

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 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) to a series of targets to be reached by 2030. The 2030 Agenda includes a detailed mechanism for monitoring progress towards these targets. At its core are a number of quantified indicators for each target, which 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.

The data feed into the voluntary national reports that countries prepare to exchange best practice and advice on tackling the challenges they encounter in implementing their SDG strategies. Every year, a high-level political forum on sustainable development (HLPF) takes stock of both progress and weaknesses in implementation. Based on the reporting and the conclusions of the HLPF, every 4 years an SDG summit – the next one coming up in September 2023 – makes recommendations and pledges to undertake a number of actions to accelerate progress.

The EU Statistical Office (Eurostat) has solid experience in collecting consistent data from the EU Member States. Together with a set of specific indicators created by Eurostat, these data give a good overview of the EU's progress towards the SDGs. Moreover, the EU services for international partnerships have set up a framework of indicators to assess how EU support contributes to other countries' implementation of the SDGs. At this year's HLPF, the EU is presenting its first voluntary review, giving an overview of the EU policies' and initiatives' contribution to progress towards each of the SDGs at EU and global levels.

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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Update of a briefing published in July 2022.



Multilateral cooperation on SDGs through global governance and monitoring

2030 Agenda: a country-led mechanism under UN coordination

The 2030 Agenda – the most comprehensive blueprint to date for eliminating extreme poverty, reducing inequality, and protecting the planet – was launched at the UN Summit of 25-27 September 2015. Its core idea was laid out in the UN General Assembly resolution of 25 September 2015 – Transforming our world: the [2030 Agenda](#) for Sustainable Development – which highlighted that sustainable development can only be achieved through a [universal and comprehensive effort](#). It introduced 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets seek to realize the human rights of all and to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls. They are integrated and indivisible and balance the three dimensions of sustainable development: the economic, social and environmental.

2030 Agenda is the result of a long and comprehensive process that involved the bodies and member states of the UN, as well as 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 can succeed. The diversity of players and their incongruent priorities and needs prevent a one-size-fits-all approach; consequently, 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' (2030 Agenda, Introduction, paragraph 47), and the UN system is tasked with supporting national efforts on reporting.

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 the 2030 Agenda, the 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 4 years in order to propose further action.

Developing relevant SDG indicators, sound 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 2021, 247 [national reviews](#) were submitted – and some countries have submitted up to three successive

reviews, some 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 (i.e. aspects such as choice of strategy, political leadership and delegation of responsibilities, participation of stakeholders, specific targets and measures, and link to national budget) differs significantly between Member States. An EPRS [analysis](#) published in December 2022 recommends that Member States do more to share their experience on SDGs and integrate more science-based evidence, in particular on planetary boundaries and the interlinkages between SDGs.

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 development 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.

By the end of 2022, [each EU Member State](#) had carried out at least one VNR. **Belgium, Ireland, France, Croatia, Lithuania, Poland, Portugal, Romania** and **Slovakia** will present their individual [VNRs](#) at the high-level political forum on sustainable development (HLPF) in July 2023. The European Commission has published the very first **EU-level voluntary review** in May 2023 (see below in the Section on EU Reporting)

The annual high-level political forum on sustainable development

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.

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.¹ In [July 2023](#), the theme is 'Accelerating the recovery from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) and the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at all levels', and the focus will be more specifically on reviewing SDG 6 ([clean water and sanitation](#)), SDG 7 ([affordable and clean energy](#)), SDG 9 (industry innovation and infrastructure) and SDG 11 (sustainable cities and communities). Every HLPF also assesses progress on SDG 17 (partnerships for the goals).

At the end of the annual HLPF, the UN member states vote upon a ministerial declaration highlighting the main outcomes and commitments.

During the HLPF, the discussion on the selected SDGs are fed by:

- VNRs and regional reviews;
- thematic reviews organised by UN entities;
- the annual UN Secretary General's report for UN ECOSOC on progress towards the SDGs ([latest version: May 2023](#));
- [discussion papers or position papers](#) by other stakeholders, such as local authorities, business, trade unions, and non-governmental and civil society organisations – in particular, those representing [major groups](#) such as women, children and youth, indigenous peoples, and farmers. The [main conclusions](#) of these contributions are [compiled](#) by the UN ECOSOC.

