

# Reporting on SDG implementation

## UN mechanisms and the EU approach

### SUMMARY

Adopted in 2015 by the United Nations (UN), the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development – 'the blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all' – clearly links the 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) it introduced to a series of targets to be reached by 2030. The 2030 Agenda includes a detailed mechanism to monitor progress with regard to these targets. At the core of this mechanism are a number of quantified indicators for each target that are regularly revised by the UN and other international agencies. These agencies and the EU provide support to national statistical services across the world in collecting data for the SDG indicators in order to gather reliable and comparable datasets. These data feed the voluntary national reports that countries prepare to exchange good practices and advice on tackling the challenges they encounter in implementing their SDG strategies. High-level forums take stock of both progress and weaknesses in implementation, so as to ensure that everybody is on track in pursuing the SDGs.

The EU has long experience in collecting consistent data from its Member States. The European Union Statistical Office (Eurostat) has created a set of sustainable development indicators that provide a good overview of progress within the EU; yet, according to analysts, these indicators do not give a clear picture of the risks of not attaining some goals by 2030. EU development cooperation services have devised a framework of indicators to assess how EU support contributes to other countries' implementation of the SDGs. However, the European Parliament and other stakeholders regret that the spill-over effect of EU policies on third countries remains a blind spot in the evaluation of the EU's contribution to the SDGs.

Although technical in nature, SDG indicators and data also have a political dimension, as they clearly measure countries' and other stakeholders' achievements against their own commitments.



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# Agenda 2030: A multi-layered follow-up process

## A country-led, UN-coordinated approach

The UN General Assembly resolution of 25 September 2015 ('Transforming our world: the [2030 Agenda](#) for Sustainable Development') emphasises the interlinkages among previous international commitments<sup>1</sup> and highlights that sustainable development can only be achieved through a [universal and comprehensive effort](#). The 2030 Agenda is the result of a long and comprehensive process that involved bodies and member states of the UN, but also local authorities, private businesses and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). While its implementation is entrusted primarily to national governments, it is only through the participation of a broad range of stakeholders that it could succeed. The diversity of players and their incongruent priorities and needs prevent a one-size-fits-all approach; consequently, the 2030 Agenda clearly indicates that national governments have ownership of their development strategies and that reporting on progress is a voluntary undertaking ('Our Governments have the primary responsibility for follow-up and review').

*Ever since the negotiations on the 2030 Agenda, there were those who wanted more rigorous and regulated follow-up and review and those who believed that it was for the national level to deal with it, taking into account particular circumstances of each country. Thus, a middle ground should be found, and a challenge is to see how to support countries in their follow-up and review and yet do it in such a way that all countries find it useful and do not see it as interfering in their internal affairs.*

Expert Group Meeting on [Lessons learned from the first cycle of the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development](#), 6-7 May 2019.

Placed at the core of Agenda 2030, the sustainable development goals (SDGs) set specific, often quantified targets, to be achieved by 2030. SDG reporting draws on the [development effectiveness](#) principles of **transparency and accountability**, which require sound results frameworks. The [architecture of SDG monitoring](#), as [endorsed](#) by the UN General Assembly, consists of a mix of new and existing channels and tools. It is flexible enough to allow individual countries (as well as any public or private organisations) to decide how and on what targets they would report, while also providing for specific forums to review and compare results in an efficient manner. Countries are invited to draft national reviews of their achievements, notably based on the SDG indicators designed and collected by international agencies; an annual high-level forum enables states and other stakeholders to exchange best practices and to review progress, of which the UN General Assembly takes stock every four years in order to propose further action.

Developing relevant SDG indicators, well-grounded collection methods and rich datasets is no longer only the concern of pundits. Yet, regardless of the fact that accountability for the SDGs has been assumed directly by countries in an unprecedented way, the UN Secretary-General has warned that '[progress toward sustainable development is seriously off-track](#)', an opinion [grounded on SDG data](#).

## Countries' voluntary national reviews

The 2030 Agenda incorporates a pledge by UN member states to review their progress towards the SDGs through 'country-led and country-driven' national reviews. Between 2016 and 2019, 142 countries submitted their [national reviews](#), some of them for the second or third time. Considering that these reviews are voluntary and without a specified frequency, this is a good indication of the interest aroused in the 2030 Agenda.

