Sustainable Development Goals in EU regions

SUMMARY

The Sustainable Development Goals were established in 2015 as part of the United Nations (UN) 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The signatories adopted a policy framework with 17 goals, addressing such issues as poverty, hunger, health and wellbeing, education, gender equality, environment and climate, strong institutions, peace and justice. Sustainable development aims at balancing social, economic and environmental aspects, seeing them as interconnected.

The European Union (EU) has contributed to creating the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and takes action to implement them. It has committed to deliver on the 2030 Agenda through its internal and external policies, as outlined in the ‘Towards a Sustainable Europe by 2030’ reflection paper, the European Green Deal, the European Commission’s political priorities and its work programme. EU Member States prepare Voluntary National Reviews, in line with UN guidelines. Eurostat publishes annual monitoring reports showing EU progress on implementing the goals through a set of indicators adapted to the European context. Since 2019, the SDGs are included in the European Semester.

The Sustainable Development Goals also have a regional dimension, sometimes called 'localisation'. Achieving around 65% of the targets is estimated to require local and regional authority participation. 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.
Background

In 2015, UN member states adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals. The agenda provides a policy framework for a more sustainable future, which balances social wellbeing, environmental protection and economic prosperity. It also acknowledges the interconnections between various aspects of development (see Figure 1). The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) apply universally to all countries, as they address challenges affecting both the developing and developed world. The set of goals is the result of a participatory consultation process involving various stakeholders, such as NGOs, the private sector, and authorities at various levels of government. The EU was an active participant in these efforts.

The 17 SDGs are accompanied by 169 targets and 231 indicators. Each year, a review process takes place at the High-level Political Forum (HLPF) on sustainable development. During this conference, countries present their Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) and, in some cases, also regional achievements. The annual HLPF meetings usually focus only on a selection of SDGs. Every four years the HLPF transforms into an SDG summit, which gathers heads of state or government to review overall progress and set priority actions for the coming years. The annual reviews also feed into a global SDGs report. The 2020 edition of the report shows that more efforts are still needed to achieve the goals by 2030, especially in the context of recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic.

Figure 1 – UN Sustainable Development Goals


Given the broad and universal character of the SDGs, their successful implementation depends on the active involvement of international, national and subnational stakeholders. While national governments carry the primary responsibility for implementing the SDGs, it has been calculated that about 65% of the targets require participation of regional and local authorities. Efforts to 'localise' the SDGs are ongoing, ranging from conducting studies and organising events to integrating local reviews into national ones and producing fully fledged regional SDG strategies. The SDG framework allows for flexibility in adapting the goals to the territorial context, for instance within each goal it is possible to select indicators monitoring specific challenges relevant to a given locality. Reporting on SDGs at the regional level can thus help support the overall implementation of SDGs, reinforce national efforts, support regional development strategies, and provide a broader picture of within-country trends.
EU dimension

The EU has fully committed itself to SDG implementation. Following the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, the European Commission published a communication on ‘Next steps for a sustainable European future – European action for sustainability’ in 2016. This reviewed the SDGs within the EU policy framework and priorities, assessed the EU approach, and set out EU action to address the 17 goals. To outline long-term scenarios and stimulate debate at EU level, the Commission published a reflection paper ‘Towards a Sustainable Europe by 2030’, in January 2019. The three scenarios proposed included: 1) a new overarching EU sustainable development strategy, with the EU and its Member States committing to action, 2) mainstreaming SDGs in all EU policies by the Commission, without binding the Member States, and 3) enhanced focus on external SDG action while pursuing improvements at EU level.

The SDGs form an important part of Commission President Ursula von der Leyen’s political programme. The Commission’s intention to implement the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs is reflected in its comprehensive approach to sustainable development, the European Green Deal, the Commission work programme, and a number of other policy initiatives covering various aspects of the goals. In her political guidelines, the Commission President has also committed to integrating the SDGs in the European Semester, the framework for the coordination of Member States’ economic and budgetary policies. Since December 2019, the European Semester includes tracking of Sustainable Development Goals at EU level. The Country Reports featuring the Commission’s analysis of the Member States’ social and economic situation also cover monitoring of the SDGs, especially contribution of macroeconomic policies to their delivery.

Building on the Country Reports, the Commission’s Country-Specific Recommendations (CSRs) highlight the contribution of national reforms to progress towards SDGs. As indicated in the 2020 Annual Sustainable Growth Strategy (ASGS, previously known as Annual Growth Survey), this ‘refocusing of the European Semester’ puts the SDGs at the centre of EU policy-making and confirms Europe’s commitment to sustainability.

