European Parliament

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 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 issues such 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 both setting and implementing the SDGs. 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 and the European Commission's political priorities and work programme. To measure their progress towards achieving the goals, EU Member States prepare voluntary national reviews, in line with UN guidelines. EU-level progress is measured through a set of indicators adapted to the EU context, and Eurostat publishes annual monitoring reports on the results. The objectives of the SDGs were integrated into the European Semester in 2019.

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

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This is an update of an earlier briefing published in December 2020.

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Background

In 2015, UN member states adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). 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 SDGs apply universally to all countries, as they address challenges affecting both the developing and developed world.[1] 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 2021 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 coronavirus pandemic.

Figure 1 – UN Sustainable Development Goals

Source: United Nations.

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 the participation of regional and local authorities. Efforts to localise the SDGs (that is, adapt them to reflect the local realities and needs) 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 the SDGs, reinforce national efforts, support regional development strategies and provide a broader picture of within-country trends.

EU dimension

The EU has fully committed 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.[2] This document reviewed the SDGs in the light of the EU policy framework and priorities, assessed the EU approach, and mapped 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](#) on Towards a Sustainable Europe by 2030, in January 2019. The three proposed scenarios included: 1) a new overarching EU sustainable development strategy would be introduced, with the EU and its Member States committing to action; 2) the Commission would mainstream the SDGs in all EU policies, without this having a binding effect on the Member States; and 3) enhanced focus would be placed 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 has included tracking of the SGDs at EU level.[3] The Commission's annual [country reports](#) on the Member States' social and economic situation also cover monitoring of the SDGs, focusing on four dimensions of 'competitive sustainability': environmental sustainability, fairness, productivity and macroeconomic stability.
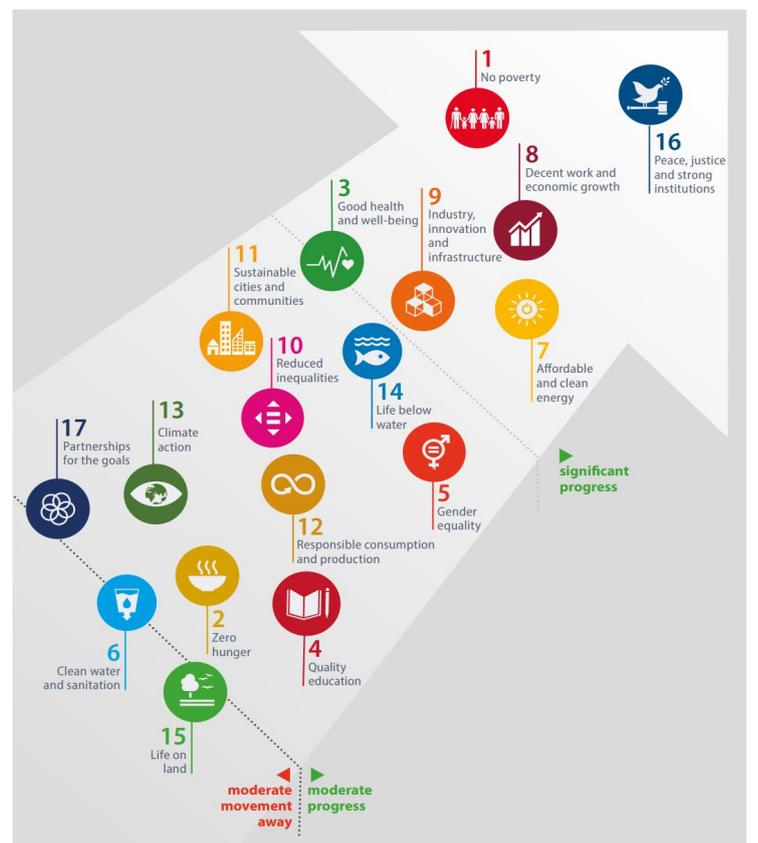
Building on the country reports, the Commission's [country-specific recommendations](#) (CSRs) highlight the contribution of national reforms to progress towards the SDGs. The Commission's 2022 [annual sustainable growth survey](#) confirms that the European Semester will continue to include fully updated and consistent SDG reporting across the Member States.

Monitoring the SDGs

Since 2017, Eurostat has been publishing annual monitoring [reports](#) on EU progress towards the SDGs.[4] These reports 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 a comparison of results with other EU countries.

