global goals (2 degree Celsius in the first place) with a myriad of national contributions. It is a self-fulfilling prophecy: if countries bet on the SDGs, the SDGs will then help them to implement their strategies. The country that has made the most progress in formulating a national strategy for SDG implementation is Finland, which based its comprehensive SDG strategy on a gap analysis.

### *The SDGs needs to be operationalised*

It is true that it would not make much sense to pick out only a few SDGs, without respecting interlinkages with other goals and targets. The added value of the SDGs is actually to overcome silo approaches and to point out the interlinkages (and trade-offs) between the three dimensions of sustainability. In this sense, the SDGs are a valuable tool. They should be used to enhance the performance of important sectoral policies, like the Common Agricultural Policy and the Structural and Cohesion Funds, as well as their coherence with other policy objectives. The SDGs present an opportunity to increase collaboration among ministries, to make better use of ex-ante evaluations in the policy debate, and to ensure that impact assessments are comprehensive.

However, any assumption that all the SDGs should be tackled at once is likely to lead to inaction or marginal change in current practices. The EU member states and institutions have to start somewhere in operationalising the SDGs, just as other countries are starting to do. Starting with the biggest gaps would already be a huge step forward. The SDGs could serve



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as a tool for identifying the weaknesses in the development model for each country and region. The findings of the Eurostat report and the gap analysis by the Joint Research Centre could generate some initial pointers to blind spots in the EU's current development model on which action is needed.

## 2. THE EU RESPONSE TO DATE

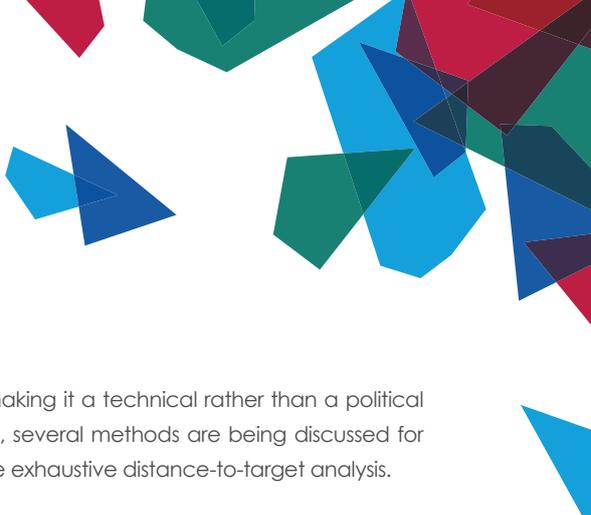
When the SDGs were negotiated in the Open Working Group, the European Council pushed for a “transformative” and “ambitious” post-2015 Agenda.<sup>6</sup> Since then, the EU has made only limited progress in implementing the SDGs, and has invested more in “stock-taking” than in transformative reforms. At the end of 2015, for instance, the EU introduced a few policy reforms and rolled out proposals for a circular economy.<sup>7</sup> It has also started to reform its policy strategies. In November 2016, the European Commission released a “package” of three communications. Two were related to the external implementation of the SDGs. One proposes a new European Consensus on Development, which was subsequently signed by the EU institutions and member states in June 2017.<sup>8</sup> Another contains building blocks for new EU-ACP relations after the Cotonou Partnership Agreement

5. Global Policy (2017).

6. On a transformative post-2015 agenda. Council conclusions, 16 December 2014.

7. [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/publications/european-commission-proposals-circular-economy\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/publications/european-commission-proposals-circular-economy_en)

8. The new consensus on development. Our world, our dignity, our future. Joint Statement by the Council and the representatives of the governments of the member states meeting within the Council, the European Parliament and the European Commission, 8 June 2017.



expires in 2020.<sup>9</sup> Both highlight the importance of the SDGs for the EU's development policy, but neither gives clear direction or sets priorities for reforming the development policy so that it can contribute to SDG implementation. Finally, a Communication (on the "next steps for a sustainable European future")<sup>10</sup> focuses more on the internal dimension of SDG implementation. Although this Communication maps out how the Commission's 10 priorities already cover the SDGs, it does not take the opportunity to identify gaps and provide guidance on an ambitious implementation of the SDGs. The package of communications is also a missed opportunity to better coordinate the internal and external implementation of the SDGs.