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

An additional HLPF taking place every 4 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 [second SDG summit](#) will take place on [18-19 September 2023](#). The SDG summit is informed by a quadrennial **Global Sustainable Development Report** ([GSDR 2019](#) and [GSDR 2023](#)), 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, policymakers and civil society. During the SDG summit, Heads of State 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 [negotiated between the UN member states](#). 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.

Data revolution

The global SDG indicator framework

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.² 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 [231 indicators](#); most indicators are also disaggregated by age, sex, level of education or other criteria.

Several SDG indicators, such as the proportion of the 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 classify [SDG indicators into two 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; progress in methodology and standards led, notably, to the third tier in the classification being discontinued in 2020 (see Table 1).

Table 1 – Tier classification for global SDG indicators

Tier I 136 indicators*	Tier II 91 indicators*	Tier III 0 indicator (deprecated)
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 a methodology/standards are being (or will be) developed or tested. This tier was discontinued in 2020 as the indicators it contained are now standardised or no longer used for the SDGs.
Data are regularly produced by at least 50 % of countries (and 50 % of the population in every region where the indicator is relevant)	Data are not regularly produced by countries (regularly produced by less than 50 % of countries or for less than 50 % of the population in regions where the indicator is relevant)	

* Number of indicators as of 4 February 2022; in addition, four indicators have components spread between both tiers. Source: IAEG-SDGs, [Tier classification for global SDG indicators](#) (accessed 30 June 2023).

Custodian agencies

Under the 2030 Agenda, several UN or international agencies [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. In addition to the indicators of which they are custodians, the agencies also contribute to the work on other indicators;³ some indicators may be used under different goals,⁴ which reflects the interlinkage of all SDGs and avoids duplication of surveys.

Table 2 – Examples of indicators and custodian agencies

UN or international bodies	Examples of indicators of which they are custodians
FAO Food and Agriculture Organization	<i>Indicators on food, agriculture, forests and fisheries:</i> most SDG 2 indicators ('End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture'); 5.a.1 Women's ownership of agricultural land; 6.4.1 Water use efficiency; 12.3.1 Global food losses; 14.4.1 Fish stocks sustainability; 14.6.1 Illegal unreported unregulated fishing; 15.2.1 Sustainable forest management; etc.
ILO International Labour Organization	<i>Indicators on working conditions:</i> 1.1.1 Working poverty rate; 5.5.2 Proportion of women in managerial positions; 8.5.1 Gender pay gap; 8.7.1 Child labour rate; 10.4.1 Labour income share; etc.
OECD Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development	Indicators on official development assistance and <i>government spending for SDGs:</i> Total official flows (official development assistance plus other official flows) to: 2.a.2 Agriculture, 3.b.2 Medical research and basic health sectors, 4.b.1 Scholarships by sector and type of study, etc., 1.a.2 Proportion of total government spending on essential services (education, health and social protection); 8.a.1 Aid for Trade commitments and disbursements; etc.
UN-Habitat	<i>Indicators on living conditions and local governance:</i> 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.
UNESCO	<i>Indicators on including SDGs in education and research:</i> Most SDG 4 indicators ('Quality education'); 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.
UNICEF	<i>Indicators on child health and child socioeconomic conditions:</i> 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; 16.2.3 Proportion of young women and men aged 18-29 years who experienced sexual violence by age 18; etc.
UNODC UN Office on Drugs and Crime	<i>Indicators on crime or perceived safety:</i> 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.
World Bank	<i>Macro- and microeconomic indicators:</i> 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.
WTO , World Trade Organization ; ITC International Trade Centre ; UNCTAD UN Conference on Trade and Development	<i>Trade-related indicators:</i> 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.

Numbering: X.Y.Z means Indicator Z under Goal X, Target Y.

Source: IAEG-SDGs, [Tier classification for global SDG indicators](#) (accessed 30 June 2023).

