February 2023

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are 17 interconnected and indivisible goals, each with a series of specific targets, to be attained by 2030. All UN member states have committed to the SDGs, which address the multiple causes and consequences of environmental depletion and social inequalities. The European Union has been a leader in drafting the SDGs; it is also a frontrunner in mainstreaming the SDGs in all its policies. As the world’s biggest official development aid donor, the EU and its Member States help partner states implement the SDGs. However, the way of living of people in the EU also has negative spill-overs on third countries. At a time when the world is falling off track in the implementation of the SDGs, because of external shocks as well as inadequate national policies, 2023 is a key year for sustainable development. In July, the United Nations (UN) Economic and Social Council will convene a High-level Political Forum at which governments’ representatives and major stakeholders will assess global progress towards the SDGs, and in September the UN General Assembly will, for the second time since 2019, set priority actions with a view to accelerating the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. This topical digest features EPRS publications and audiovisual products which illustrate clearly both successes and challenges in pursuing SDG achievement.

These and other analyses are available on the European Parliament’s Think Tank pages.

New publication in 2023

SDG 3 – Good Health and Well-being

New EU global health strategy: A recalibrated agenda

Briefing by Gabija Leclerc, EPRS, January 2023

On 30 November 2022, 12 years after the adoption of the first strategy on the EU’s role in global health in 2010, the European Commission unveiled the EU global health strategy with the overarching goal of improving global health security and ensuring better health for all. The document takes stock of lessons learnt from the pandemic and guides EU action in an evolving landscape of threats and opportunities, including towards reasserting responsibility for attainment of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – currently an unfinished agenda. The strategy constitutes the external dimension of the European health union and is a cornerstone of the Global Gateway strategy. It not only relaunches the EU’s global health agenda but also recalibrates the EU’s approach to global health, by positioning it as an essential pillar of EU external policy, a critical geopolitical sector and a central aspect of EU strategic autonomy.

Overview

Understanding SDGs

Briefing by Eric Pichon, EPRS, June 2022

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 antecedents, the SDGs commit both developed and developing countries. The structural transformation that would bring about the desired change requires a joint effort by the international community, but equally from public authorities, companies and citizens, to speed up the process.
Reporting on SDG implementation: UN mechanisms and the EU approach

Briefing by Eric Pichon, EPRS, July 2022

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development clearly links the 17 SDGs 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. UN agencies, other international 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 help countries exchange good practice and advice on 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. Eurostat has created a set of sustainable development indicators that provide a good overview of progress within the EU. 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.

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in EU regions

Briefing by Agnieszka Widuto, EPRS, June 2022

The SDGs also have a regional dimension, sometimes called ‘localisation’. Achievement of around 65% of the targets is estimated to depend on input from local and regional authorities. Numerous regions and cities, including in the EU, have expressed support for the SDGs, and many have integrated them in their policy frameworks. Efforts to localise the SDGs are ongoing and regional achievements are featured in the national reviews presented at international conferences. Monitoring SDGs at the regional level can thus help support the overall implementation of the SDGs, reinforce national efforts, support regional development strategies, and provide a broader picture of within-country trends. The European Parliament has expressed its support for an EU sustainable development strategy, and enhanced involvement of regional, local and civil society stakeholders in SDG implementation.

Children’s rights and the UN SDGs: A priority for EU external action

Briefing by Ionel Zamfir, EPRS, November 2019

No action to implement the SDGs can be detrimental to the rights of the child. More than a normative framework guiding the implementation of the SDGs, the rights of the child are a fundamental enabling factor for sustainable development and vice versa. Healthy, well-nourished, well-educated children, who are protected from violence and abuse, are the best guarantee of long-term sustainable development. On the other hand, the rights of the child can only be realised in an appropriate environment – peaceful, prosperous, protective of the child and fostering human development. Thus, there is a natural convergence between the SDGs and specific children’s rights. While progress has been steady in certain areas, particularly on health-related issues, in others, progress has been less conclusive. The EU prioritises children’s rights and relevant SDGs in its external action. It aims at mainstreaming human rights, including children’s rights, in its development assistance to connect the normative and developmental dimensions. The European Parliament has repeatedly defended the need to protect and promote children’s rights through EU external action, and has asked the Commission to propose a strategy and action plan in this sense.
Green and sustainable finance
Briefing by Stefano Spinaci, EPRS, February 2021

The dramatic consequences of climate change and environmental degradation have brought the need for a more sustainable economy to the top of the agenda. In its 2018 action plan on financing sustainable growth, the European Commission set out the EU strategy to connect finance with sustainability. The first deliverables have been three key regulations seeking to create a classification system to determine whether an economic activity is environmentally sustainable (the ‘taxonomy’); to make disclosures relating to sustainable investments and sustainability risks clearer; and to establish low-carbon benchmarks. The Taxonomy Regulation is particularly important for driving the consistent development of future legislation, as advocated, in particular, by the European Parliament. Given that climate change and environmental degradation are global challenges, international cooperation is in the common interest; the European Union is actively promoting this through the International Platform on Sustainable Finance.

Ten composite indices for policy-making
In-depth analysis by Samy Chahri, Eulalia Claros, Alina Dobreva, Liselotte Jensen, Lucille Killmayer, Eric Pichon and Agnieszka Widuto, EPRS, September 2021

The information provided in this publication is designed to help policy-makers by providing sources of data and identifying possible bias in their use. EPRS has selected 10 composite indices in a range of policy areas from reliable sources; indices already used as references by policy-makers. For each index, a chapter presents the producers and describes their objectives in publishing the index, the data compiled, and how that data is being or could be used by policy-makers. The chapters also highlight each index's limitations.