In the first half of 2017, the Council<sup>11</sup> and the European Parliament<sup>12</sup> asked the Commission to raise its level of ambition, calling for an analysis of the distance that still needs to be travelled if the SDGs are to be achieved by 2030, as well as for an implementation strategy (to be ready by mid-2018). A new working party on the 2030 Agenda has been set up to foster an ongoing debate among member states and follow up the Commission's proposals.

In November 2017, Eurostat published its first SDG Monitoring Report. This provides an overview of the situation in the EU and the member states in relation to the 17 SDGs. This report identifies a number of alarming trends and issues in relation to which the EU is failing to make progress. At the same time, it focuses exclusively on trends and does not actually identify the biggest gaps. Moreover, it gives few hints as to how to measure the EU's impact on the rest of the world. The preparatory work on the indicators and the report more generally was carried out by statisticians without any strong linkages with the relevant political bodies and council

working groups, making it a technical rather than a political exercise. Currently, several methods are being discussed for performing a more exhaustive distance-to-target analysis.

Participation being a key principle of the SDGs, the Commission has set up a multi-stakeholder platform.<sup>13</sup> This platform will feed into the process of the Commission's reflection paper entitled *Towards a sustainable Europe by 2030*, which is due to be released by the end of 2018. The Secretariat-General, which is in charge of the paper, will most likely limit itself to a "preparatory" reflection and leave the details of the much needed implementation strategy to the next Commission.

To sum up, some building blocks have been put in place. However, the implementation of the SDGs in and by the EU has been slow and they are a long way from steering the EU towards a transformation. Two key links are missing:

1. a link between the technical (i.e. monitoring report and mapping) and the more political aspects of implementing sustainable development (i.e. vision and priorities);
2. a link between the internal and external dimensions of implementing the universal SDGs.

As is the case in many member states, the EU has taken a silo approach towards the implementation of the SDGs. This is contrary to the overarching nature of the 2030 Agenda. Both internally and globally, the EU should set an example in leading the urgently needed sustainability transformation of wealth generation and redistribution systems, by defining its own sustainable pathway to 2030 and investing in sustainable pathways abroad.

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9. *Towards a renewed partnership with African, Caribbean and Pacific countries after 2020*. Joint Communication by the European Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 22 November 2016.

10. *Next steps for a sustainable European future*. Communication by the European Commission, 22 November 2016.

11. *A sustainable European future: The EU response to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. Council Conclusions 20 June 2017.

12. European Parliament resolution of 6 July 2017 on EU action for sustainability.

13. This multi-stakeholder platform is made up of around 30 civil-society representatives. It was created at the instigation of the Secretariat-General. Meetings are convened either by the Chair, First Vice-President Timmermans, or at the request of a simple majority of members: [https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/international-strategies/global-topics/sustainable-development-goals/sustainable-development-goals-sdgs-multi-stakeholder-platform\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/international-strategies/global-topics/sustainable-development-goals/sustainable-development-goals-sdgs-multi-stakeholder-platform_en)



### 3. FIVE CONCRETE WAYS IN WHICH THE EU COULD LEAD THE WAY IN IMPLEMENTING THE SDGS

#### 3.1 Prepare a Europe2030 strategy

The Europe2020 strategy is set to expire in the near future and the next European Commission and the new European Parliament will have to decide on the political priorities for the years to come. By focusing on broader messages of the 2030 Agenda as well as the 17 SDGs, the new agenda can set a strategic direction for EU policies and decision-making.

The EU has mixed experiences with the implementation of long-term political strategies. The Europe2020 strategy set a political course for the current decade, with a dozen priorities, and with indicators and goals set for employment, research, climate change, education, energy and poverty. It was not very strong on the environment and focused only on EU domestic policies. Moreover, the Europe2020 strategy was sidelined when Jean-Claude Juncker became Commission President and set the Commission's top ten priorities. The EU's Sustainable Development Strategy lacked governance and ownership and had limited impact on EU policy-making.<sup>14</sup> Although the new Global Strategy and European Consensus on Development, which were produced more recently, address the 2030 Agenda and SDGs, they are not very specific about political priorities (particularly the latter).