Monitoring is based on a set of about 100 [indicators](#) tracking the SDGs in the EU context. Quantitative EU targets exist for 22 indicators, and thus progress is

Figure 2 – Overview of EU progress on the SDGs over the past five years

Source: [Eurostat](#), 2022.

measured in relation to those targets (mainly in the areas of climate, environment, agriculture, 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 they are adjusted to the EU context (for instance, SDG1 on Hunger tracks obesity rather than undernourishment, and SDG4 on Education measures tertiary education attainment rather than primary or secondary education). Other EU-specific examples include land surface under organic farming (SDG2 Hunger), in-work at-risk-of-poverty rate (SDG1 Poverty), and renewable energy and CO_2 emissions from new passenger cars (SDG13 Climate).

According to the 2022 Eurostat monitoring report on progress towards the SDGs in an EU context, the EU has made progress on all the goals over the past five years (see Figure 2). However, the pace between goals varies and some within-goal objectives are lagging behind. The greatest advances have been made in fostering peace and personal security, ensuring access to justice and building trust in institutions (SDG16). Significant progress has been scored in reducing poverty and social exclusion (SDG1), in the domains of the economy and the labour market (SDG 8), in clean and affordable energy (SDG 7) and in innovation and infrastructure (SDG 9). Good progress has also been achieved in health and well-being (SDG 3), life below water (SDG 14) and gender equality (SDG 5). Progress towards the other goals has been slower, while some goals have even showed slightly unsustainable overall trends over the five-year period. No progress has been observed as regards water and sanitation (SDG6), while life on land (SDG15) has experienced a moderate movement away from the goal. In analysing the data, it must be noted that figures on SDG1 (poverty) are available only up to 2019 and therefore do not take into account the coronavirus pandemic. Moreover, progress on SDG7 (energy) reflects the significant drop in energy consumption in 2020.

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 (HLPF), which brings together countries to assess global SDG progress, also features input from regions and cities. In 2020, for the fourth time already the HLPF included a special event on local action for global commitments; furthermore, work on including the regional dimension in the voluntary national reports is ongoing. The UN has also set up the Local2030: Localizing the SDGs platform offering 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 issues such as public transport, air pollution, housing, waste and safety. However, it is estimated that without the participation of local and regional authorities (LRAs), 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 players, 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 LRAs in their implementation. The main challenges to SDG delivery at local level include lack of continuity in political commitments to sustainable development; lack of awareness; lack of coordination between different levels of governance and different policy departments; insufficient financial resources; and lack of capacity to follow up on indicators and make connections between the different systems of indicators maintained by the UN, Eurostat, and the national and regional authorities. The study recommends better integrating the SDGs into the EU budget and political agendas, and clearly defining the relevant policy objectives, priorities and targets. It also calls for better involvement of all levels of government and civil society, efficient use of funds, and appropriate monitoring of harmonised indicators.[5]

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.[6] The platform also included a stakeholder subgroup on 'Delivering SDGs at local and regional level'. In its 2018 recommendations to the Commission, the subgroup highlighted the need to acknowledge the importance of the territorial dimension of the SDGs, given the role of the regional and local level in their implementation; to

> **Regional SDG initiatives**
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> Agenda Euskadi Basque Country 2030 is a regional strategy that is aligned with the SDGs and includes corresponding legislative initiatives, indicators and sectoral plans.
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> The city of Espoo in Finland conducts a number of local policies aligned with the SDGs. Its voluntary local review was submitted to the HLPF 2021 in New York.
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> Flanders is implementing the SDGs through its 'Vision 2050' and 'Focus 2030: Flanders' Goals for 2030'. Its 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.

adopt 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; to implement vertical and horizontal cooperation between all levels of governance (i.e. public administrations and other relevant stakeholders); to involve LRAs in developing national strategies; to develop indicators relevant to the local level; and to consult 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 own sustainable development strategies, some of which 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

In 2022, the European Commission's Joint Research Centre (JRC) published an updated European Handbook for SDG voluntary local reviews, prepared with the support of the Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy (DG REGIO) as part of the URBAN2030 project. 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 local or regional authority. It follows the framework of national reviews and adjusts them to the local level. A voluntary local review can thus become a 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 EU 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 of particular local relevance include the share of women elected to local councils (as opposed to country-level share of women elected in national parliaments), urban waste per capita, surface waters with a high ecological status, newly planted trees and access to public transport. Some data are already available and ready to use by LRAs. For instance, DG REGIO, JRC and Eurostat produce various regional data, which can also be supplemented by data from sources such as the European Environment Agency (EEA) and satellites, and by open and big data. In contrast with the handbook's previous (2020) edition, the 2022 one has taken out some indicators and added others, depending on data availability and feedback from the exercise of testing the handbook with pilot cities. A future project (REGIONS2030) will identify indicators for the regional level and test them in pilot regions.

