Understanding the Sustainable Development Goals

SUMMARY
In 2015, the United Nations adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), to be attained by 2030, as a follow-up to the Millennium Development Goals (2000-2015) and the Rio+20 Summit (2012). Unlike their predecessors, the SDGs commit both developed and developing countries, and embrace the economic, environmental and social aspects of development. The SDGs and the broader 2030 Agenda for sustainable development of which they form the core, are based on the findings that human activities have triggered dramatic changes in the conditions on Earth (climate change and biodiversity loss), which in turn have contributed to the deterioration of human well-being. To reverse the trend, there is an urgent need to simultaneously address the multiple causes and consequences of environmental depletion and social inequalities, by developing synergies and managing trade-offs between the SDGs.

Challenges in pursuing the SDGs include the fact that countries do not necessarily have an equal start and, even more importantly, that regardless of their stage of development, they can no longer afford to apply the current development model, where production and consumption happen at the expense of natural resources. According to many observers, such a model creates unsolvable tensions between SDGs, notably between the safeguarding of natural resources and the aspirations for improved well-being. The structural transformation that would bring about the desired change requires a joint effort by the international community, but equally so by natural and public or private legal persons, to urgently speed up the process. The European Union has been a leader in drafting and implementing the SDGs; however, the European Parliament considers the EU could go further in devising a common SDG strategy.

This briefing updates an EPRS ‘At a glance’ note published in November 2017.
A universal and comprehensive agenda

In September 2015, the 193 UN member states unanimously adopted the [2030 Agenda for sustainable development](https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/2030Agenda), a global commitment to navigate humanity towards greater well-being and to forge a new conflict-free relationship between sustainability and development. This global agenda unfolded in a novel institutional setting with a high level of participation. Its decade-long elaboration process involved various stakeholders: NGOs, private-sector entities and local authorities in various frameworks, including global and national consultations. These consultations (the [Global Conversation](https://www.globalconversation.org/)), included 88 national and 11 thematic dialogues and an online worldwide survey, enabling more than a million people to share their views on the new global development agenda. The resulting charter sets interconnected and indivisible goals, the [17 sustainable development goals](https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdggoals) (SDGs), each with a series of specific targets (169 in total), to be attained by 2030.

The predecessors of the SDGs, the eight [Millennium Development Goals](https://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/) (2000-2015), focused primarily on health and poverty issues in developing countries. The 17 SDGs have a universal dimension and a broader scope: they recognise environmental sustainability as an essential and necessary dimension of human development, alongside the social, economic and political dimensions. Far beyond the traditional donor-recipient approach, their successful implementation requires the active involvement of international, national and subnational stakeholders, citizens and the private sector. National governments carry the primary, formal responsibility for implementing the SDGs (even though the goals are voluntary in nature), and they have therefore committed to reporting systematically on progress towards achieving them. The role of the UN, and more specifically of its Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and General Assembly (UNGA), is to assist countries in this process, in particular by providing guidelines and, if needed, support. Every year, UN member states and other stakeholders exchange feedback on their successes, challenges and lessons learned during a high-level political forum on sustainable development (HLPF), held under the auspices of the ECOSOC. At the end of a four-year cycle, in a special HLPF under the auspices of the UNGA, also referred to as an 'SDG summit', world leaders set priority actions with a

The concept of sustainable development gained ground in the 1980s. The Brundtland Commission, appointed in 1983 by the UN Secretary-General, defines it in its seminal report (1987) as 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'. This report clearly highlights the interconnectedness of poverty, inequality and environmental degradation. Many SDG targets can be traced back to the recommendations drafted in this report. Several analysts however argue that development in the sense of economic growth cannot be sustainable, as it inevitably depletes natural resources.
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view to accelerating the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The first SDG summit took place in New York, on 24 and 25 September 2019.

Policy coherence calls for a paradigm shift

The SDGs have a universal, integrated and inter-related nature and are set against the backdrop of an increasingly interconnected world; policy and institutional coherence is therefore a key prerequisite for achieving them. Many countries have already established coordination structures at national level. The UN is also reforming its structures and processes to address SDG implementation in a more integrated way. The principle of policy coherence for development is laid down in SDG 17, aimed at strengthening the means for implementation and revitalising the global partnerships for sustainable development. The ‘leaving no one behind’ principle at the heart of the 2030 Agenda also applies to partnerships, which now go beyond traditional stakeholders and involve new players such as local governments and minority groups.