Data collection and dissemination

National statistical offices are tasked with gathering data at country level. Due to the [diversity of indicators](#), a wide 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.).

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. Over the years, data collection has improved – except during the [COVID-19 crisis](#) – however the lack of data globally can still hinder the assessment of progress. The World Bank [found](#) that, between 2015 and 2019, national statistics bodies had, on average, reported on only half of the SDG indicators; 22 countries had reported on less than a quarter of the SDG indicators, and none had reported on the whole set of indicators.

Improving countries' statistical capacity is therefore indispensable to correctly track progress towards the SDGs: accordingly, UN or international agencies have streamlined the SDGs in their [action plans](#). In particular, they are tasked with providing technical assistance and capacity-building to help national statistical offices collect data. Along with missing data, another challenge is to ensure that the selected indicators correctly reflect progress towards the desired goals, a topic increasingly [discussed](#) among specialists. Researchers also hinted at [possible conflicts](#) between targets (such as poverty reduction and reducing CO₂ emissions – if the former is mainly due to an increase of per capita GDP).

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 developed 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 \(SDMX\)](#). In 2020, following a [comprehensive review](#) of the indicator framework, 14 indicators were replaced, eight reviewed, eight added and six deleted (or partly deleted). The debates between the UN Statistical Commission member states about these changes show that data collection and interpretation is not a merely technical issue:

Some expressed support for specific changes, such as the addition of an indicator on civil justice (16.3.3), the addition of an indicator on total greenhouse gas emissions per year (indicator 13.2.2), and in a revision to indicator 15.9.1, the integration of biodiversity into national accounting under the System of Environmental-Economic Accounting. On other changes, the speakers expressed concern, including on the proposed deletion of indicator 8.9.2 on the proportion of jobs in sustainable tourism industries out of total tourism jobs. China voiced concern about, among others, the addition of the GHG emissions indicator, noting that the global response to climate change should focus on equity and preserve each country's equal right to development. (IISD, 20 March 2020)

Available data for SDG indicators are transmitted to the UN [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. They feed the [UN SDG annual report](#) – in short and [extended](#) versions – which highlights the major trends per SDG globally and by regional groupings. Since 2019, it has featured a [progress chart](#) and an analysis of the [gender dimension](#) of SDG progress.

In addition, SDG data being [open](#) has made it possible for numerous NGOs, universities and think-tanks to produce their own data visualisations and interpretations.⁵ This openness of the UN database might also explain why some countries might choose not to collect or not to make public some data. [Researchers for the World Bank](#) found little correlation between the existence of a strong statistical system and the amount of reported SDG data, which led them to conclude that 'SDG data reporting may not only be a function of statistical capacity but perhaps also of political will'.

EU reporting tools

The EU-level voluntary review

The von der Leyen Commission has [committed to deliver](#) on the SDGs and has given each Commissioner a clear mandate to ensure the delivery on the SDGs within their policy area. President von der Leyen's [political guidelines](#) set quantified targets, which helped the EU further refine its SDG reporting. On 15 May 2023, the European Commission published the **first EU-level voluntary review** (EUVR) on progress towards the SDGs ([EUVR](#)). While reporting documents had been published in the past years, it is the first time such that a report – in particular its first annex '[Progress in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals](#)' – follows the [UN guidelines](#) for voluntary national reviews more strictly. The EUVR assesses how (and how much) EU actions and policies have contributed to progress towards achieving each of the SDGs.

The EUVR, informed by exchanges with Members and staff of the European Parliament, Member States, the [European Committee of the Regions](#), the [European Economic and Social Committee](#) (EESC),⁶ and an online stakeholder consultation, includes lessons learned and provides guidance on future steps to further implement the 2030 Agenda. The synopsis report of this [consultation](#) as well as several other annexes accompany the EUVR. One of them presents the impact on the SDGs of EU tools and mechanisms dedicated to [youth](#). **Statistical annexes** present the EU SDG indicators developed by the European Statistical Office (Eurostat) (see below: Reporting on results within the EU: EU SDG indicators). An **analysis then maps these indicators with actual EU policies** – i.e. shows [how SDGs are mainstreamed](#) in EU policies launched since 2019, based on [research](#) carried out by the EU's in-house Joint Research Centre (JRC). The analysis also assesses synergies and trade-off between SDGs in the EU, as well as the impact of the EU and Member States' official development assistance (ODA) to the achievement of SDGs in third countries (see below: EU's impact on SDG implementation in third countries: The Global Europe results framework).

