

Understanding SDGs

The UN's Sustainable Development Goals

SUMMARY

In 2015, the United Nations adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), to be attained by 2030. Unlike their antecedents, the SDGs commit both developed and developing countries, and embrace the economic, environmental and social aspects of development. The SDGs and the broader 2030 Agenda for sustainable development, of which they form the core, are based on findings that human activities have triggered dramatic changes in the conditions on Earth (climate change and biodiversity loss), which in turn have contributed to the deterioration of human wellbeing. To reverse the trend, there was an urgent need to simultaneously address the multiple causes and consequences of environmental depletion and social inequalities. To this end, it is necessary to develop synergies between the SDGs and manage the trade-offs between them.

Challenges in pursuing the SDGs include the fact that countries do not necessarily have an equal starting point and, even more importantly, that regardless of their stage of development, they can no longer afford to apply the current development model, where production and consumption happen at the expense of natural resources. According to many observers, this model creates unsolvable tensions between SDGs, notably between the safeguarding of natural resources and the aspirations for improved wellbeing. Halfway to the 2030 deadline, progress towards the SDGs is insufficient or, in some cases, has even gone into reverse. The structural transformation that would bring about the needed acceleration requires a joint push by the international community, but an equally strong one by individuals and public or private legal persons. The European Union was a leader in drafting the SDGs; it is also a frontrunner in mainstreaming the SDGs in all its policies. At the high level political forum on sustainable development coming up in July 2023, the EU will present a detailed review of its achievements and plans for each SDG. The European Parliament regularly assesses the EU commitments on achieving the SDGs.

This further updates an earlier briefing; the first edition of which, by Marta Latek and Eric Pichon, was published in December 2019.



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A universal and comprehensive agenda

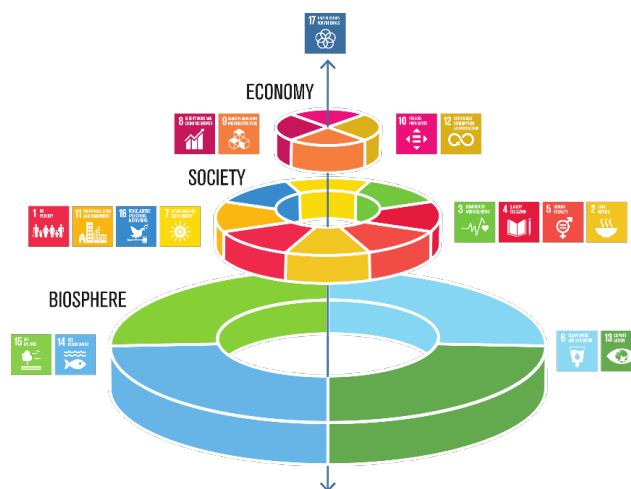
Figure 1 – The 17 SDGs



Source: [United Nations](https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/).

In September 2015, the 193 UN member states unanimously adopted the [2030 Agenda for sustainable development](https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/), a global commitment to navigate humanity towards greater wellbeing and to forge a new relationship between sustainability and development. This global agenda unfolded in a novel institutional setting with a high level of participation. Its decade-long elaboration [process](#) involved several stakeholders: non-governmental organisations, private-sector entities and local authorities in various frameworks, including global and national consultations. These consultations (the [Global Conversation](#)), included 88 national and 11 thematic dialogues and an online worldwide survey, enabling more than a million people to share their views on the new global development agenda. The resulting charter set interconnected and indivisible goals, the [17 Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs, see Figure 1), each with a series of specific targets to be attained by 2030. The 2030 Agenda recognises environmental sustainability as an essential and necessary dimension of human development, alongside the social, economic and political dimensions (Figure 2). Furthermore, it emphasises the interlinkages among previous international commitments.¹

Figure 2 – Economies and societies as embedded parts of the biosphere



Source: [Beyond growth](#), EPRS, 2023. Based on [Stockholm Resilience Centre](#) findings, Stockholm University. Picture by Azote ([CC BY-ND 3.0](#)).

National governments carry the primary, formal responsibility for implementing the SDGs (even though the goals are [voluntary](#) in nature), and they have therefore committed to [reporting systematically](#) on progress towards achieving them. The role of the UN, and more specifically of its Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and General Assembly (UNGA), is to assist countries in this process, in particular by providing [guidelines](#) and, if needed, support. Every year, UN member states and other stakeholders exchange feedback on their successes, challenges and lessons learned during a **high-level political forum on sustainable development (HLPF)**, held under the auspices of the ECOSOC. In [July 2023](#), the HLPF will examine how to accelerate 'the recovery from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) and the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at all levels', with a focus on:

- [SDG 6](#) – Clean water and sanitation: Ensure access to water and sanitation for all;
- [SDG 7](#) – Affordable and clean energy: Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy;
- [SDG 9](#) – Industry, innovation and infrastructure: Build resilient infrastructure, promote sustainable industrialization and foster innovation;
- [SDG 11](#) – Sustainable cities and communities: Make cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable;
- [SDG 17](#) – Partnerships for the Goals: Revitalise the global partnership for sustainable development.

