

## BRIEFING

# The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development: 17 Goals agreed, now for the hard part

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### ABSTRACT

After more than two years of consultations and negotiations, 193 UN member states agreed on 2 August 2015 to a new sustainable development agenda that is as ambitious as it is fraught with potential pitfalls. Titled '[Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#)', the agenda will be formally adopted at the UN summit on 25-27 September in New York. With 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs), it aims for an economic and societal transformation, integrating all three pillars of sustainable development – economic, social and environmental. The sectorial scope of the new agenda is enormous, including areas such as migration, industrialisation and energy. The SDGs are universal in nature, creating responsibilities for all countries, spanning domestic development outcomes, assistance to other countries and global public goods. The EU has played a major role in the process and has fought hard for the inclusion of EU values such as human rights and good governance, and for effective implementation and review processes. The ambitious agenda creates implementation challenges at all levels, including indicators and data collection, communication and outreach, the financing challenge and the balance between universality and national ownership.

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# 1 An ambitious and universal agenda

The new international agenda of 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) was agreed by UN member states in early August, nearly two months before the scheduled summit in New York.

The SDG agenda merges the Rio+20 processes and the follow-up to the Millennium Development Goals, whose target date was 2015.

The agenda's key achievements are its universality and its inclusion of the economic, social and environmental pillars of sustainable development.

After more than two years of consultations and negotiations, 193 UN Member States agreed on 2 August 2015 on a new sustainable development agenda. The outcome document, '[Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#)', was welcomed by the UN General Assembly on 1 September 2015 and was forwarded to the Summit of Heads of States and Government and High Representatives, meeting from 25 to 27 September 2015 in New York, for adoption. The summit will be attended by a delegation of the EP Development Committee, headed by that committee's chair. After adoption at the summit, the SDG Agenda will enter into force on 1 January 2016. The outcome document consists of: a forceful preamble; a political declaration setting out the common vision, shared principles and key elements of the new agenda; a detailed list of 17 goals and 169 targets; and concluding chapters on the means of implementation (MOI) and on the follow-up and review process. The core element, the goals and targets, are based on the [proposal from the Open Working Group](#) presented in August 2014. It had been agreed not to reopen these beyond technical adaptations, so the final round of intergovernmental negotiations resulted in only a very few changes.

The SDGs are the result of [the convergence of two processes](#); the follow-up to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), whose target date was 2015, and the Rio+ 20 process on Sustainable Development. In Europe, the discussions and negotiations have been mainly followed by the development, and partly the environment communities, but the ambition of the new SDGs goes much further. All three pillars of sustainable development (economic, social and environmental) are integrated in the new agenda, which is considered one of its major achievements. The SDGs aim at an economic and societal transformation in order to 'shift the world on to a sustainable and resilient path' (preamble). The sectorial scope of the new agenda, including areas such as migration, industrialisation or energy, is broad. In contrast to the MDGs, which created commitments on richer countries primarily in view of their external policies, the SDGs are universal in nature. [Researchers](#) have suggested a threefold typology of the targets:

- i. domestic development outcomes, where governments assume responsibility for improving the situation of their own citizens;
- ii. responsibilities for assisting other countries, through financial assistance or capacity building;
- iii. responsibilities for helping achieve global public goods, such as climate change and biodiversity.

A challenge will involve achieving universality for all three types and transforming the SDG agenda from a 'development project' into a more holistic approach.

## 2 Key issues and controversies

The EU played a key part in the process, insisting on a rights-based approach, on addressing good governance and inequality, and on a strong and participatory review process.

Ambitious targets include the eradication of poverty and hunger and the reduction of inequalities within and between countries.

The theme of 'leaving no-one behind' serves as a red thread running through the new agenda.

Commitments to human rights, gender equality and women's empowerment are well integrated in the declaration, but less perfectly reflected in the goals and targets.

The EU played a major role throughout the process, with the [Commission communication of June 2014](#) and the [Council conclusions of December 2014](#) laying the basis for common engagement in the last phase of the negotiations. Parliament adopted a [position on 24 November 2014](#). Expressing its most recent point of view, this text generally supported the OWG proposal. Parliament further refined its position on the financing of the agenda in a resolution of [19 May 2015](#). Particular and additional attention was paid in the November resolution to keeping a strong focus on poverty eradication, to a rights-based approach to development, and to including good governance in the agenda. The EP insisted on addressing inequality, including gender inequality, and on ensuring a focus on vulnerable groups, as well as on making the implementation process participatory, transparent and accountable.