Building on these experiences, the new Europe2030 strategy should include a clear commitment to the key principles of the 2030 Agenda. Europe2030 should promote all three dimensions of sustainability: economic, social and environmental. In doing so, it should help to reverse negative trends in poverty, inequality, biodiversity loss, and the global mitigation and adaptation measures for fighting climate change (which are still far from sufficient). The Europe2030 strategy should have a strong focus on reducing inequality within and across EU countries, in line with the principle of "leaving no one behind". Moreover, it should focus not just on EU domestic policies, but should also take account of the

spillover effects of EU policies on third countries, for example in relation to reforms of the EU's agriculture or energy policy. Finally, making the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs a key element of the new Europe2030 strategy would speak to the principle of universality that calls on the EU to implement the 2030 Agenda not just in its development policy, but also in its domestic policies.

Close coordination with EU member states and their respective national strategies for implementing the 2030 Agenda would be needed so as to generate Europe-wide added value and make the best use of the division of labour among EU institutions and member states. The implementation of the Europe2030 strategy could be reviewed within the European semester process<sup>15</sup> should the latter be reformed. The review could thus also feed directly into the preparations for the EU's report at the High Level Political Forum.

In order for citizens to regain trust in the EU, the EU should clarify its vision of progress and set out its main goals for the next decade, by constructing a new narrative that responds to these worrying long-term trends and sets the EU on a sustainable pathway. Placing the 2030 Agenda at the core of a debate on the Europe2030 strategy could be a big step in this direction.



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14. German Development Institute (2016). "Towards a "Sustainable Development Union": Why the EU Must Do More to Implement the 2030 Agenda", Briefing Paper.

15. [https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/economic-and-fiscal-policy-coordination/eu-economic-governance-monitoring-prevention-correction/european-semester\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/economic-and-fiscal-policy-coordination/eu-economic-governance-monitoring-prevention-correction/european-semester_en)

### 3.2. Measure how far there is to travel

In order to define a Europe2030 strategy, an analysis needs to be made of where the EU (and the member states) needs to bridge the biggest gaps and rise to the biggest challenges in aligning with the 2030 Agenda and SDGs. The European Commission has taken a few small steps in this direction. The Joint Research Centre has been asked to prepare a distance-to-targets analysis, building on the Eurostat report. It is not yet clear whether this analysis will be published ahead of the reflection paper or at the same time, as an annexe to the reflection paper. Whatever the case, it is crucial that it should feed into the reflection paper and does not remain simply a technical exercise. An early publication of this analysis would allow for a transparent discussion of the gaps identified and what this means in terms of priorities, a discussion that the reflection paper should take up. Building on this analysis, the reflection paper should set out policy options that the new Commission (which is due to take office in 2019) can then decide upon when developing a new Europe2030 strategy.

At the moment, there are a number of methodologies on the table for this distance-to-target analysis (none of which have been made public). In order to take the SDGs seriously, we would like to suggest a few elements that this distance-to-target analysis should contain:

1. First, the preparation of the analysis should be backed by a political process and support from the newly established working party on the 2030 Agenda. The analysis should take into account areas where the EU has already developed policy objectives (such as for energy efficiency, renewable energy and the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions) and assess whether these objectives are ambitious enough to bring the EU "on track", so that it can become a sustainable development actor by 2030.
2. The analysis should also make proposals for new policy objectives, particularly in areas where the EU is very far



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from delivering on the promises it made in signing the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs. The Eurostat report already lists a few areas in which the EU needs to reverse certain trends in order to attain the SDGs. Poverty, gender inequality, loss of biodiversity, and poor performance in education are just a few examples given in the Eurostat report. The distance-to-target analysis should also include an assessment of whether the EU is likely to achieve its external policy objectives.<sup>16</sup>

3. Finally, the analysis should include an assessment of the spillover effects of EU policies. How do EU domestic policies impact third countries and limit their chances of reaching the SDGs? This evidence-based approach of EU performance across a wide range of indicators would help to identify blind spots and *impensés* (unthoughts), on which the EU should redouble its efforts. This would be the first step towards defining a sustainable pathway to 2030.