Some argue that the dominant economic model based on economic growth and consumption makes some SDGs incompatible with others. For example, an analysis of correlations confirms that, when poverty reduction is mainly due to an increase in per capita GDP, it has a negative effect on the target of reducing CO2 emissions. On the other hand, it finds that investing in human well-being (e.g. through programmes aimed at reducing child mortality or reinforcing education) and the environment (e.g. by investing in renewable energy production to reduce CO2 emissions) does not have adverse effects on other goals. While individual countries cannot avoid making trade-offs to achieve progress towards some SDGs in the short term, reaching all SDGs at global level requires a change of mindset in order to achieve human well-being with means other than GDP growth and environmental depletion. This is also highlighted in the first quadrennial Global sustainable development report (2019), drafted by an independent group of scientists, which warns that progress is behind schedule for most SDG targets and calls for a radical structural change to ‘address those aspects of economic growth and production that perpetuate deprivations, generate socioeconomic and gender inequalities, deplete the global environmental commons and threaten irreversible damage’. According to the report, science can help in this, by thoroughly analysing the ‘systemic interconnections’ between SDG targets.

EU contribution

Having played an active role in elaborating the SDGs, the EU and its Members States have also committed to implementing them in their domestic and foreign policies. In November 2016, the European Commission presented its SDGs package adopted in June 2017: a communication describing the next steps for a sustainable European future, a communication on the future relations with the Africa, Caribbean and Pacific group of countries (ACP-EU ‘post-Cotonou’), and a proposal for a new European consensus on development. The key implementing actions are:

- launching a high-level multi-stakeholder platform to support the exchange of best practices on implementation;
- regularly reporting on the EU’s progress: since 2016, Eurostat publishes an annual report on progress towards the SDGs within the EU. Since 2017, this report is based on a specific EU SDG indicator set. As concerns development cooperation policies, the first joint EU-Member States report on EU action supporting the SDGs across the world was published in May 2019, and is the first of a quadrennial series;
- opening the debate on the post-2020 perspective: In January 2019, the Commission published a reflection paper on ‘Towards a sustainable Europe by 2030’, identifying actions that present the greatest opportunities for achieving the SDGs. These actions are focused on areas such as the circular economy, sustainable agriculture and clean energy, and also include investing in education, work, health, social inclusion, gender equality and rural development. The Commission proposes three scenarios for following up on the SDGs:
1. adopting an EU SDG strategy (the EU and its Member States would commit to time-bound targets and coordinate their actions to reach them); or
2. mainstreaming the SDGs in all relevant EU policies (‘but not forcing EU Member States to achieve the EU’s collective engagement’); or
3. putting an enhanced focus on external action while consolidating the current EU SDG policy (without a binding SDG strategy).

**making the SDGs a guiding principle for all EU policies:** The new Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, has committed to this objective. The new Commissioners now have the mandate to ensure the delivery of the SDGs both in their own policy areas and as a college. This is well reflected in most Commissioners’ commitments made at their hearings before the Parliament, even though not all of them explicitly refer to the SDGs. In her political guidelines, von der Leyen also commits to integrating the SDGs in the European Semester, the framework for the coordination of Member States’ economic policies.

The Parliament welcomed the Commission's 2019 reflection paper in a resolution of 14 March 2019, and indicated its preference for scenario 1 (EU and Member States' commitment to an overarching EU SDG strategy). It however regretted that the Commission did not elaborate an integrated SDG framework during the 2014-2019 term. The resolution urged the Commission to draw up a strategy ‘fully integrating the SDGs in EU policies and governance, providing guidance for both the EU institutions and the Member States’. This implies adapting the EU budget to the SDG priorities, as already requested in a resolution of 6 July 2017 on EU action for sustainability.

The Parliament also stressed the need to ensure effective EU external policy support for implementing the SDGs in developing countries. In its resolution of 14 February 2017 on the revision of the European consensus on development, it reiterated its long-term position that the fight against poverty and hunger should remain a primary goal, and insisted that official development aid (ODA) should remain the backbone of EU development policy. Furthermore, it once again called upon the Member States to fulfil their commitment to dedicating 0.7% of their GNI to ODA. Regarding increased private-sector participation in development cooperation, in particular via the new European external investment plan, the Parliament voiced its support for enhancing public-private partnerships to leverage additional resources for development, but under strict aid effectiveness, environmental and social conditions.

**MAIN REFERENCES**
European Commission, Sustainable Development Goals, web page.

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