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ACHIEVING SUSTAINABILITY IS IT TOO LATE?

THINKING
BIG

DEMOCRACY AND
ITS CHALLENGES

KOREA'S END
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WHY IS THE EU FAILING TO CHAMPION THE SDGs?

Adolf Kloke-Lesch

THE EUROPEAN UNION is truly at a crossroads. Populist movements and parties are questioning its value for Europeans, while the United Kingdom is set to leave the EU in March 2019. Threats to the rules-based world order and tectonic shifts in geopolitics challenge allegedly immutable truths and long-term partnerships.

Meanwhile, a new European Parliament will be elected in May 2019, to be followed by a new composition of the European Commission. The debate has already started on the next EU budget, called the Multiannual Financial Framework, which will set the EU's financial and political priorities until the end of the next decade.

While controversies between governments drag on—not only on the subject of refugee policy—there definitely is a lack of a common positive vision of the

EU's future that would resonate with its citizens. We see an eternal recurrence of the same, so to speak: stereotypical debates about more or less Europe, widening versus deepening, solidarity and austerity, or voting procedures; these and others all turn hollow if not linked to substantial issues that people care about.

Such debates have lost sight of the full meaning of Article 3 of the Lisbon Treaty (2009), which states that the EU aims “to promote peace, its values and the well-being of its peoples.” More specifically, the Treaty stipulates that the Union “shall work for the sustainable development of Europe.”

It should therefore have come as no surprise that the EU became an early champion of designing what became the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development that was adopted unanimously by world leaders at a special UN summit

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SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS (SDGs)

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



Box 1: The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Source: United Nations

in September 2015 in New York. Entitled *Transforming our World*, this “plan of action for people, planet, and prosperity” is an extraordinary achievement in times of global uncertainty and division, as well as an elaborate global affirmation of core European values and aspirations.

A LEADERSHIP VOID

The 2030 Agenda set 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to be met “for all nations and peoples and for all segments of society” (see Box 1): these must necessarily be implemented at local, national, and regional levels—in other words, globally.

With all that being said, a fundamental question needs to be asked: are the SDGs, championed by Europeans at the United Nations, becoming the roadmap for the EU itself, across all domestic and international policies?

The answer is quite discouraging. At best, it is “not yet,” for the European champions of the SDGs on the world stage are dragging their feet at home and in Brussels. It seems as though the discourse on the future of Europe and that the one on sustainable development inhabit two different planets. The Commission’s White Paper of the Future of Europe (2017) mentions the SDGs only when praising the achievements of EU diplomacy; there is

no consideration of whether implementing fully the SDGs might have a bearing on Europe’s own future.

This reflects the mistaken perception of many political leaders that the SDGs are something to be dealt with under the category of development aid or environment protection. They have not yet realized that some of the EU’s most pressing socioeconomic priorities and challenges, including rising inequalities, youth unemployment, migration, and climate change, are covered under the SDGs.

European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker is said to have never been approached by a single European leader on the issue of the role of the SDGs in implementing the sustainable development agenda within Europe. Again, it comes as no surprise that we have not seen a statement by the European Council on this topic since the adoption of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This constitutes a deplorable void of political leadership by the body in which the heads of state or government of the 28 EU member states are meant to shape the future of Europe.

This void cannot be compensated for by the many assiduous efforts within parts

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of the Commission and some working parties of the Council of the EU that have delivered several communications and conclusions on the 2030 Agenda since its 2015 adoption. It must be said, in addition, that the European Parliament and the European Economic and Social Committee, where civil society representatives come together, have raised their voice in favor of embracing the SDGs in and for the EU. Furthermore, during 2018’s European Sustainable Development Week, tens of thousands of European citizens took part in more than 6,000 initiatives in 34 European countries—an increase of 50 percent compared to previous years. The critical question is whether the pre-election campaigns for the European Parliament, scheduled for May 2019, will result in additional momentum to bring the EU back on its path towards the sustainable development of Europe.

ON TRACK WITH THE SDGs?

“You cannot manage what you don’t measure.” With these words, Frans Timmermans, the First Vice-President of the European Commission, began his foreword to Eurostat’s publication *Sustainable Development in the European Union*. He should have added the following: “you cannot manage what you measure without time-

bound and quantified targets.” It was on this that the 2001 EU Sustainable Development Strategy (ESDS) was weak, garnering little attention in Brussels.