[Guidelines](#) are provided by the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA); however, due to the country-ownership principle, the drafting process and content of the voluntary national reviews (VNRs) differ from one country to another. **In the EU** alone, a 2019 [study for the European Parliament](#) found that the operationalisation of the SDGs (that is, aspects such as choice of strategy, political leadership and delegation of responsibilities, participation of stakeholders, specific targets and measures, and link to the national budget) differs significantly between Member States. The reporting level differs as well: four Member States had no clear monitoring framework, six reported progress on a regular basis but had not updated their indicators since the adoption of the SDGs, 10 had regular progress reports and updated indicators, and seven had quantified and time-bound targets. All Member States have presented a VNR, except Austria (expected for 2020), Bulgaria (expected for 2020) and Lithuania (no information in the VNR database).

### How useful are voluntary national reviews?

The Committee for Development Policy (CDP), an advisory expert group for the UN Economic and Social Committee (ECOSOC), [assessed](#) the content of the 43 VNRs presented in 2017. It found that most countries mentioned the objective of 'leaving no one behind', but:

- for the majority of them, this objective was primarily linked to social protection action plans;
- only one third had translated this principle into comprehensive strategies, and only five countries had linked this objective with macro-economic strategies.

According to the CDP's research, targeted interventions risk being ineffective if the 'leaving no one behind' principle is not at the core of integrated policies. In addition, **the groups targeted as not to be left behind vary among VNRs:**

- women, persons with disabilities, children and youth are frequently cited;
- indigenous people, ethnic minorities, refugees or migrants, LGBT people and people with mental health issues are rarely cited.

Few countries mention the participation of potentially left-behind groups in the elaboration of policies or in the taking of related decisions.

The CDP also highlights that limited resources necessarily imply trade-offs between policy priorities; however, only half of the countries explicitly mention such trade-offs and the rationale behind them, and even fewer refer to the mechanisms they use to address such trade-offs.

The assessment nevertheless notes that, collectively taken, the set of VNRs provides **useful case studies** of **lessons learned** and examples of mechanisms to address trade-offs, which could trigger a fruitful discussion and peer-learning between countries.

## Data collection: The role of international agencies

### 17 goals, 169 targets, 232 indicators

National statistical offices are tasked with gathering data at country level. However, for the sake of comparison at international level, data production and data dissemination have to be standardised as much as possible. In order to measure progress towards the **goals**, each of them is subdivided into specific **targets**. Consequently, there are 169 targets to be reached in total for the 17 SDGs. Progress towards a target is measured with the help of (recommended but non-obligatory) **indicators**, selected by the Inter-agency and Expert Group on SDG Indicators ([IAEG-SDGs](#)), composed of UN organisations' and UN member states' representatives.<sup>2</sup> The [Sustainable Development Solutions Network](#) (SDSN), a scientific network set up under the auspices of the UN Secretary-General, provided [technical advice](#), based on input from the UN and other international bodies, statistical offices, civil society organisations, academia and businesses. The work of the SDSN and the IAEG-SDGs led to the adoption of a '[global indicator framework](#)' in July 2017. As some

targets are measured by more than one indicator, this framework currently comprises [232 indicators](#); besides, most indicators are disaggregated by age, sex, level of education or other criteria.<sup>3</sup>

Several SDG indicators, such as the proportion of population below the international poverty line, had been in use even before the SDGs were drafted and are well standardised; certain targets, however, required that new indicators be designed and their implementation tested. The IAEG-SDGs classifies SDG indicators into three tiers, depending on their standardisation and availability. This classification is continuously evolving to reflect progress made in the formulation of indicators and the collection of data (see Table 1).

Table 1: Tier classification for Global SDG indicators

Tier 1	Tier 2	Tier 3
Indicator is conceptually clear, has an internationally established methodology and standards are available		No internationally established methodology or standards are yet available for the indicator, but methodology/standards are being (or will be) developed or tested
Data are regularly produced by countries for at least 50 per cent of countries and of the population in every region where the indicator is relevant	Data are not regularly produced by countries	
104 indicators*	89 indicators*	33 indicators*
(among which: 1.1.1 Proportion of population below the international poverty line; 3.1.1 Maternal mortality ratio; 9.b.1 Proportion of medium and high-tech industry value added in total value added)	(among which: 6.3.1 Proportion of wastewater safely treated; 8.9.1 Tourism direct GDP as a proportion of total GDP and in growth rate; 14.a.1 Proportion of total research budget allocated to research in the field of marine technology)	(among which: 8.9.2 Proportion of jobs in sustainable tourism industries out of total tourism jobs; 11.7.2 Proportion of persons victim of physical or sexual harassment; 16.4.1 Total value of inward and outward illicit financial flows)

\* Number of indicators as of 26 September 2019; in addition, six indicators belong to more than one tier, because they have components with different levels of standardisation or availability. Source: IAEG-SDGs, [Tier classification for global SDG indicators](#) (accessed 29 October 2019).