Reporting on results within the EU: EU SDG indicators

The European Statistical Office (Eurostat) has developed its own set of sustainable development indicators, the 100 [EU SDG indicators](#), slightly different from the UN indicators. According to a [2019 analysis](#) commissioned by the EESC, 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 [JRC](#) (e.g. to estimate soil erosion or fish stocks evolution). While the first Eurostat reports evaluated progress as a positive change, but failed to assess whether the EU was on track towards the 2030 targets, the [2022](#) and [2023](#) editions not only measure progress over the past 5-15 years but also assess trends towards measurable 2030 targets, if these are clearly laid down in EU policies or strategies – which is the case for a [growing number of them](#) (see Table 3).

Table 3 – Examples of EU SDG indicators calculated against an official EU policy target

SDG	EU SDG indicator	Official target
1	People at risk of poverty or social exclusion	'The number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion should be reduced by at least 15 million by 2030' (European pillar of social rights action plan , 2021)
2	Area under organic farming	'reach the objective of at least 25 % of the EU's agricultural land under organic farming by 2030' (farm to fork strategy , 2020)
7 and 13	Share of renewable energy in gross final energy consumption	raise the share of renewable energy in the EU's overall energy consumption to 42.5 % by 2030 (provisional agreement between Council and Parliament on the renewable energy directive , 2023)
8	Young people neither in employment nor in education and training (NEET)	'decrease the rate of young people neither in employment, nor in education or training (NEETs) aged 15-29 from 12.6 % (2019) to 9 %' (European pillar of social rights action plan , 2021)
4 and 11	Tertiary educational attainment	'The share of 25-34 year-olds with tertiary educational attainment should be at least 45 %, by 2030' (European Education Area strategic framework , 2021)

Non-exhaustive list. Source: [Monitoring report on progress towards the SDGs in an EU context](#), 2023 edition.

EU's impact on SDG implementation in third countries: The Global Europe results framework

The scope of Eurostat's EU SDG indicators is limited to measuring results in the EU and its Member States. These indicators do not directly measure the EU's positive or negative impact on SDG progress in third countries. The 2023 edition analyses some of the [spill-over effects](#) of the EU's way of life and internal policies on third countries – as a result of CO₂ emissions, import of raw materials, third countries' cropland, grassland and forestry land used for EU consumption, and gross value added induced in third countries by EU consumption.

Conversely, Eurostat's EU SDG indicators do not measure how the EU contributes to helping third countries deliver on the SDGs. 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 partner 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. Besides, the EU does not always act as a single entity on the ground, as EU institutions and Member States can cooperate on the same programmes – ideally in the framework of [policy coherence for development](#). On top of that, the EU also contributes in the less-targeted form of budget support to third countries.

Despite these challenges, the EU and its Member States committed, under the 2017 [new European consensus on development](#), to collectively report every four years on their support to implementing the SDGs in developing countries. The first (and only one to date) joint report of this kind, '[Supporting the Sustainable Development Goals across the world](#)', was published in July 2019.⁷ 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. This first report on EU support for achieving the SDGs abroad actually built 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 (or 'EU results framework', EURF).

The [first version](#) of the EURF was launched in March 2015, with most indicators being linked to the then draft SDG targets. A [revised EU results framework](#), better aligned with the adopted SDG indicators, was published in October 2018. A second revision in January 2022 has been rebranded as the **Global Europe results framework (GERF)**, as it aligns with the new Global Europe 2021-2027 budgetary instrument and with the strategic plans for 2020-2024 of the Commission services that manage this instrument: the Directorates-General for International Partnerships ([DG INTPA](#)) and for European Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations ([DG NEAR](#)), and the Service for Foreign Policy Instruments ([FPI](#)). Each GERF indicator is matched both with the relevant SDGs and an EU strategic priority: Green Deal; Science, technology and innovation, and digital; Sustainable growth and jobs; Migration; Governance, peace and security; Human development.