Monitoring the SDGs

Since 2017, Eurostat has been publishing annual monitoring reports on EU progress towards the SDGs. These are accompanied by a short summary brochure showing trends for each indicator. In addition, since 2018, Eurostat has produced a digital publication ‘SDGs & me’, with an analysis of each SDG by country and comparison of results with other EU countries.

Monitoring is based on a set of 100 indicators tracking the SDGs in the EU context. For 16 indicators, quantitative EU targets exist and thus progress is measured in relation to those targets (mainly in the areas of climate, energy consumption,
education, poverty and employment). All other indicators are analysed according to the direction and speed of change. The EU indicators are aligned with the UN framework, but in some cases adjusted to the European context (for instance, SDG1 on Hunger tracks the obesity rate rather than undernourishment, and SDG4 on Education measures tertiary education attainment rather than primary or secondary education). Other Europe-specific examples include land surface under organic farming (SDG2 Hunger), in work at-risk-of-poverty rate (SDG1 Poverty), and renewable energy and CO₂ emissions from new passenger cars (SDG13 Climate).

According to the 2020 report monitoring progress towards the SDGs in an EU context, over the past five years, the EU has made progress on almost all the goals. However, the pace between goals varies and some within-goal objectives are lagging behind (see Figure 2). The greatest advances have been made on fostering peace and personal security, access to justice and trust in institutions (SDG16). Good progress was noted in reducing poverty (SDG1), improving health (SDG3), quality of life in cities and communities (SDG11) and the labour market (SDG8). Progress on goals with an environmental dimension was slower, as targets on climate and energy (SDG7 and SDG13) and the shift to a circular economy (SDG12) stalled, leading to increased pressure on ecosystems and biodiversity (SDG15). Progress on education (SDG4), innovation (SDG9), inequalities (SDG10) and global partnerships (SDG17) is mixed. A movement away from the goal is observed for gender equality (SDG5). In case of two goals (SDG6 on Clean water and sanitation, and SDG14 on Life below water), data were insufficient to calculate a five-year trend. The 2020 SDG monitoring report describes the situation in the EU and its Member States up to 2019, which means that the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic are not yet included.

Regional dimension

While the UN framework for SDGs is predominantly country-based, efforts to 'localise' the SDGs are ongoing, including highlighting the links between local actions and global challenges. There is also growing awareness that successful implementation of the goals depends on effective collaboration between a variety of stakeholders and delivery on the ground. The annual High-level Political Forum, which brings together countries to assess global SDG progress, also features input from regions and cities. In 2019, the HLPF included a special event on 'Local Action for Global Commitments' and the work on including the regional dimension in the VNRs is ongoing. The UN has also set up a platform called 'Local2030: Localizing the SDGs', with resources and opportunities to share local experiences. The platform features an overview of local SDG actions around the world, a sample toolbox, and a selection of Voluntary Local Reviews, with many examples coming from the EU.

Goal 11 focuses specifically on 'Sustainable cities and communities' and covers such issues as public transport, air pollution, housing, waste and safety. However, it is estimated that without the participation of regional and local authorities, some 65 % of the targets under all SDGs will not be achieved, as the regions and cities have a hand in policies central to sustainable development. The SDG framework can thus be used to guide territorial strategies, offering the possibility to flexibly adjust the specific targets and indicators under each goal to the local context and within local competences.

According to the 2019 survey conducted by the European Committee of the Regions (CoR) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) among local and regional actors, about 60 % of respondents are familiar with the SDGs and intend to implement them. This share rises to 80 % in large and medium-sized cities. The majority of respondents support an overarching long-term EU strategy to mainstream the SDGs within its policies and ensure coordination across policy areas. The most common challenges identified included 'lack of awareness, support, capacities or trained staff' and 'difficulty to prioritise the SDGs over other agendas'.

These findings are also confirmed in the 2019 CoR study on ‘A territorial approach for the implementation of the SDGs in the EU – The role of the European Committee of the Regions’, which reviewed the state of play of SDG policies in the EU and the role of local and regional authorities
Sustainable Development Goals in EU regions

In 2017, the Commission established a high-level multi-stakeholder platform tasked with supporting and advising the Commission and other stakeholders on the implementation of the SDGs at EU level. In 2018, the platform published its advisory report on implementing the SDGs through the post-2020 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF). The report made a number of recommendations, including adding ‘social, environmental and climate indicators’ to European structural and investment funds. The platform also included a subgroup on ‘Delivering SDGs at local and regional level’. The subgroup published its recommendations to the European Commission in 2018. The recommendations highlighted the need to acknowledge the importance of the territorial dimension of SDGs, given the role of the regional and local level in their implementation; adopting a territorial approach taking the specificities of the territories into account, while ensuring policy coherence, maximising synergies and addressing trade-offs between different policy areas; implementing vertical and horizontal cooperation between all levels of governance (i.e. public administrations and other relevant stakeholders); involving LRAs in developing national strategies; developing indicators relevant to the local level; and consulting LRAs in order to adapt indicators to local problems and tasks.