Every four years, at the **SDG summit** – a special HLPF under the auspices of the UN General Assembly – world leaders discuss cross-cutting issues and set priority actions with a view to accelerating the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The [first SDG summit](#) took place in New York, on 24 and 25 September 2019. At the end of this summit, a [political declaration](#) acknowledged the slow progress in several areas and committed to deliver faster on SDGs during the remaining 10 years before 2030 – a '[decade of action](#)' with stakeholders voluntarily pledging to '[acceleration actions](#)', vetted by the UN. The second SDG summit will take place in [September 2023](#).

Figure 3 – Crises affecting progress towards the SDGs



Source: [EPRS briefing on future shocks 2022](#), [IISD](#) article (2022), and UN SDG logos.

Policy coherence calls for a paradigm shift

The SDGs are universal, integrated and inter-related in nature and are set against the backdrop of an increasingly interconnected world; policy and institutional coherence is therefore a key prerequisite for achieving them. Revitalising the global partnerships for sustainable development is at the core of the 2030 Agenda, as laid down in SDG 17. Many countries have already established [coordination structures](#) at national level. The UN has also [reformed](#) its structures and processes to address SDG implementation at country level in a [more integrated way](#). The principle of [policy coherence for sustainable development](#), as laid down in the 2030 Agenda, not only applies to traditional stakeholders such as the [UN system](#), the EU or [national governments](#), but also requires the active involvement of [subnational stakeholders, the private sector, and citizens, including minority groups](#). To leverage the funds needed for [financing the SDGs](#) ('from billions to trillions', according to the [World Bank](#)), partnership with many contributors is needed, from [multilateral banks](#) to [individuals](#).

Some argue that the dominant economic model based on [economic growth and consumption](#) challenges coherence between SDGs. For example, an [analysis of correlations](#) confirms that, when poverty reduction is mainly due to an increase in per capita gross domestic product (GDP), it has a negative effect on the target of reducing CO₂ emissions. Individual countries cannot avoid making [trade-offs](#) to achieve progress towards some SDGs in the short term. However, there are few targets towards which the world is on track (see Table 3 – 2021 data, accounting only partly for coronavirus pandemic impacts). Reaching all SDGs at global level requires a change of mindset, as highlighted in the first quadrennial [Global sustainable development report \(GSDR 2019\)](#), drafted by an independent group of scientists.² GSDR 2019 warns that progress is behind schedule for most SDG targets – including movements away from some of them (see Table 4 for 2021 data), and calls for a radical structural change to 'address those aspects of economic growth and production that perpetuate deprivations, generate socioeconomic and gender inequalities, deplete the global environmental commons and threaten irreversible damage'. According to the report, science can help in this, by thoroughly analysing the 'systemic interconnections' between SDG targets. As an example, the above-mentioned analysis of correlations finds that investing in human wellbeing, e.g. through programmes aimed at reducing child mortality or reinforcing education, as well as the environment, e.g. through fostering renewable energy production to reduce CO₂ emissions, does not have adverse effects on other goals.

The concept of **sustainable development** gained ground in the 1980s. The Brundtland Commission, appointed in 1983 by the UN Secretary General, defines it in its [seminal report](#) (1987) as '**development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs**'. This report clearly highlights the interconnectedness of poverty, inequality and environmental degradation. Many SDG targets can be traced back to the recommendations drafted in this report. However, several analysts, including [Dennis Meadows](#), a former member of the [Club of Rome](#), argue that development in the sense of economic growth [cannot be sustainable](#), as it inevitably depletes natural resources, so that they become unavailable or too expensive for many.

Table 1 – Progress towards many SDG targets is slowing

Substantial global progress towards SDG targets:	In Goals:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Achieve universal access to electricity 	SDG 7 – Affordable and clean energy
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase access to mobile networks 	SDG 9 – industry, innovation and infrastructure
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enhance access to technology by increasing internet use 	SDG 17 – Partnerships for the Goals

Global backsliding on SDG targets:	In Goals:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure access by all people to safe, nutritious and sufficient food all year round 	SDG 2 – Zero hunger
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • End the epidemic of malaria • Increase diphtheria-tetanus-pertussis vaccine coverage among 1-year-olds 	SDG 3 – Good health and wellbeing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Achieve full employment 	SDG 8 – Decent work and economic growth
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce the proportion of urban populations living in slums 	SDG 11 – Sustainable cities and communities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce global greenhouse gas emissions 	SDG 13 – Climate action
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase the proportion of fish stocks within biologically sustainable levels 	SDG 14 – Life below water
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By 2020, protect and prevent the extinction of threatened species 	SDG 15 – Life on land
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce the proportion of unsentenced detainees 	SDG 16 – Peace, justice and strong institutions

[Trend assessment](#) measuring progress made towards the target from a baseline year to the most recent data point. Source: United Nations, [Sustainable Development Goals Progress Chart 2022](#). (Selection; other indicators show fair progress but acceleration needed, limited or no progress).