The framework is composed of **three levels of indicators** (see box below), aimed 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).

Global Europe results framework indicators

32 level 1 indicators, matched to the SDGs at indicator level, 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 UN SDG indicators, but do not cover all of them. A level 1 indicator can be used to track progress for several level 2 indicators. Example: GERF 1.29 Proportion of seats held by women in (a) national parliaments and (b) local governments (SDG indicator 5.5.1).

39 level 2 indicators, matched to the SDGs at target level, concern the EU's contribution to development outputs in partner countries. 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. Each level 2 indicator is linked to a level 1 indicator; level 2 indicators are linked to a main and other relevant SDG targets. Example: GERF 2.37 Number of people benefiting from EU-funded interventions to counter sexual and gender-based violence (SDG target 5.2 Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres).

16 level 3 indicators, matched to the SDGs at goal level, measure policy priority mainstreaming, i.e. the share of EU-funded assistance directed towards specific countries (fragile states) or specific priorities (in the 2021-2027 budget, these priorities are often linked with spending targets – e.g. climate change, biodiversity, human development, migration and forced displacement). Level 3 indicators are linked to one or several level 2 indicators. Example: GERF 3.13 Number and share of EU external interventions promoting gender equality and women's empowerment (SDG 5).

While one cannot of course assume that there is a quantifiable causal link between EU interventions and SDG progress in a given third country, according to the European Commission the EU results framework should help assess ongoing programmes and projects more systematically and better track their contribution.

Even if all results measured at Level 2 cannot be fully attributed to EU funding specifically, there is a clear link between the EU resources mobilised and these results. Indeed, these results are collected and measured by including the relevant Level 2 indicators in the monitoring framework for all EU funded interventions, so that every year when values are reported at intervention level, they can be aggregated over all interventions to produce corporate values.

([Commission staff working document, SWD\(2022\) 22](#))

For example, it is assumed that the 'Total length of transport infrastructure supported by the EU (kms): (a) roads, (b) railways, (c) waterways' (GERF 2.18) partly contribute to developing 'quality, reliable, sustainable and resilient infrastructure' in the supported partner country (SDG target 9.1).

The staff working document accompanying the GERF points out that its predecessor (EURF) has improved the corporate accountability of EU interventions, but acknowledges that efforts have to be made for communication purposes or to meet the management and learning needs of other stakeholders. Currently, only part of its data is made available to the greater public in public reports

on EU development policies, such as the 2022 [annual report on the implementation of the EU instruments for financing external actions](#) and the 2019 [EU report on policy coherence for development](#).⁸

The first EU voluntary report published for the HLPF 2023 provides for each SDG the results of EU internal action and of the EU external action. For the latter, it describes:

- the global trends;
- the EU efforts of coherence between internal and external actions;
- the main external policies and initiatives impacting the analysed SDG;
- examples of EU actions – in particular those involving a joint programming of the EU and Member States (e.g. through the Global Gateway and Team Europe initiatives).

European Parliament's position on SDG monitoring

In a [resolution of 14 March 2019](#), in response to the Commission's reflection paper, [Towards a sustainable Europe by 2030](#), **Parliament** expressed its preference for developing an overarching EU strategy jointly endorsed by the Parliament, the Commission and the Council – therefore committing EU institutions and Member States alike. This scenario entailed 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. Parliament insisted on a better monitoring of negative spill-over effects. To this end, the resolution invited the Commission to draw up the overarching strategy, by first identifying the steps to be taken, notably in terms of 'statistics and disaggregated data collection'. Parliament also called upon the Commission to analyse the Member States' voluntary national reviews in order to identify good practices, and to analyse the voluntary national reviews of the least developed countries to assess their needs and better support them. It also recommended peer review and exchange of good practices in SDG implementation policies at OECD level. As mentioned above, the Commission and Council have partly responded to this request, by mainstreaming the SDGs in policies handled by the Commission and improving the Commission's reporting, but without making these binding on the EU Member States.