Under the 2030 Agenda, several UN or international agencies also have the task to [compile available national data](#). **Each agency is 'custodian' of a number of indicators** (see Table 2): as the granularity of custody is at the level of indicators, several custodian agencies may be in charge of the same goal or of the same target.<sup>4</sup> In addition to the indicators they are custodian of, the agencies also contribute to the work on other indicators,<sup>5</sup> and some indicators may be used under different goals,<sup>6</sup> which reflects the interlinkage of all SDGs and avoids duplication of surveys.

## Developing statistical capacity

The tier classification also takes into account the availability of data globally, as not all countries have the statistical capacity to collect all of the data needed to fill in the SDG indicators. A [pilot assessment](#) revealed that in some countries up to two thirds of the SDG indicators would be left blank, failing data availability or the possibility to retrieve them. For some goals, the lack of data globally can, still in 2019, hinder the assessment of progress: this is the case for [68% of environment-](#)

[related indicators](#); and for [more than 60%](#) of indicators related to children's learning, child-protection, and child-poverty.

**Improving countries' statistical capacity is therefore indispensable to correctly track progress** towards the SDGs: accordingly, UN or international agencies are endeavouring to [streamline the SDGs in their action plans](#), and in particular to help national statistical offices collect data by providing them with 'normative, analytical, technical assistance or capacity building ... in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda'.

Table 2: Examples of indicators and custodian agencies

UN or international bodies	Examples of indicators of which they are custodians:
FAO	<i>Most indicators for Goal 2, End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture</i>
International Labour Organization	<i>Indicators on working conditions: 5.5.2 [= Goal 5, Target 5, Indicator 2] Proportion of women in managerial positions; 8.2.1 Annual growth rate of real GDP per employed person; etc.</i>
OECD	<i>Indicators on official development assistance<sup>7</sup> and other official flows to various economic sectors: 2.a.2 Agriculture; 3.b.2 Medical research and basic health sectors; etc.</i>
UN-Habitat	<i>Indicators on living conditions and local governance: 1.4.1 Proportion of population living in households with access to basic services; 11.1.1 Proportion of urban population living in inadequate housing; 11.3.2 Proportion of cities with a direct participation structure of civil society in urban planning and management; etc.</i>
Unesco	<i>Most indicators for Goal 4. Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all; Indicators on including SDGs in education and research: 9.5.1 Research and development expenditure as a proportion of GDP; 12.8.1 Extent to which i) global citizenship education and ii) education for sustainable development ... are mainstreamed in ... education policies; etc.</i>
Unicef	<i>Indicators on child health and child socioeconomic conditions: 3.2.1 Under-5 mortality rate; 4.2.1 Proportion of children under 5 years of age who are developmentally on track in health, learning and psychosocial wellbeing, by sex; 16.2.3 Proportion of young women and men aged 18-29 years who experienced sexual violence by age 18; etc.</i>
UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)	<i>Indicators on crime or perceived safety: 11.7.2 Proportion of persons victim of physical or sexual harassment; 15.7.1 (with the CITES secretariat) Proportion of traded wildlife that was poached or illicitly trafficked; 16.1.4 Proportion of population that feel safe walking alone around the area they live; etc.</i>
World Bank	<i>Macro- and microeconomic indicators: 1.1.1/1.1.2 Proportion of population below the international/national poverty line; 8.10.2 Proportion of adults (15 years and older) with an account at a bank or another financial institution; 16.6.1 Primary government expenditures as a proportion of original approved budget, by sector (or by budget codes or similar); etc.</i>
WTO, International Trade Centre and UNCTAD	<i>Trade-related indicators: 17.10.1 Worldwide weighted tariff-average; 17.11.1 Developing countries' and least developed countries' share of global exports; 17.12.1 Average tariffs faced by developing countries, least developed countries and small island developing states; etc.</i>

Source: IAEG-SDGs, [Tier classification for global SDG indicators](#) (accessed on 29 October 2019).