A number of key innovative goals and targets of the OWG proposal, strongly supported by the EP, survived the intergovernmental negotiations without major changes. These included:

- the target (1.1) of fully eradicating extreme poverty, at a benchmark of USD 1.25 a day, (although the EP had called for a USD 2 benchmark); and the target (2.1) of ending hunger by 2030 (target 2.1), albeit the EP had called for a 2025 deadline;
- the goal (10) of reducing inequality within and between countries, as well as a comprehensive standalone goal on gender equality and women's empowerment (goal 5);
- a goal on peace and good governance (16), including targets for violence against children, accountable and transparent institutions, participatory decision-making, access to justice, and protection of fundamental freedoms (albeit the latter 'in accordance with national legislation and international agreements' - a change compared to the OWG proposal).

Attention to the most vulnerable groups, also symbolised by the ambition that 'no-one should be left behind' (preamble), has been confirmed in several parts of the declaration (e.g. para. 4), in different goals and targets, and in relation to indicators (para. 48) and the review process (para. 74d).

Some key EU concerns, however, and in particular their political expression in the declaration, were controversial until the last phase of intergovernmental discussions, during which Member States and EU institutions managed to coordinate closely in defending their positions. The [public negotiation documents](#) show, for example, that the EU insisted on avoiding a weakening of language on human rights and good governance, as equally on gender equality. The final declaration strongly reaffirms the commitment to protect and promote human rights and to realise gender equality in several contexts (preamble, paras 3, 7, 8, 10, 19, 20), reconfirms the Universal Declaration on Human Rights and international human rights

instruments, and describes democracy, good governance and the rule of law as essential for sustainable development (paras 9, 35). The rights language is somewhat weaker, however, in the actual goals and targets. Besides goal 16, with its specific targets on civil and political rights (see above), ending discrimination is enshrined in goal 5, labour rights in target 8.8, human rights education in target 4.7 and sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights in target 5.6. The 'right to economic resources' is referred to in targets 1.4 and 5, but for access to social services or food the rights concept is not explicitly included. Advocating for the human rights commitments in the declaration to guide the concrete implementation of goals and targets will therefore be necessary to bring about a rights-based approach to development' for the entire agenda. Another reference point can be the human rights language in the Addis Ababa Action Agenda, which forms an integral part of the new SDG framework (see below).

Eradicating poverty remains a top priority for the agenda.

The EU - like other stakeholders (such as the NGO network [Beyond 2015](#)) – has tried to ensure a proper balance between the objectives of poverty eradication and sustainable development. The final outcome singles out poverty eradication as the 'greatest global challenge', but also recognises it as being 'an indispensable requirement for sustainable development' (para 2). The core development targets taken over from the MDG agenda (such as poverty, hunger, health, education, gender equality, water and sanitation) are listed at the beginning of the agenda. On the other hand, the EU's call for adding poverty eradication to the title of the new agenda was not successful.

The EU insisted on close links between the SDG agenda and the outcome document of the Addis Conference on Financing for Development.

Another key EU request was to integrate the substance of the outcome document of the Financing for Development Conference held in Addis Ababa in July 2015 ([Addis Ababa Action Agenda, AAAA](#)) into the SDGs, in order to ensure an integrated framework for implementation and review. The AAAA, agreed after controversial negotiations (with the final conference attended by a DEVE delegation), defines a comprehensive framework for financing and creating an enabling environment at all levels for sustainable development, paying attention to new sources and channels, the private sector included. It stresses the importance of domestic resource mobilisation and domestic action, good governance and policy coherence for development. The final SDG agenda does not annex the AAAA, as suggested by the EU, but recognises it as an 'integral' part of the new SDG agenda, and allows for some convergence of the review processes (paras 40, 47, 62 and 86). The section on MOI also recognises the AAAA consensus on the diversity of financing sources for development, going beyond - but not replacing - traditional development assistance (paras 62-71).

The conflict between developed and developing countries over common responsibilities for financing the new challenges could only be overcome by a delicate compromise.

In the discussion over differentiation, the EU objected - as in previous international conferences such as [Addis Ababa](#) - to the extension of the principle of 'common but differentiated responsibilities' (CBDR) to cover the whole post-2015 agenda, as supported by the G77 as well as some civil society groups. With its origins in international environmental agreements

and requiring developed countries to take the lead in addressing environmental damage, its inclusion in the overall SDG agenda is considered inappropriate by the EU, not least in light of new capacities and capabilities of richer developing countries in addressing global public goods. The concept was finally included in the declaration, albeit only through reference to the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development (para 12), and is balanced by the preceding paragraphs 10 and 11, which refer to other international agreements and shared commitments, including the UN Millennium Declaration of 2000. The issue is likely to come back, however, in the implementation phase.

Other controversial elements for which delicate compromises had to be found, include the reference to 'unilateral economic, financial or trade measures' (para 30), the inclusion of the concept of peace in the preamble (strongly defended by the EU), the reference to the rights of peoples living under foreign occupation, demanded by developing countries (para 35), and the final deletion of all references to '[all social and economic groups](#)'.