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16. See for instance ODI's Projecting Progress series for a possible methodology. <https://www.odi.org/publications/9895-projecting-progress-reaching-sdgs-2030>

### 3.3. Make the next EU budget truly sustainable

The EU is in a process of setting a new budget for the period from 2021 to 2027. Integrating the global commitments of the SDGs in the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), as the budget is known, will be an uphill battle. Yet, if the EU is serious about the SDGs and wants to become a global leader in relation to the SDGs, the MFF debate will be a big stumbling block. Moreover, the EU cannot credibly ask third countries to integrate the SDGs in their budgets if the EU decides that it is too complicated to align its own forthcoming budget with the SDGs.

There are several specific ways in which the SDGs can and should be used for the MFF debate:<sup>17</sup>

1. First, integrating the 2030 Agenda and SDGs not just in the EU's development budget, but in the entire MFF, would be a clear signal to its international partners that the EU takes the principle of universality seriously and wishes to position itself as a global leader in terms of sustainability.
2. The EU should be specific in defining which headings of its budget should contribute to which SDGs. The SDGs should already shape the reform of headings and instruments, for instance those related to the Common Agricultural and Cohesion Policies. The next EU research budget could place more emphasis on supporting research into the interlinkages between the three dimensions of sustainability, particularly in those areas in which the EU has the furthest to travel. Overall, the EU should direct funding to the areas where the need is the greatest, namely most off-track targets, but also most off-track countries, regions, districts and/or communities, as the "leave no one behind" commitment would suggest.
3. The EU should further develop and expand existing climate mainstreaming in the current budget 20% of expenditure, on internal and external policies alike, needs to be climate relevant. While the group of green growth ministers<sup>18</sup> has called for the 20% target to be retained,<sup>19</sup> the European Parliament has called for the climate mainstreaming target to be raised to 30%. French President Macron has called for the target to be raised to 30%.<sup>20</sup> However, in order to align with the 2030 Agenda, the target would need not just to be increased, but also to be complemented with targets for other dimensions of sustainability
4. The next EU budget is an opportunity for contributing to the 2030 Agenda by addressing various cross-cutting issues, such as sustainable procurement and the reform of impact assessments.



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17. For the following see also Hackenesch et al. (2018). *EU budget reform: opportunities and challenges for global sustainable development*, DIE Briefing Paper [https://www.die-gdi.de/uploads/media/BP\\_4.2018.pdf](https://www.die-gdi.de/uploads/media/BP_4.2018.pdf)

18. *This is a group of EU environment ministers that promotes ambitious climate and energy policies in the EU.*

19. [http://www.bmub.bund.de/fileadmin/Daten\\_BMU/Download\\_PDF/Europa\\_\\_International/green\\_growth\\_group\\_financing\\_climate\\_action\\_bf.pdf](http://www.bmub.bund.de/fileadmin/Daten_BMU/Download_PDF/Europa__International/green_growth_group_financing_climate_action_bf.pdf)

20. <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+TA+P8-TA-2018-0075+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN&language=EN>

21. See the ETTG 2018 MFF paper for a discussion of the options for reforming heading IV.: <https://ettg.eu/2018/03/14/the-european-unions-next-multiannual-financial-framework-prospects-and-challenges-for-eu-development-cooperation/>

5. Finally, the EU's external relations instruments will need to be reformed to take the 2030 Agenda into account.<sup>21</sup> While the Commission has proposed increasing the current volume of financing for external instruments beyond €100 billion in the next MFF period,<sup>22</sup> the EU's external policies are currently dominated by a debate on security and migration. The SDGs are an opportunity for the EU to continue supporting long-term sustainable development in third countries, instead of subordinating its development policy to migration and security interests.

### 3.4. Foster peer learning and the exchange of best practice among EU institutions and member states

One of the benefits of the SDGs is their universality. Given that there is no such a thing as a set recipe for sustainable development, peer learning and the exchange of best practice will be essential for incentivising action and ownership of the Agenda.

In this regard, the UN Secretary-General, in preparing the 2016 HLPF meeting, suggested encouraging "all countries to champion inclusive and rigorous approaches to high-level political forum reviews, including, where appropriate, conducting peer reviews and reviews among groups of countries facing similar situations, taking into account existing arrangements and practices".<sup>23</sup> In addition, the Secretary-General stressed how peer learning and peer reviews are key to boosting regional cooperation and partnerships.

In response to this call for cooperation, Colombia and Finland presented their models for mutual learning at the 2016 HLPF

meeting. These focused on building institutional capacity, creating mechanisms for engaging the private sector and civil society, and integrating SDGs into national plans and public policies. Since the G20 summit in 2017, several countries have undertaken a voluntary peer learning process for implementing the 2030 Agenda .