Due to the [diversity of indicators](#), a large range of [data collection methods](#) is used:

- assessment of legislation (marriage age, protection of minorities, etc.);
- administrative records (tax records, immigration records, work permits, business registers, etc.);
- public or private registers (business registers, bank accounts, access to electricity, trade or passenger freight, etc.);
- household surveys and interviews;
- direct observation and research, satellite observation (climate change, natural disasters, fishing vessels' activity, etc.);
- automatically generated data ('big data': financial transactions, GPS data, etc.).

**'Data revolution'**. The IAEG-SDGs expert group regularly discusses the [methodological aspects](#) of data collection and validation methods. It reflects on [new methods to monitor data](#), to make it possible for most indicators to be filled in by a majority of countries. Solutions to the issues that have arisen in relation to data collection for the SDG indicators are elaborated by working groups within the IAEG-SDGs on three specific issues: [geo-spatial information](#), [inter-linkages of SDG statistics](#), and [statistical data and metadata exchange \(SDMX\)](#).

All available data for SDG indicators are transmitted to the [Global SDG Indicators Database](#) and can be consulted online. Despite some possible filtering, compiled data are presented as large tables that are difficult for non-specialists to read. However, the fact that SDG data are [open](#) has made it possible for numerous NGOs, universities and think-tanks to produce their own data visualisations and interpretations. These are often based on a weighing of selected SDG indicators, taking into account their supposed relevance to monitoring the achievement of the SDGs, as well as [possible conflicts](#) between targets (such as poverty reduction and reducing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions when the former is mainly due to an increase of per capita GDP).<sup>8</sup>

## A global review of achievements

The primary objective of the progress reviews at national level is to allow comparisons and the sharing of best practices between countries. A key event in the process is the High-level political forum on sustainable development ([HLPF](#)). Although it was [set up](#) after the 2012 UN conference on sustainable development (Rio+20) and not as part of Agenda 2030, the HLPF has since 2016 been tasked with the [follow-up and review of the SDGs](#), and with providing recommendations to bolster SDG implementation. The HLPF is a two-tier process spreading over a four-year cycle: the annual HLPF under the auspices of the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), and the quadrennial HLPF under the auspices of the UN General Assembly.

## The annual High-level political forum on sustainable development

Each year, under the auspices of the UN ECOSOC, the HLPF gathers ministers from all UN member states to examine the achievements and shortcomings with regard to a specific theme and to review the implementation of a set of goals, so that at the end of a four-year cycle all SDGs should have been reviewed.<sup>9</sup> At the end of the HLPF, the UN member states vote upon a ministerial declaration highlighting the main outcomes and commitments.

### EU indicators

The European Statistical Office (Eurostat) has developed its own set of **sustainable development indicators**, the 100 [EU SDG indicators](#), which are reviewed annually. According to an [analysis commissioned by the European Economic and Social Committee](#), most of these indicators are of a higher standard than the IAEG-SDGs recommendations, notably because most of them **benefit from the long-established compilation** of Member States' data (including household surveys such as the Eurobarometer) or draw on **pioneering research** by the EU in-house Joint Research Centre (e.g. to estimate soil erosion or fish stocks evolution). Despite the soundness of data, the analysis notes that the **Eurostat report on SDGs only focuses on short-term trends** rather than on the actual length of time to the 2030 targets and therefore lacks an evaluation of the rate of progress actually needed. Only 16 of the 100 EU SDG indicators are time-bound, and mainly with regard to the EU 2020 strategy targets rather than the ones under the 2030 Agenda. The analysis however highlights that setting such targets is not in the ambit of Eurostat but of policymakers.

[Thematic reviews](#) organised by UN entities and the annual UN Secretary General report for UN ECOSOC on [progress towards the SDGs](#) (latest version: [E/2019/68](#), 8 May 2019) help prepare the discussion on the selected SDGs. VNRs and regional reviews also feed the debate. Other stakeholders, such as local authorities, business and trade unions, NGOs and civil society organisations – in particular those representing [major groups](#) – such as women, children and youth, indigenous peoples, and farmers – also provide input through a wide range of [discussion or position papers](#). The main conclusions of these contributions are compiled by the UN ECOSOC ([E/HLPF/2019/2](#) for 2019).