As regards process, the EU - in line with the EP resolution - called for a strong and participatory follow-up and review mechanism. The final outcome document does not yet specify all details, but proposes a 'robust, voluntary, effective, participatory, transparent and integrated' process, covering the national, regional and global levels, and promoting 'accountability to our citizens' (paras 47, 72, and 73). Parliaments' role in ensuring effective implementation and accountability is explicitly recognised (paras 45 and 79), as also in the AAAA (paras 10 and 130). Review processes at all levels should be 'people-centred, gender-sensitive, respect human rights, and have a particular focus on the poorest and most vulnerable and those furthest behind' (para. 74 d). The High Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF), created in 2012 to facilitate implementation of the Rio+20 Agenda, has a central role in overseeing the follow-up at different levels. Its role is to undertake voluntary national and thematic reviews, promote coherence and coordination, and make recommendations. Its task of ensuring that the process remains open to civil society and other stakeholders (para 80) is also significant. At national level, although it is stated that indigenous peoples, civil society, the private sector and other stakeholders should contribute to reviews, this is only required 'in line with national circumstances, policies and priorities' (para 79).

The whole process reveals a delicate balance between the ambition of universality and global coordination on the one hand, and differentiation and national ownership on the other. The follow-up and review processes are 'voluntary and country-led, will take account of different national realities, capacities and levels of development and will respect policy space and priorities' (74a). Member states, when developing their national responses, are to define national targets, complemented by national or regional indicators. At the same time, they must pursue the global goals and targets and apply the global indicators applicable to all countries.

The SDG agenda foresees a complex follow-up and review process at the national, regional and global levels, to be guided by the High Level Political Forum (HLPF). Transparency and participation are confirmed as key principles.

Implementation of the universal agenda is to respect the principles of national ownership and national circumstances.



### 3 First reactions

Civil society networks have generally welcomed the new agenda's innovative elements and its potential, despite shortcomings in both substance and (future) process.

Reactions to the final draft from [civil society](#) have overall recognised the success of finding a consensus on all key global challenges, of ensuring universality of the agenda and of combining the three dimensions (economic, environmental and social) of development. Civil society networks were not fully satisfied, however, with the wording on participation and accountability in the review process. Critics have also noted that there is a certain contradiction between the continued insistence on economic growth as path to prosperity and development (e.g. para 27, target 8.1), and the ambition to respect the planetary boundaries. States should sustain or increase economic growth, but only 'endeavour' to decouple economic growth from environmental degradation (8.4). The transparent nature of the two-year process has been generally hailed by many observers and stakeholders. Some [development activists](#) have criticised, however, certain final changes agreed on behind closed doors in the very last days of the negotiations, such as a weakening of the commitment to ensure (changed to 'promote') fair and equitable sharing of benefits from genetic resources (targets 2.5 and 15.6). The criticism that finding a global consensus has been paid for by an overloaded agenda, already directed in the earlier phase of the process, remains valid for the final outcome: With 169 targets, focusing resources and monitoring results will be much more difficult than was the case with the MDGs. Another challenge is the nature of the targets. According to one [calculation](#), only 45 of the targets are clearly time-bound and have a specific level of outcome, and of those, only 29 provide full conceptual clarity. Developing and agreeing on the global indicators to be used for measuring progress will thus be decisive.

### 4 Next steps

Several UN member states have already started processes to define their national response to the SDG agenda.

The details of the implementation and the rather complex architecture of different reporting and review processes are still under discussion (such as at the recent HLPF meeting in July), but some steps have been fixed by the outcome document:

- Global Indicators are being elaborated by the Inter Agency and Expert Group on SDG Indicators, to be agreed by the UN Statistical Commission in March 2016 and adopted thereafter by ECOSOC. A first draft is now open for [consultation](#).
- Countries are asked to develop 'national responses', to define national targets, and to undertake regular and inclusive reviews. Many have already started to adapt their existing development plans and legislation and will present national commitments in New York.
- To further clarify the review process, the UN Secretary- General should prepare a report for the 2016 HLPF meeting (to be held under the auspices of the organisation's Economic and Social Council



The overall review process still needs to be further fine-tuned by the UN's Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and the HLPF.

(ECOSOC)). This report will outline 'critical milestones' for a coherent follow-up and review, including recommendations on voluntary common reporting guidelines. The Secretary-General will also prepare an annual progress report on the SDGs. Another source of information for the HLPF will be the (annual) Global Sustainable Development Report, which should strengthen the science/policy interface. The ECOSOC President is tasked to conduct consultations on the relationship between the two reports with a view to the HLPF in 2016 (para 83).

- Every four years, the HLPF – when meeting under the auspices of the General Assembly – will undertake a strategic review and provide high-level political guidance on the Agenda and its implementation. The next meeting will be in 2019.