The EU should engage more closely with member states on their respective SDG implementation strategies, not least given that competences and responsibilities in many areas are divided among EU institutions and member states. Moreover, the EU should promote independent fora supporting SDG policy-makers. Independent learning platforms have played a major role in the run-up to the Paris Agreement on Climate Change by building stronger capacities within countries to implement climate policies and by building more trust among countries to negotiate a global deal.<sup>24</sup>

There has been criticism that, at the time of the MDGs, there was no adequate monitoring of the flow of public financial resources invested in the global goals.<sup>25</sup> The lack of national ownership and transparency sometimes made it difficult both to hold governments to account for their contribution to the global agenda and to establish clear connections between spending and outcomes. In this sense, there is a vital need to learn from both mistakes and best practice.<sup>26</sup> Italy has started to include sustainable development indicators in its annual "BES report on well-being"<sup>27</sup> and France has just decided to align its budget performance indicators with the SDGs and could make use of insights and best practices from other countries.<sup>28</sup> These examples could inspire the EU and its member states to make their budgets more readable, coherent and aligned with sustainable development.

22. European Commission (2018). « A new, modern Multiannual Financial Framework for a European Union that delivers efficiently on its priorities post-2020" COM(2018) 98 final.

23. "Critical milestones towards coherent, efficient and inclusive follow-up and review at the global level," Report of the Secretary-General, 15 January 2016.

24. See, for instance, the "Learning Platform on Climate Policies", IDDRI Project 2011, which evolved into the Deep Decarbonization Pathway Project (DDPP) in close collaboration with the French climate ambassador at COP21.

25. Blog Post by Claire Schouten on International Budget Platform, 23 September 2015. <https://www.internationalbudget.org/2015/09/open-budgets-for-the-sustainable-development-goals/>

26. Fourteen governments have announced that they already – or will in the near future – use the SDGs and their set of indicators in their budgetary processes. These countries are Norway, Denmark, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Indonesia, Mexico, Colombia, Afghanistan, Costa Rica, Thailand, Nepal, Jordan, Uganda and Belize. It is worth noting here that very different methods have been chosen for integrating the SDGs into budgetary processes. For example, whereas every Norwegian ministry must attach to its budget proposal a progress report on the SDGs for which it is responsible, the government of Belize plans to measure the impact of its budget on the SDGs.

27. <http://www.istat.it/en/archive/210255>

28. Relevé de Conclusion. Comité interministériel de la Coopération internationale et du Développement (CICID), 8 February 2018.



### 3.5. Empower local actors in Europe and third countries

While the SDGs are global, their achievement will depend on the ability of cities and regions to promote integrated, inclusive and sustainable territorial development. All the SDGs, in fact, have targets directly related to the responsibilities of local and regional governments, particularly to their role in delivering basic services. As the UN Secretary-General stated in his Synthesis Report, "many of the investments to achieve the sustainable development goals will take place at the subnational level and be led by local authorities."<sup>29</sup>

If cities and regions are ideally positioned to translate the sustainable development agenda into local and regional policies, the term "localising the SDGs" must not, however, be confused with the local implementation of programmes and strategies fixed at a higher level. This approach could ultimately feed the misconception of the SDGs being an external imposition, hampering local participation and limiting the richness and vision of local initiatives. Localisation relates both to how the national goals derived from global agendas can provide a framework for local development, and to how local needs and actions shape national priorities.



If localisation is successful, the 2030 Agenda will become "the DNA of what governments (including local governments) are doing"



Moreover, the SDGs come into effect in a world that is increasingly urban. Over half the global population now live in cities and this is projected to grow to two-thirds by 2050.



If localisation is successful, the 2030 Agenda will become "the DNA of what governments (including local governments) are doing".<sup>30</sup> Moreover, the SDGs come into effect in a world that is increasingly urban. Over half the global population now live in cities and this is projected to grow to two-thirds by 2050. Concentrating sustainable development efforts in cities and empowering local governments are therefore strategic choices for the achievement of the global goals and agendas. With just a few exceptions, however, SDGs have only just begun to be integrated into local plans and agendas. Among the 63 countries that submitted a Voluntary National Review on the implementation of the SDGs to the HPLF in 2016 and 2017, SDG awareness among local and regional authorities is high in the EU (in particular in Germany, Scandinavia and the Netherlands) and Latin America (with Brazil and Colombia standing out).<sup>31</sup> Ultimately, despite some encouraging results, many local and regional authorities still see the SDGs as something far-off and irrelevant to their own agendas.