### How useful are the high-level political forums?

In May 2019, the European Commission and the UN DESA convened representatives from UN member states, UN bodies, academic research and civil society to [take stock of the first cycle of the HLPF under the auspices of the UN ECOSOC](#) (2016-2019). Participants noted that

- the HLPF has **contributed to improving the reports on SDG implementation**, both in terms of data quality and coverage of the SDGs;
- the drafting process of the VNRs has strengthened the **coordination mechanisms** between stakeholders at national level.

Experts called on the HLPF organisers to

- focus more on **interlinkages between the SDGs** and on cross-cutting and cross-regional issues;
- give a stronger focus on how **the 'leave no one behind' principle and human rights** are integrated in the pursuit of the SDGs.

They regretted that the HLPF ministerial declarations ([2016](#), [2017](#), [2018](#)), being agreed in advance, did not reflect all of the stakeholders' positions put forward during the HLPF. According to the discussants, these declarations lack ambition and **fail to provide strong leadership** and guidance on the actions that need to be taken.

## The quadrennial SDG summit

The HLPF taking place every four years under the auspices of the UN General Assembly is often referred to as the 'SDG summit'. The first [SDG summit](#) took place on 24-25 September 2019 in New York.

The SDG summit is informed by a quadrennial **Global Sustainable Development Report (GSDR)**, drafted by an independent group of scientists. This report consists of a literature review of reports by international organisations and academic researchers, complemented by input from the scientific community, policy-makers and civil society. The [first GSDR](#) was published before the 2019 SDG summit and its purpose was to serve as a call for action based on scientific evidence. The GSDR warned that no country is on track to achieve all of the SDGs, and that [negative trends](#) – notably, rising inequalities, climate change, biodiversity loss and increasing waste production – could irreversibly compromise human life conditions.

During the SDG summit, Heads of States or Government participate in [dialogues on cross-cutting themes](#), a [format](#) preferred to individual speeches, as it encourages leaders to address global weaknesses in implementation rather than praise individual successes. The outcome of the SDG summit is the adoption by the UN General Assembly of a political declaration that is [negotiated in advance](#). In the [2019 political declaration](#), world leaders acknowledged the gaps in progress towards the SDGs. However, they showed various levels of commitment to [accelerating action](#) in favour of drastic policy changes.

## Tracking the EU's impact on SDG implementation in third countries

### A commitment under the new consensus on development

In addition to reporting on progress within its Member States (see box on EU indicators above), the EU contributes to helping third countries deliver on the SDGs, notably through its international development cooperation policy. Measuring this contribution with precision is a difficult task. The EU is committed to the principle of recipients' ownership of their development priorities, which includes how they wish to report on these priorities. Therefore, the EU's reporting on the impact it makes depends on the actual data provided by the host country ([mutual accountability](#)). In addition, the EU cannot claim to be the only contributor to the success of specific programmes or projects, as other public or private donors, lenders or investors often provide financial support to EU-funded projects or programmes. The EU can also contribute in the less-targeted form of budget support to third countries. Besides, the EU does not always act as a single entity on the ground, as EU institutions and Member states can co-operate on the same programmes – ideally in the framework of [policy coherence for development](#). Despite this multi-pronged involvement, under the [new European consensus on development](#), agreed in 2017, the EU and its Member States committed to collectively report every four years on their support to implementing the SDGs in developing countries. The first joint report of this kind, '[Supporting the Sustainable Development Goals across the world](#)', was published in July 2019. It provides a review of progress, with examples of EU and Member States' actions set against the backdrop of global trends and the EU policy approach to each goal. It furthermore gives numbers to illustrate the EU's impact, for instance, with regard to SDG3:

*During the 2013-2017 period, EU-funded interventions supported more than 19 million births attended by skilled health personnel, provided full immunisation for 13 million children, enabled more than 57 million women to use contraception, provided 11 million people with access to treatment for HIV and distributed 600 million insecticide-treated bed nets.*

This first report on EU support to achieving the SDGs abroad actually builds on a momentous effort to measure the EU's impact on third countries' development, which led to the creation of the **EU international cooperation and development results framework (EU results framework)**.