> **Box 1 – Structure of VLRs (example)**
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> > Opening statement > commitment of the Mayor, administration
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> > Executive summary > highlights
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> > Introduction
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> > Organizational alignment and institutional process
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> > Structural issues and challenges
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> > Methodology: Metrics and Data
>
> > Policy & enabling environment
>
> > Review of the Goals (all goals, goals under review at the current HLPF, or the top priorities)
>
> > Conclusions
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> Source: JRC Handbook (2022).

European Parliament

In June 2022, the European Parliament adopted a resolution on the implementation and delivery of the SDGs, where it called for a new high-level EU SDG implementation strategy, a plan to finance the SDGs and efforts to reinforce multilateral cooperation. It also highlighted the need for a regular review of the SDG implementation at regional and local level.

In its March 2019 resolution on the annual strategic report on the implementation and delivery of the Sustainable Development Goals, the Parliament expressed its preference for the first scenario outlined by the Commission in its reflection paper, namely, 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 and LRAs, and on active stakeholder engagement.

In its 2017 resolution on EU action for sustainability, the Parliament recalled that sustainable development is a fundamental EU objective laid down in Article 3(3) of the Treaty on European Union (TEU). It considered implementing the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda as being of crucial importance for the EU and described achieving the SDGs as Europe's legacy to future generations. Parliament also called for mainstreaming 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 EU investment policy and recalled the application of sustainability criteria in relation to 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 LRAs.

European Committee of the Regions

In the 2021 opinion on Delivering on the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030, the European Committee of the Regions (CoR) asked the Commission to renew the SDG platform or create another dialogue platform with stakeholders. It also reaffirmed its commitment to step up its partnerships to accelerate the localisation of SDGs.

In its 2020 opinion on A Sustainable Europe by 2030: Follow-up to the UN Sustainable Development Goals, ecological transition and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, the CoR called for formal involvement of regions and cities in the process of implementing (localising) the SDGs at international, EU and national level. It also welcomed the 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 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.

The CoR also collaborated with the OECD on conducting a survey of LRAs and stakeholders on their contribution to the SDGs. The results were presented at a 2019 conference on 'Regions and Cities Making the SDGs Happen', and fed into the subsequent CoR opinions and a 2020 OECD report on the territorial approach to SDGs. In 2021, the CoR and OECD conducted another joint survey on The SDGs as a framework for COVID-19 recovery in cities and regions, which fed into the OECD policy paper on this topic. The findings of the survey reveal a solid engagement of LRAs in SDG implementation. They also identify the need to better 'engage local and regional governments in VNRs, address funding gaps caused by the pandemic and strengthen human and technical capacities'. The results also suggest that local and regional governments could further harness the SDGs to develop comprehensive recovery strategies, addressing local priorities.

Outlook

In light of the recovery from the coronavirus pandemic and the impact of Russia's war on Ukraine, many policy areas covered by the SDGs will require intensified efforts. As sustainability and climate issues gain prominence in the EU agenda (e.g. the European Green Deal, the 'Fit for 55' package and the energy transition), the commitment to achieving the SDGs is also likely to strengthen. The SDG framework and the monitoring of the SDGs based on tailor-made indicators both offer an opportunity to translate the vision of sustainable development into concrete actions and policies. Efforts to localise the 2030 Agenda and involve subnational actors in SDG implementation are also likely to accelerate in the coming years. Numerous SDG initiatives by local and regional governments confirm their strong interest in contributing to the global agenda as well as using the SDG framework to shape their individual territorial development strategies. However, progress in localising the SDGs will also require overcoming numerous challenges linked to funding, capacity-building and coordination. Initiatives such as the JRC Handbook for voluntary local reviews can help regions and cities apply a ready-to-use set of indicators; similarly, other EU-level activities can foster sharing of experience, 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.

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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 both an internal and an external dimension. This briefing focuses on their internal implementation – within the EU and its regions. In relation to the external dimension, the Commission published two other communications in 2016: one on A new European Consensus on Development and another 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 on 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 inception, 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, several 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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