For more information about targets and indicators, see [Reporting on SDG implementation](#), EPRS 2023.

EU contribution

Having played an active role in elaborating the SDGs, the EU and its Member States have also committed to [implementing](#) them in their domestic and foreign policies. On 22 November 2016, the European Commission presented a [communication on the next steps for a sustainable European future](#), including a first mapping of existing European policies' contribution to the SDGs. On the same date, the Commission presented a [communication on future relations with the Africa, Caribbean and Pacific group of countries \(ACP-EU 'post-Cotonou'\)](#), and a [proposal for a new European consensus on development](#) was [adopted](#) in June 2017 – both in line with the 2030 Agenda.

Both the **European Commission**, in President Ursula von der Leyen's [political guidelines](#), and the **Council of the EU**, in its [22 June 2021 conclusions](#), have committed to making the SDGs a guiding principle for all EU policies. This '[holistic approach](#)' for delivering on the SDGs is reflected in most [European Commission proposals](#). The EU voluntary report for the HLPF 2023 highlights among others the following policies and strategies:

Planet and prosperity – The [European Green Deal](#)

- The '[Farm to Fork](#)' Strategy
- The [European Climate Law](#) enshrining the 2050 climate neutrality objective
- The contribution to achieving similar goals in third countries, notably through the Global Europe instrument of the budget ('35% contributes to climate action (SDG 13), including through support for sustainable energy (SDG 7)')

People and prosperity – An economy that works for people and a Europe fit for the digital age

- The [European Pillar of Social Rights](#)
- The [Strategy on the rights of persons with disabilities 2021-2030](#)
- The contribution to achieving similar goals in third countries, notably through the [Global Gateway](#)
- The [Digital Decade](#), the EU strategy for digital transformation

- The [Strategy on the Rights of the Child](#)
- The [Digital for Development Hub](#) to support third countries' digitalisation

People and peace – promoting our European way of life and a new push for European democracy

- The [Security Union Strategy](#)
- The [European Rule of Law Mechanism](#)
- The [New Pact on Migration and Asylum](#)
- The [Gender Equality Strategy](#)
- The contribution to achieving similar goals in third countries, notably with at least 20% of the Global Europe Instrument contributing to human development and 'ensuring that at least 85% of all its external actions are gender-responsive'

The EU Statistical Office, Eurostat, publishes an annual report on [progress](#) towards the SDGs. Since 2017, this [report](#) is based on a specific set of [EU SDG indicators](#), some of which match [measurable targets](#) set in EU policy documents (see Table 2).³

Table 2 – Progress towards some official and measurable EU targets

Goals	EU SDG indicators showing significant progress towards an EU target
SDG 3 – Good health and well-being	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Premature deaths due to exposure to fine particulate matter (<i>also in SDG 11 – Sustainable cities and communities</i>)
SDG 4 – Quality education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early leavers from education and training • Tertiary educational attainment
SDG 7 – Affordable and clean energy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Primary energy consumption • Final energy consumption • Share of renewable energy in gross final energy consumption
SDG 8 – Decent work and economic growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employment rate • Young people neither in employment nor in education and training
SDG 9 – Industry, innovation and infrastructure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tertiary educational attainment • Share of households with high-speed internet connection (<i>also in SDG 17 – Partnerships for the Goals</i>)
SDG 14 – Life below water	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Marine protected areas
SDG 15 Life on land	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Terrestrial protected areas
Goals	EU SDG indicator showing a shift away from an EU target
SDG 4 – Quality education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low achieving 15-year-olds in reading, mathematics or science
SDG 13 – Climate action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Net greenhouse gas emissions from land use, land use change and forestry

[Trend](#) compared against a theoretical trend necessary to reach the quantitative target set within the political process. Source: Eurostat, [How has the EU progressed towards the SDGs?](#), accessed 3 July 2023. (Selection; other indicators measuring progress towards an EU target show moderate or insufficient progress, and for other indicators a measurable EU target has not been set).