### A specific tool to measure the EU's contribution

The [first version](#) of the EU results framework was launched in March 2015. While the SDGs were not yet adopted at the time, most indicators were nevertheless linked to the draft SDG targets. A [revised EU results framework](#), better aligned with the SDG global indicators, was published in October 2018. The framework is composed of three levels of indicators:

- 31 **'level 1 indicators'** measure the operational context of partner countries (poverty rate, GDP growth, good governance indices, access to food, energy, health services, etc.). Most level 1 indicators correspond to the global SDG indicators, but do not cover all of them;
- 30 **'level 2 indicators'** concern the EU's contribution to development outputs in partner countries (number of human rights defenders who have received EU support; number of women and men who have secure tenure of land with EU support; renewable energy production supported by the EU; number of births attended by skilled health personnel with EU support, etc.). These indicators measure the overall results achieved jointly by the EU and other donors – the EU contribution is not computed as proportional to the share of EU funding;
- 10 **'level 3 indicators'** measure policy priority mainstreaming, i.e. the share of EU-funded assistance directed towards specific countries (fragile states) or specific priorities (nutrition, women's empowerment, climate, trade facilitation, etc.); the

investment leverage ratio of EU blending operations; or the budget qualifying as official development assistance.

The EU results framework covers EU external assistance financed by the European Development Fund and the EU budget.<sup>10</sup> The three levels of indicators for each SDG aim at assessing whether EU interventions (level 2) are consistent both with the needs on the ground (level 1) and the EU policy priorities (level 3). However, the working document accompanying the results framework makes it clear that 'direct and quantifiable causal links between levels 1 and 2 cannot be assumed'. For example, it is difficult to clearly correlate the 'Total length of road supported by the EU through a) construction, b) rehabilitation, c) maintenance (km)' with the evolution of 'Passenger and freight volumes on roads', which can also be linked with the evolution of trade exchange, the security situation and other factors.

Table 3: The revised EU results framework: indicators for SDG1 and SDG 2

SDG	Results statement <sup>a*</sup>	Level 1 – Development progress in EU partner countries <sup>b*</sup>	Level 2 – Outputs of and outcomes from EU interventions
SDG1	Eradicate poverty, leaving no-one behind (1.22)	1.1 SDG 1.1.1 Proportion of population below the international poverty line	n/a
SDG2	Pursue an end to hunger and undernutrition and systematically integrate resilience in all actions (22, 24, 38, 55)	1.2 SDG 2.1.2 Prevalence of moderate or severe food insecurity in the population	2.1 Number of food insecure people receiving EU assistance
		1.3 SDG 2.2.1 Prevalence of stunting among children under 5 years of age	2.2 Number of women of reproductive age, adolescent girls and children under 5 reached by nutrition-related interventions supported by the EU
	Support sustainable agriculture and fisheries, especially for smallholders (55, 56)	1.4 Value added of agriculture as % of GDP	2.3 Number of smallholders reached with EU supported interventions aimed to increase their sustainable production, access to markets and/or security of land 2.4 *Agricultural and pastoral ecosystems where sustainable management practices have been introduced with EU support (ha)

\*- <sup>a</sup> In parentheses: relevant paragraphs from the new European consensus on development;

\*- <sup>b</sup> With a corresponding global SDGs indicator, where relevant.

Source: [Revised EU International Cooperation and Development Results Framework](#), European Commission, 2018.

## Gaps in reporting

According to the European Commission, the EU results framework should help assess ongoing programmes and projects more systematically and better track their contribution to progress towards the SDGs outside the EU. It mainly contributes to reporting for internal information purposes and to transferring data to the [international aid transparency initiative](#); a part of its data is made available to the greater public.<sup>11</sup> However, for the time being, it is mainly used by the Commission's Directorates-General for International Cooperation and Development (DEVCO) and for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (NEAR). **EU reporting on other external policies is not yet clearly aligned with the SDG targets.** A significant example is the 2018 [Report](#)

on [Implementation of EU Free Trade Agreements](#), which includes a chapter on trade and sustainable development, but does not mention either Agenda 2030 or the SDGs. EU results framework data therefore do not review progress against all SDG targets and imperfectly account for the interlinkage of policy results: for example, the EU results framework is not used to bring clear evidence of the [security/development](#) nexus or the [migration/development](#) nexus, in either direction.