According to the 2019 CoR study, current regional approaches range from perceiving the SDGs as a top-down additional burden, to being first movers in implementing local SDG strategies. Many EU countries have defined their sustainable development strategies, and some include a regional component. However, the local and regional SDG strategies differ, in terms of arrangements for multi-level governance, sector and stakeholder involvement, and detailed definitions of indicators and targets. More ambitious approaches include fully-fledged SDG strategies with cross-cutting themes and indicators (see box above), other are based on updating previous policies or addressing SDGs through a specific sector view (e.g. energy policy or gender equality). The level of detail, such as the number of indicators, and monitoring arrangements also vary.

European Handbook for SDG Voluntary Local Reviews

The European Commission’s Joint Research Centre (JRC) published a European Handbook for SDG Voluntary Local Reviews in 2020, prepared with the support of the Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy (DG REGIO). The Handbook addresses some of the territorial challenges mentioned above, by offering a framework for the selection of indicators tailored to the local context and enabling comparisons between different localities. It is primarily aimed at municipalities and focuses on urban issues, although it can be used by any regional or local authority. It follows the framework of national reviews and adjusts them to the local level. A Voluntary Local Review can thus become a

Regional SDG initiatives

Agenda Euskadi, Basque Country 2030 is a regional strategy aligned with the SDGs and includes corresponding legislative initiatives, indicators and sectoral plans.

Helsinki City Strategy 2017-2021 links its themes and objectives to the implementation of the SDGs and was included in the Voluntary Local Review presented at the HLPF 2019 in New York.

Flanders is implementing the SDGs through its ‘Vision 2050’ and ‘Focus 2030: Flanders’ Goals for 2030’. The Flemish strategy experiments with multi-stakeholder partnerships, and Flanders is one of the pilot regions in the OECD programme on a territorial approach to the SDGs.
tool that helps assess progress on SDGs and contribution to the 2030 Agenda within the relevant LRA competences. It enables cities (and regions) to prioritise actions, raise awareness about sustainability in the administration and local community, and foster collaboration between stakeholders. Regional or local reviews can also feed into national reporting and provide insight into within-country trends and patterns.

The Handbook presents each of the 17 goals separately, describes the European and local dimension, and proposes a set of local indicators for each goal. These are based on UN and Eurostat indicators, with some additional ones adjusted to the local context. Examples of indicators with particular local relevance include the share of females elected to local councils (as opposed to country-level share elected in national parliaments), access to green spaces within walking distance, urban waste per capita, tree cover density and access to public transport. Some data are already available and ready-to-use for LRAs. For instance, DG REGIO, JRC and Eurostat produce various regional data, which can also be supplemented from such sources as the European Environment Agency (EEA), satellites, open and big data. A second edition of the handbook is planned for 2022. Exploratory work is also ongoing on testing the handbook with pilot cities, upscaling indicators to the regional level, and examining links with cohesion policy.

**European Parliament**

In its March 2019 resolution on the 'Annual strategic report on the implementation and delivery of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)', the Parliament expressed its preference for the first scenario outlined by the Commission in its reflection paper. This scenario entailed an EU SDG strategy implemented by the EU and the Member States, supported by a reporting mechanism. The Parliament also called for 'an EU budget which gives sustainable development the status of a primary objective', and highlighted the importance of EU internal and external action. It also supported a multi-level governance approach, based on cooperation between the EU, its Member States, regional and local authorities, and active engagement of stakeholders.

In its 2017 resolution on 'EU action for sustainability', the Parliament recalled that sustainable development is an EU fundamental objective laid down in Article 3(3) of TEU. It considered implementing the SDGs and 2030 Agenda as crucial for the EU and described achieving the SDGs as Europe’s legacy to future generations. Parliament also called for mainstreaming of sustainable development in the post-2020 EU budget, and for sufficient allocations to achieving the SDGs. It highlighted the significance of cohesion policy as the main investment policy of the EU, and recalled the application of sustainability criteria for the European structural and investment funds. In the context of reporting on SDGs, Parliament encouraged Member States to develop their reports in cooperation with competent local and regional authorities.