In other words, the EU has an important role to play in promoting outreach to, and mobilising, local and regional

29. Synthesis Report of the Secretary-General. On the Post-2015 Agenda. New York. December 2014.  
30. ADB/. DeLoG 2017: <http://k-learn.adb.org/system/files/materials/2016/09/201609-event-report.pdf>  
31. National and sub-national governments on the way towards the localization of the SDGs, UCLG, July 2017

authorities around SDGs. In particular, the EU could play a decisive role in supporting the localisation of SDGs by:

- making strategic use of EU delegations to engage in a dialogue with local stakeholders around SDG implementation, thus strengthening awareness, policy commitment and ownership;
- supporting the creation of an appropriate institutional framework that allows for different forms of cooperative governance involving both different levels of government (i.e. multi-level governance) and other stakeholders (i.e. multi-stakeholder governance);
- integrating the urban dimension within the EU's external action in order to address several interlinked SDGs and facilitating local governments' access to long-term finance;
- fostering capacity-building among local authorities in the EU and abroad by means of knowledge-sharing, the exchange of experiences, and mutual learning on sustainable local and urban development;
- supporting a thematic analysis of progress in the localisation of all SDGs (e.g. urban poverty, slum rehabilitation, nutrition and territorial development).

#### 4. CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

The implementation of the SDGs in the EU has been slow. This might be because the SDGs are often misunderstood, and we hope that this paper will help to clarify the opportunities they offer the EU.

The EU's values (many of which are embedded in the SDGs) are not to be taken for granted, either in the international arena, or less and less across EU countries, especially if we look at recent elections and the Commission's unprecedented decision to activate Article 7(1) of the Treaty on European



We will create momentum around the production of a reflection paper entitled “Towards a sustainable Europe by 2030”



Union. The SDGs may not be perfect, but they are a tool for all those who wish to uphold the EU's values at the core of the European project. According to the EU's Global Strategy, this is the Commission's intent: “Without global norms and the means to enforce them, peace and security, prosperity and democracy – our vital interests – are at risk. Guided by the values on which it is founded, the EU is committed to a global order based on international law, including the principles of the UN Charter, which ensure peace, human rights, sustainable development and lasting access to the global commons. This commitment translates into an aspiration to transform rather than simply preserve the existing system.”<sup>32</sup>

In this paper, we have suggested some practical ways of translating this intention and the EU's overall support for the SDGs through the UN negotiating process into concrete action. The ETG will continue to work on the implementation of the SDGs in and by Europe, with a special focus on the link between the internal and external dimensions. We will propose further food for thought throughout the year in the form of blogs, briefs and events, so as to create momentum around the production of a reflection paper entitled “Towards a sustainable Europe by 2030”. This reflection paper and the distance-to-target analysis are small windows of opportunity for steering the EU towards transformation.

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32. Shared vision, common action, a stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy. June 2016.



However, these windows can be opened wider if the five forms of action we propose in this paper are put into effect.

Again, the SDGs are not just technical; they are a highly political agenda. Hence, if they feed into the ongoing discussions on the European budget and prepare the way for an overarching Europe2030 strategy, they could become a tool for transformation after all.

In terms of multilateralism, the SDGs are a big window of opportunity that the EU should try and make use of in order to learn from and support other regions and countries in defining and investing in their sustainable pathways towards 2030. Global leadership in implementing the SDGs is not just an opportunity to sustain Europe's diplomatic profile for global development, environmental protection and climate change mitigation, but an opportunity to lead progress on the most pressing European debates, and to empower local actors, many of whom feel left behind. There is a real space for the EU to seize this opportunity to exercise global leadership, and there is an opportunity for the EU to work with new partners in providing this global leadership.

The EU will present its progress on the SDGs at the High Level Political Forum in 2019 that will be held under the auspices of the UN General Assembly. If the European Commission wants to seize any of the windows of opportunity depicted here before then, it will have to hurry up. ■



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