A similar gap exists as concerns the **spill-over effect** of the EU's way of life and internal policies on third countries' performance towards the SDGs, as a result of [chemical pollution, waste exports, the arms trade](#), etc. The scope of Eurostat's EU SDG indicators (see box above: EU indicators) is limited to measuring results in the EU and its Member States. The spill-over effect is not evaluated as such, but is only partly addressed, for example, through measuring the share of environmental taxes, based on the 'proven, specific, negative impact on the environment', compared to the share of labour taxes within the EU.<sup>12</sup> This – as well as the weak reporting on the global commons (the Antarctic, the high seas, the atmosphere) – is an important gap in SDG reporting both by the EU and by most countries globally,<sup>13</sup> missing the call for collective action that is at the core of the 2030 Agenda.<sup>14</sup>

## European Parliament's and other EU institutions' positions

In January 2019, the Commission published a reflection paper on '[Towards a sustainable Europe by 2030](#)', where it proposed three possible scenarios for progress towards the SDGs:

- developing an overarching EU strategy jointly endorsed by the Parliament, the Commission and the Council – therefore committing EU institutions and Member States alike;
- mainstreaming the SDGs in policies handled by the Commission, but without binding the EU Member States;
- helping the rest of the world catch up while pursuing improvements at EU level – a 'business as usual' scenario.

In a [resolution of 14 March 2019](#), the **Parliament** expressed its preference for the first scenario. This scenario entails specific, time-bound SDG implementation targets defined at EU level, as well as a sound reporting mechanism, implemented by the Member States and coordinated at EU level. The Parliament insists on a better monitoring of negative spill-over effects. To this end, the resolution invites the Commission to draw up the overarching strategy before the end of 2019, by first identifying the steps to be taken, notably in terms of 'statistics and disaggregated data collection.' The Parliament also calls upon the Commission to analyse the voluntary national reviews of Member States in order to identify good practices; it also calls for an analysis of the voluntary national reviews of the least developed countries to assess their needs and better support them. Last but not least, the Parliament recommends peer-review and exchange of good practices in SDG implementation policies at OECD level.

The [Council conclusions of 9 April 2019](#) also highlight the need of a robust follow-up mechanism at EU level, based on the Eurostat indicators, while its [conclusions of 10 December 2019](#) 'encourages Member States ... to proactively mainstream the 2030 agenda into national planning instruments, policies, strategies and financial frameworks.'

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) has set up a [Sustainable Development Observatory](#) to better disseminate knowledge on sustainable development among civil society and EU institutions. It commissioned a [study](#) exposing EU policy gaps regarding the SDGs (cited above, box on EU indicators), notably as concerns monitoring of progress. The EESC also calls for an overarching EU sustainable development strategy and [recommends](#) that civil society organisations be better involved in the definition of indicators and the monitoring of EU progress.

The new Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, has set the clear mandate for each Commissioner to 'ensure the delivery of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals within their policy area' and for the 'College as a whole' to 'be responsible for the overall implementation of the Goals'. Furthermore, by ensuring better coverage of the EU's progress towards the SDGs globally, the EU could further refine its SDG indicators and fill the existing reporting gaps. Something that would help in this direction is the fact that von der Leyen's [political guidelines](#) set quantified targets, such as reducing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions by at least 50 % by 2030. This would strengthen the EU commitment, reiterated in the [EU's priorities at the UN and the 74th UN General Assembly](#) 'to supporting sustainable development through the implementation of the 2030 Agenda both domestically and across the world, alongside national efforts, in partnership with all relevant actors'.

## MAIN REFERENCES

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The UN Statistics Division's [website dedicated to the SDGs](#) provides the [official list](#) and [detailed description](#) of the Global SDG indicators.