On 15 May 2023, the European Parliament [debated](#) and voted in plenary on the EU's role in the [implementation and delivery of the SDGs](#) inside and outside the Union (as it had also done in [2022](#)). It stresses the importance of accountability, transparency and good governance in the EU and third countries to correctly implement the 2030 Agenda and correctly assess progress towards the SDGs. The resolution also highlights the role of non-state players in monitoring SDG progress. It furthermore calls for the reinstatement of [the multi-stakeholder platform on SDGs](#) (the mandate for which ended in 2019) and the appointment of a Special Envoy for the SDGs to harness the mainstreaming of SDGs in EU external action 'and to ensure fair burden sharing and a level playing field'. It states that a new high-level EU 2030 Agenda implementation strategy is needed to define, notably, 'a revised set of concrete measurable, EU-wide, time-bound targets' and 'an updated monitoring system and indicators, taking into account the EU's internal and external impact on global SDG progress'. The EUVR presented on the same day by the Commission is a first step in this direction. On 26 June 2023, a conference in Parliament offered the opportunity for a dialogue between policymakers and civil society on the EUVR.

MAIN REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

European Commission, [EU Voluntary Review on progress in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#), Report to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions ([COM\(2023\)700](#)) and annexes ([SWD\(2023\) 700](#), [SWD\(2023\) 701](#), [SWD\(2023\) 702](#), [SWD\(2023\) 703](#)) – (see also: [Main messages](#) for the High Level Political Forum 2023).

Montvai D., [Budgetary control of the Sustainable Development Goals in the EU budget](#), IPOL, European Parliament, 2021.

Pichon E., [Understanding SDGs](#), EPRS, European Parliament, July 2023.

Shulla K. and Leal Filho W., [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 requested by the DEVE committee, European Parliament, December 2022 (dated January 2023). United Nations, [Sustainable Development Goals Knowledge Platform](#), website.

United Nations [official list](#) and [detailed description](#) of the SDG indicators.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ The first round of reviews was covered over a period of 3 years (2017-2019) instead of four. During the [HLPF 2020](#), participants mostly debated the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on SDG progress. However, the 17 SDGs will be covered at the end of the 2020-2023 cycle with [HLPF 2021](#), [HLPF 2022](#), and [HLPF 2023](#) covering respectively SDGs 1, 2, 3, 8, 10, 12, 13, 16, 17; SDGs 4, 5, 14, 15, 17; and SDGs 6, 7, 9, 11, 17.
- ² Created in 2015 by the UN Statistical Commission, the IAEG-SDGs is composed of representatives of statistical offices from [27 UN member states](#) (rotating); the UN's and other multilateral agencies have an observer status in the group.
- ³ For example, the World Bank is custodian of indicator 1.1.1 (population below the international poverty line); the ILO, as a partner agency, provides methodological input concerning the proportion of employed persons living in poverty.
- ⁴ For example 'deaths, missing persons and directly affected persons attributed to disasters (...)' is used: under SDG 1 ('No poverty'), as 1.5.1; under SDG 11 ('Sustainable cities'), as 11.5.1; and under SDG 13 ('Climate action'), as 13.1.1.
- ⁵ For example, the UN-funded Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) [SDG report's index](#) ('SDG Index') allows visualisation of the distance to the 2030 threshold.
- ⁶ The EESC has set up a [Sustainable Development Observatory](#) to better disseminate knowledge on sustainable development among civil society and EU institutions.
- ⁷ A second edition should have been issued in 2023 but the EUVR replaces it.
- ⁸ While the Commission uses this results framework for development and neighbourhood policies, EU reporting on other external policies is not yet clearly aligned with the SDG targets. A significant example is the 2021 [report on implementation and enforcement of EU trade agreements](#), which includes a chapter on trade and sustainable development but fails to mention either Agenda 2030 or the SDGs. EU results framework data therefore do not measure progress against all SDG targets and imperfectly account for the interlinkage of policy results: for example, the EU results framework is not used to provide clear evidence about the [security/development](#) nexus or the [migration/development](#) nexus, in either direction.

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