SDGs to be discussed at the High-level Political Forum in 2023

SDG 6 – Clean water and sanitation
Freshwater protection: EU policy and the status of freshwater systems
In-depth Analysis by Anne Altmayer, February 2017

Freshwater ecosystems are particularly rich in biodiversity and fulfil important ecosystem services. However, the continuing presence of pollutants still raises concerns for public health, as well as for nature conservation. Surface water bodies and groundwater alike are threatened by synthetic and also naturally occurring substances that can have a negative impact on the aquatic environment and on human health. Increased temperature and over-abstraction of water are further causes for concern. Meanwhile, heavy modifications to the natural flow and physical changes to water bodies can also cause serious disturbances to water ecosystems. With the Water Framework Directive (WFD), the EU adopted comprehensive legislation for the protection of water within the EU. Under the directive, Member States are required to achieve good status in all bodies of surface water and groundwater by 2015, or 2027 at the latest.

SDG 7 – Affordable and clean energy
Energy saving and demand reduction
Briefing by Agnieszka Widuto, EPRS, September 2022

Since Russia invaded Ukraine, Europe has found itself in an energy crisis. Skyrocketing gas and electricity prices, coupled with energy supply concerns, have obliged the European Union (EU) to take action to mitigate the situation. Reducing energy consumption is seen as one of the key measures the EU Member States can take to reduce energy bills and tackle supply issues. It can help them reduce their energy import dependency and prepare for a winter of possible gas supply disruptions. It can also help the EU reach its climate goals in line with the European Green Deal.
SDG 9 – Industry, innovation and infrastructure

A new European innovation agenda
Briefing by Clément Evroux, EPRS, September 2022

The growing effects of the ecological crisis, from climate change to the loss of biodiversity, digitalisation and mounting geopolitical tensions have broadened the scope of innovation policies to the transformations required by both sustainability and preparedness to crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Today, the EU’s innovation performance gives a mixed picture. While the EU has managed to keep its scientific base at the forefront of the global race, it has not been able to disseminate the new knowledge, technologies and solutions created by EU actors across Member States. With the adoption of a communication on a new European innovation agenda on 5 July 2022, the European Commission aims to encourage innovators to make better use of EU single market finance opportunities, as well as to attract new private and public investors to reinforce EU financial and capital markets. The communication presents a set of legislative and non-legislative initiatives based on five flagship areas – access to finance; framework conditions for deep tech innovation; tackling the innovation divide; deep tech talents; and improving innovation policies – which cut across the von der Leyen Commission’s political priorities.

SDG 11 Sustainable cities and communities

Biodiversity protection: Where do we stand?
Study by Eckhard Binder et al., EPRS, October 2021

Cities are inevitably affected by shocks and disruptions, the pandemic being a case in point. The extent of the impact however depends on cities’ preparedness and capacity to adapt. By thinking ahead, cities can explore emerging or plausible developments in order to anticipate them and contain potential disruption. Drawing on a report prepared by the European Strategy and Policy Analysis System (ESPAS), this EPRS paper explores the impact on and implications for cities of current global trends, such as climate change, population growth, urbanisation, economic growth, increasing energy demand, higher connectivity and a changing world order, that will have direct consequences for the future of cities and their inhabitants.

SDG 17 – Partnerships for the goals

The European Union and the multilateral system: Lessons from past experience and future challenges
Briefing by guest author: David O’Sullivan, EPRS, March 2021

David O’Sullivan, former Secretary General of the European Commission and EU Ambassador to the United States, reflects on the Union’s contribution to and standing in the multilateral system, as well as on some of the issues that confront Europe if it is to maximise its influence in international economic fora of various kinds.

The future of multilateralism and strategic partnerships
Briefing by Elena Lazarou, EPRS, September 2020

The coronavirus pandemic has exacerbated global geopolitical trends, including the struggle to uphold multilateralism in a climate of growing nationalism, protectionism and rising great power competition. At the same time, it has demonstrated the need for multilateral cooperation for the effective mitigation of cross-border threats, including health crises. Within this environment, the European Union, a multilateral entity in itself, has illustrated the relevance of cooperation. Beyond its internal strengthening, the EU has set the defence and reform of multilateralism as one of its key priorities under the current European Commission. This will require a more coordinated and autonomous EU foreign policy, a smart approach towards the escalating US–China rivalry, reinvigorated cooperation with major democracies, and mobilisation of the EU’s foreign policy tools, widely defined. As coronavirus leaves parts of the world more fragile and vulnerable, it also precipitates the need for a reformed multilateral system ‘fit for purpose’ and able to address the challenges of the future.
Other SDGs

Publications by other EP services
Achieving the UN Agenda 2030: Overall actions for the successful implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals before and after the 2030 deadline
In-depth Analysis, Policy Department for External Relations, December 2022

The Sustainable Development Goals in the EU budget
Briefing, Policy Department for Budgetary Affairs, July 2021

Budgetary control of the Sustainable Development Goals in the EU budget
Briefing, Policy Department for Budgetary Affairs, July 2021

The implementation of the 2030 Agenda’s principles of ‘leaving-no-one-behind’ and ‘addressing the needs of those furthest behind first’ in the EU’s development policy
Study, Policy Department for External Relations, January 2022

Europe’s approach to implementing the Sustainable Development Goals: Good practices and the way forward
Study, Policy Department for External Relations, February 2019

EPRS graphics
Primary and final energy consumption, EU, 2000-2020, Mtoe

Energy saving and demand reduction EPRS, September 2022

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External publications on SDGs: Selected Online Reading guides of the EP Library

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