As concerns the impacts of external policies, in 2023, Eurostat's monitoring report on progress towards the SDGs analyses some of the [spill-over effects of EU consumption](#) both on the EU and on third countries:

- **Carbon dioxide (CO₂) footprint:** EU consumption generated 9.3 % of global CO₂ emissions in 2020. The EU's net imports of CO₂ emissions (embodied in goods and

services) increased between 2015 and 2020 – hence an increased negative spill-over effect on exporting countries.

- **Material footprint:** In 2020, the EU consumed 6.4 % of raw materials used globally. Its net imports of raw materials decreased between 2015 and 2020 – hence the decrease in the negative spill-over effect on exporting countries. However, the trend could be reversed as a result of the EU's efforts to secure its access to [strategic raw materials](#) for its green and digital transformation.
- **Land footprint:** In 2019, the EU consumed about 8 % of the global cropland (net import increased by 25 % compared to 2014), 2 % of the global grassland, and 7 % of the worldwide forest area.
- **Gross value added (GVA):** EU consumption generated € 11 600 billion GVA in 2020 and the EU's consumption patterns make it a net exporter of GVA (positive spill-over)⁴

In addition, the voluntary report that the EU will submit at 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;
- and 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

In a [12 May 2016 resolution](#) ahead of the HLPF 2016, the **Parliament** called on the Commission to prepare an overarching sustainable development strategy with a detailed implementation plan and timeline and an effective monitoring mechanisms. On [6 July 2017](#), Parliament proposed to improve the compatibility of a range of EU policies (such as agriculture, energy, health, education, or migration) with the SDGs in their internal and external dimensions, and to mainstream SDGs in the 2021-2027 budgetary framework. A [14 March 2019 resolution](#) requested that the Commission analyse the distance to achieving the SDG targets, so that the gap between what is happening on the ground and the UN priorities and the inconsistencies among EU policies could be reduced. On [23 June 2021](#), Parliament underlined the need to address the risks that the consequences of the pandemic and the recession pose to SDG achievement globally and more specifically in the least developed countries (LDCs).

The Parliament also stresses the need to ensure effective EU external policy support for implementing the SDGs in the developing countries. In its [resolution of 14 February 2017](#) on the revision of the European consensus on development, it reiterated its long-term position that the fight against poverty and hunger should remain a primary goal, and insisted that official development aid (ODA) should remain the backbone of EU development policy. Furthermore, it once again called upon the Member States to fulfil their commitment to dedicating 0.7 % of their gross national income (GNI) to ODA.

In its plenary sittings of [June 2022](#) and [May 2023](#), the Parliament assessed the implementation and delivery of the SDGs, and called on the Commission to present a comprehensive strategy for achieving Agenda 2030, which would define:

- a new governance framework, with a 'high-level Commissioner who is accountable for the implementation of the SDGs across all portfolios' and a consultative multi-stakeholder platform (gathering regional and local governments, civil society organisations and scientists);
- 'a revised set of concrete, measurable, EU-wide, time-bound targets and indicators and concrete measures for achieving them', with clear monitoring and a financial plan;

- 'a plan for the EU's SDG diplomacy and international cooperation', with the appointment of a special EU envoy for the SDGs, to promote coherent action at global level.

MAIN REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

[The Sustainable Development Goals](#), United Nations website.

[Sustainable Development Goals](#), European Commission web page.

[Topical digest on SDGs](#), EPRS, European Parliament, 2023.

Halleux V. and Pichon E., [Clean Water and Sanitation: The EU role in SDG 6](#), EPRS, European Parliament, July 2023

Pichon E., [Reporting on SDG implementation: UN mechanisms and the EU approach](#), EPRS, European Parliament, EPRS, July 2023.

Widuto, A., [EU progress towards Sustainable Development Goal on energy \(SDG 7\)](#), EPRS, European Parliament, July 2023

Widuto A., [Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\) in EU regions](#), EPRS, European Parliament, 2022.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ The 2030 Agenda cites the [Rio Declaration on Environment and Development](#) (1992), the [World Summit on Sustainable Development](#) (2002), the [World Summit for Social Development](#) (1995), the [Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development](#) (1994), the [Beijing Platform for Action](#) (1995), the [United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development](#) ('Rio+20', 2012) and their follow-ups.
- ² The second [Global Sustainable Development Report](#) will be published for the SDG summit in September 2023.
- ³ For more information on SDG reporting methods and tools, see the EPRS briefing on [Reporting on SDG implementation: UN mechanisms and the EU approach](#), EPRS, European Parliament, 2023.
- ⁴ 'Gross value added (GVA): Total GVA induced by EU consumption in 2020 was nearly EUR 11 600 billion. In the same year, the GVA generated in the EU as a result of consumption outside the EU was higher than the GVA induced in non-EU economies, making the EU a net exporter of GVA. Since 2015, the net balance between GVA resulting from EU imports and exports has also increased.' ([Eurostat](#), 2023)

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