In its 2016 resolution on the 'Follow-up to and review of the 2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development Goals', the European Parliament called on the Commission to prepare 'a proposal for an overarching Sustainable Development Strategy encompassing all relevant internal and external policy areas, with a detailed timeline up to 2030'. It insisted that such a strategy should be devised in consultation with stakeholders, such as national parliaments, local authorities and civil society.
European Committee of the Regions

In its 2020 opinion 'A Sustainable Europe by 2030: Follow-up to the UN Sustainable Development Goals, ecological transition and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change', the European Committee of the Regions (CoR) called for formal involvement of regions and cities in the process implementing (localising) the SDGs at international, European and national level. It also welcomed the European Commission’s commitment to sustainability expressed in the European Green Deal and EU climate action, including the 2050 climate neutrality targets. In 2019, the CoR adopted an opinion on 'Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): a basis for a long-term EU strategy for a sustainable Europe by 2030'. The opinion called for mainstreaming of all SDG dimensions in EU policies and aligning the future cohesion policy objectives with the SDGs. It also stressed the need for an overarching EU strategy, with time-bound targets and concrete deliverables for 2030, based on monitoring mechanisms and coordinating implementation between all levels of government.

In 2019, the CoR published a commissioned study on 'A territorial approach for the implementation of the SDGs in the EU – The role of the European Committee of the Regions', which confirmed the significant involvement of local and regional authorities in SDG strategies. It identified the role of the CoR as a major forum providing opportunities to diffuse such experiences at EU level and among LRAs to support capacity building for SDG implementation. This role includes facilitating exchange of best practices, generating knowledge and facilitating partnerships, for instance via seminars promoting the creation of local and regional SDG strategies. During the European Week of Regions and Cities in October 2020, the CoR co-organised several workshops dedicated to the implementation of SDGs in EU regions, featuring regional and local pioneers, and covering such topics as benchmarking and indicator sets for SDGs (e.g. JRC Handbook), using smart specialisation strategies for SDGs, and achieving the 2030 Agenda through cohesion policy.

The CoR also collaborated with the OECD on conducting a survey of local and regional authorities and stakeholders on their contribution to the SDGs. The results were presented at a 2019 conference 'Regions and Cities Making the SDGs Happen', and fed into the CoR 2019 opinion and a 2020 OECD report on the territorial approach to SDGs.

Outlook

In light of the coronavirus pandemic, many policy areas covered by the SDGs will require intensified recovery efforts. As sustainability and climate issues gain prominence on the EU agenda, the commitment to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals is also likely to strengthen. The SDG framework and their monitoring based on tailor-made indicators offers an opportunity to translate the vision of sustainable development into concrete actions and policies. The efforts to 'localise' the 2030 Agenda and involve subnational actors in SDG implementation are also likely to accelerate in the coming years. Numerous regional and local SDG initiatives confirm high interest in contributing to the global agenda, as well as using the SDG framework to shape individual territorial development strategies. Initiatives such as the JRC Handbook for Voluntary Local Reviews can help regions and cities apply a ready-to-use set of indicators, while other EU-level activities foster exchange of experiences, partnerships and peer-learning. Over time, regional indicator sets may become more comprehensive and standardised, allowing for greater comparability between different regions and cities. SDG implementation based on involvement of regional, local and civil society stakeholders is essential for an efficient and successful achievement of the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development.

MAIN REFERENCES

European Commission, Sustainable Development Goals.
European Committee of the Regions, A territorial approach for the implementation of the SDGs in the EU – The role of the European Committee of the Regions, 2019.


ENDNOTES

1 Their predecessors, the Millennium Development Goals (2000-2015), were a UN framework made up of eight goals with relevance to developing countries.

2 The implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals has an internal and external dimension. This briefing focuses on the internal implementation of SDGs in the EU and its regions. In relation to the external dimension, the Commission published two other communications in 2016: ‘A new European Consensus on Development’ and ‘Towards a renewed partnership with African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries’. In terms of monitoring the external dimension of EU action on SDGs, the Commission produces quadrennial reports, the latest one being ‘Supporting the Sustainable Development Goals across the world: The 2019 Joint Synthesis Report of the European Union and its Member States’.

3 It is important to note that since its beginnings the European Semester has been accompanied by reports tracking progress towards the ‘Europe 2020 strategy’. Since 2018, the Social Scoreboard monitoring the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights has been included in one of the key annual documents of the Semester, the Joint Employment Report.

4 Between 2005 and 2015, Eurostat produced biannual reports monitoring the EU Sustainable Development Strategy of 2001 (COM(2001)264). The reports tracked an EU set of Sustainable Development Indicators (SDIs) in a variety of thematic areas. These previous efforts enable Eurostat to calculate long-term trends for some of the current SDG indicators.

5 While this briefing focuses on the regional implementation of SDGs, it is also important to note the contribution of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) on civil society involvement in Agenda 2030. See for instance, the EESC opinions on SDGs and the work of its Sustainable Development Observatory.

6 The mandate of the ‘High-level multi-stakeholder platform on the implementation of SDGs’ ended in December 2019.

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