## 5 Challenges of implementation

A 'data revolution' will be needed to monitor the agenda implementation.

Indicators and data collection: There is a crucial need to define meaningful and consensual indicators which can make monitoring and review feasible without creating administrative overload. The need for a 'data revolution' in many countries has been pointed out for some time, in particular with a view to ensuring that indicators and statistics 'leave no one behind'.

Finding the right balance between ambition and achievability will pose a key challenge in setting national targets.

Universality: Although in principle all goals, targets and indicators should be valid for all countries, there is a risk of cherry-picking some targets rather than others. However, collective and ambitious action is required, in particular for absolute targets aiming at the complete eradication of certain phenomena, such as extreme poverty, all forms of malnutrition, or gender disparities in education. Equally, the Global Partnership will not work if countries shy away from their responsibilities to support other countries and promote global public goods. At the same time, different starting-points and capacities have to be taken into account. Finding the right balance between achievability and ambition in setting national targets is thus crucial ([Stuart 2015](#)), and fair criteria have to be agreed for defining differentiated responsibilities towards others and the common good.

After the agenda is adopted, communication and outreach will be crucial to engage stakeholders across sectors and constituencies.

Communication and participation: The achievement of the SDGs will not be possible without engagement from stakeholders across a myriad sectors and constituencies. This requires communication and outreach across the globe, for which the preamble provides forceful messages. The other side of the coin is the need for meaningful participation by and accountability towards citizens in the political process of setting and reviewing targets.

Ensuring that development aid remains focused on poverty eradication will present another challenge.

Financing: The major battles over the sources of financing of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development were fought in Addis Ababa. Going one step further, the 2030 Agenda further defines the 'Global Partnership for Sustainable Development', and links the 'means of implementation' to a concrete political vision (including through concrete MOI targets within each goal, enumerated with letters rather than numbers). There is a clear commitment to focus support, including Official Development Assistance (ODA), on the most vulnerable countries, but it is still far from clear how the

division of labour between different actors (donor countries, national governments, civil society, the private sector, etc) will work. In view of the EP position of November 2014, it will also be important to ensure that the SDG agenda does not lead to a diversion of development funds for climate change actions not having a direct link to poverty eradication. Also relevant in this context will be the outcome of the climate change conference to be held in Paris in December 2015.

For the EU, implementation requires action both at Member State and Union level, in both internal and external policies. The existing policy strategies will have to be reviewed and adapted to the global goals and commitments (a mapping exercise in the Commission has already started), and national plans and targets need to be developed in a coordinated manner. For example, as [researchers have pointed out](#), the SDG poverty target is more ambitious than that of Agenda 2020. Another [recent study](#) shows that most OECD countries are not yet 'fit' for the SDGs and will need to undertake fundamental policy changes. As regards development cooperation, the existing financing instruments and programmes of the EU were all negotiated before the SDG agenda was finalised. Although the Development Cooperation Instrument already tried to anticipate the changes, adaptation of some objectives may be necessary, as is already explicitly recognised in the [Global Public Goods and Challenges programme](#). The mid-term reviews foreseen at different levels (financing instruments, multiannual programming documents, and the EU budget) could provide appropriate procedures. The overall EU policy strategy, the 2005 European Consensus for Development, and the 2011 Agenda for Change may also have to be reviewed. In the broader foreign policy context, the development of a EU global strategy, launched by the [High Representative's report of June 2015](#) and expected to lead to a more joined-up approach for different EU policies and instruments, including those concerning development cooperation, also provides an opportunity for ensuring a comprehensive approach to the comprehensive SDG agenda - not least in view of the specific security-related targets on terrorism and violence.

The European Parliament, together with national parliaments, will have a central role in scrutinising the implementation, advocating strong monitoring procedures and accountability mechanisms, and contributing to effective communication. Cross-committee coordination yet with clear leadership will be indispensable. In this context, Policy Coherence for Development will become a top issue, but may be reinterpreted in line with the wider concept of Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development, now part and parcel of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Not all developed countries are 'fit' for the SDGs: many will need to make fundamental policy changes.

The EU development strategy will have to be reviewed in light of the new agenda.

## Annex: List of 17 goals included in the final agenda

- Goal 1 End poverty in all its forms everywhere
- Goal 2 End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture
- Goal 3 Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages
- Goal 4 Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all
- Goal 5 Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls
- Goal 6 Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all
- Goal 7 Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all
- Goal 8 Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all
- Goal 9 Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation
- Goal 10 Reduce inequality within and among countries
- Goal 11 Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable
- Goal 12 Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns
- Goal 13 Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts\*
- Goal 14 Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development
- Goal 15 Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss
- Goal 16 Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels
- Goal 17 Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development

\* Acknowledging that the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change is the primary international, intergovernmental forum for negotiating the global response to climate change.