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[Exposing EU policy gaps to address the Sustainable Development Goals](#), study for the European Economic and Social Committee, 2019.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The 2030 Agenda cites the [Rio Declaration on Environment and Development](#) (1992), the [World Summit on Sustainable Development](#) (2002), the [World Summit for Social Development](#) (1995), the [Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development](#) (1994), the [Beijing Platform for Action](#) (1995), the [United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development](#) ('Rio+20', 2012) and their follow-ups.
- <sup>2</sup> Created in March 2015 by the UN Statistical Commission, the IAEG-SDGs is composed of representatives of statistical offices from [27 UN Member States](#) (rotating); UN agencies and other multilateral agencies have an observer status in the group.
- <sup>3</sup> For example: Goal 4 (Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all), target 4.2 (By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education) calls on two indicators: 4.2.1 Proportion of children under 5 years of age who are developmentally on track in health, learning and psychosocial wellbeing, by sex; and 4.2.2 Participation rate in organized learning (one year before the official primary entry age), by sex.
- <sup>4</sup> In the example of note 3, Unicef is custodian of 4.2.1, while Unesco is custodian of 4.2.2.
- <sup>5</sup> For example, the World Bank is custodian of indicator 1.1.1 (Proportion of population below the international poverty line, by sex, age, employment status and geographical location (urban/rural)); the ILO, as a partner agency, provides methodological input as concerns the proportion of employed persons living in poverty.
- <sup>6</sup> For example 'Number of deaths, missing persons and directly affected persons attributed to disasters per 100 000 population' is used: under Goal 1 ('No poverty'), target 5 (build resilience) [1.5.1]; under Goal 11 ('Sustainable cities'), target 5 (reduce impacts of disasters) [11.5.1]; and under Goal 13 ('Climate action'), target 1 (strengthen adaptive capacity to climate-related hazards and natural disasters) [13.1.1].
- <sup>7</sup> 'Official development assistance (ODA): Flows of official financing administered with the promotion of the economic development and welfare of developing countries as the main objective, and which are concessional in character with a grant element of at least 25 percent (using a fixed 10 percent rate of discount). By convention, ODA flows comprise contributions of donor government agencies, at all levels, to developing countries ('bilateral ODA') and to multilateral institutions.' [OECD glossary of statistical terms](#), 2008.
- <sup>8</sup> See, for example, the UN-funded Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) 'SDG Index' [dashboards and reports](#) that track the implementation of the SDGs at global and regional level, allowing to visualise the distance to the 2030 threshold. In 2019, the EU Joint Research Centre published a statistical audit report on the conceptual and methodological soundness of this SDG Index. The report concludes that 'All things considered, the SDG Index is a

noteworthy effort of synthesizing the 17 adopted SDGs into a single figure. Overall, the ranks of the SDG Index are fairly robust'.

- <sup>9</sup> As the HLPF predates Agenda 2030, the first round of reviews began only the second year of the current cycle; therefore, all 17 SDGs were covered in three years (2017-2019) instead of four. In 2017: Goals 1, 2, 3, 5, 9 and 14, related to the theme [Eradicating poverty and promoting prosperity in a changing world](#); in 2018: Goals 6, 7, 11, 12 and 15, related to the theme: [Transformation towards sustainable and resilient societies](#); in 2019: Goals 4, 8, 10, 13 and 16, related to the theme: [Empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality](#); Goal 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) is examined each year.
- <sup>10</sup> Specifically, in the current multiannual financial framework (2014-2020): the Development Cooperation Instrument (DCI), the programmable part of the Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP), the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), the Instrument for Nuclear Safety Cooperation and the Instrument for Greenland; as well as the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI).
- <sup>11</sup> The first EU document explicitly based on the EU results framework (2015 version), the [first report on selected results achieved through EU-funded development cooperation projects and programmes](#), only concerns some projects accomplished between mid-2013 and mid-2014, i.e. before the adoption of Agenda 2030, and therefore is not explicitly based on SDG targets. Current public reports on EU development policies (such as the 2018 [Annual Report](#) on the implementation of the EU instruments for financing external actions and the 2019 EU [report on Policy Coherence](#) for Development) review EU actions under the five components of the 2030 Agenda (Partnership, People, Planet, Prosperity, and Peace) and incorporate some data from the EU results framework.
- <sup>12</sup> EU SDG indicator [sdg\\_17\\_50](#) (Shares of environmental and labour taxes in total tax revenues).
- <sup>13</sup> Some measures of spill-over effects are proposed in: J. D. Sachs et al., [SDG Index and Dashboards Report 2017: Global Responsibilities – International Spillovers in Achieving the Goals](#), Bertelsmann Stiftung and SDSN, 2017.
- <sup>14</sup> For their first [Europe Sustainable Development](#) Report (2019), independent from the EU institutions, the SDSN and the Institute for European Environmental Policy developed an 'International Spillover Index for the EU', which includes environmental, economic, financial, governance and security data but 'does not capture transboundary shipments of waste and physical flows (such as transboundary pollution flows) due to lack of data availability'.

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