The ESDS died a silent death after the financial crisis and the adoption of the *Europe 2020 Strategy* in 2010 (subtitled *A European Strategy for Smart, Sustainable, and Inclusive Growth*), as a way to overcome the structural weaknesses of Europe’s economy. At the time, the Commission framed this as part of an aim to mainstream sustainable

development thinking into European policies; it turns out, however, that it largely put this “thinking” on the backburner. The 2020 Strategy set a limited number of quantified headline targets covering employment, research and development (R&D), climate and energy, education, and poverty to be achieved by 2020. The strategy is accompanied by various monitoring and implementation processes, including the so-called “European Semester.”

At the end of 2017, Eurostat published the first Monitoring Report on Progress towards the SDGs in an EU Context, with 100 indicators structured along the 17 SDGs. However, EU policy targets do not exist for most

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of the SDGs, and many of them are set for a time horizon of 2020 and not 2030, as per the 2030 Agenda.

Thus, the European Union—the most vocal champion of the SDGs—has not made its priorities and policies compatible with those same SDGs. The EU neither knows which SDG-related indicator targets it has to achieve by 2030 nor the distance it still needs to cover. It remains to be seen whether a gap analysis, which is currently underway within the Commission, can solve this dilemma. Taking a brief glimpse at the headline targets of the 2020 Strategy and the related SDGs makes manifest the difficulties that lay ahead for the European Union (see Table 1).

Even if only set against the self-proclaimed targets, the data show a mixed picture. Trends are insufficient or negative in the social and economic fields, while some positive trends can be seen on climate and energy, as well as education.

However, the picture turns bleaker when data is disaggregated by country—i.e. by EU member state. Country-level poverty and education indicators vary by a factor up to two, climate/energy

and R&D indicators by up to four across EU member states. Furthermore, the targets set by the EU 2020 Strategy fall short of the ambition of the corresponding SDG targets for 2030. These would, for instance, call to relieve 60 million

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EU citizens of the risk of poverty and social exclusion over the next decade, or to bring down the share of early school leavers to zero by 2030. The emission of greenhouse gases would have to be reduced twice as fast if the self-set Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) target under the Paris Climate Agreement (which is part of the SDGs, as defined by the 2030 Agenda) is achieved.

These few examples show both the challenges and potential for Europe's future that come along with embracing the SDGs and respecting planetary boundaries in the climate change context.

In the absence of SDG targets set for and by the EU, it seems useful to take a look at the SDG Index and Dashboards Reports, published annually since 2015 by the Bertelsmann Foundation and the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN). These reports provide an overview of countries' performance on the 17 SDGs. Since 2017, the reports also cover international environmental,

EU 2020 targets and the SDGs	2008	2016/17
EU 2020 target: at least 20 million fewer people in or at risk of poverty and/or social exclusion SDG 1 No poverty, target 1.2: By 2030, reduce by at least half the proportion of men, women, and children of all ages living in poverty in all its dimensions according to national definitions	116.1 m	116.9 m (2016)
EU 2020 target: reduce rates of early school leavers to below 10 percent SDG 4 Quality education, target 4.1: By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable, and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes	13.4 percent	10.6 percent (2017)
EU 2020 target: at least 40 percent of people aged 30-34 having completed higher education SDG 4 Quality education, target 4.3: By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational, and tertiary education, including university	34.8 percent	39.9 percent (2017; but men falling behind)
EU 2020 target: greenhouse gas emissions 20 percent lower than 1990 levels SDG 13 Climate action, EU target under Paris Agreement: at least 40 percent lower by 2030	9.4 percent	22.4 percent (2016)
EU 2020 target: 20 percent of energy sourced from renewables SDG 7 Affordable and clean energy, target 7.1: By 2030, increase substantially the share of renewable energy in the global energy mix	11.1 percent	17.0 percent (2017)
EU 2020 target: 20 percent increase in energy efficiency SDG 7 Affordable and clean energy, target 7.3: By 2030, double the global rate of improvement in energy efficiency	-	16.1 percent (2016)
EU 2020 target: 75 percent of people aged 20-64 to be in work SDG 8: Decent work and economic growth, target 8.1: By 2030, achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all women and men, including for young people and persons with disabilities, and equal pay for work of equal value	70.3 percent	72.2 percent (2017)
EU 2020 target: 3 percent of the EU's GDP to be invested in R&D SDG 9: Industry, innovation and infrastructure, target 9.5: Enhance scientific research [...], including, by 2030, encouraging innovation and substantially increasing the number of research and development workers per million people and public and private research and development spending	1.84 percent	2,03 percent (2016)

Table 1: The Europe 2020 Strategy and the SDGs

Source: Author's own compilation based on EU, Eurostat, and UN documents

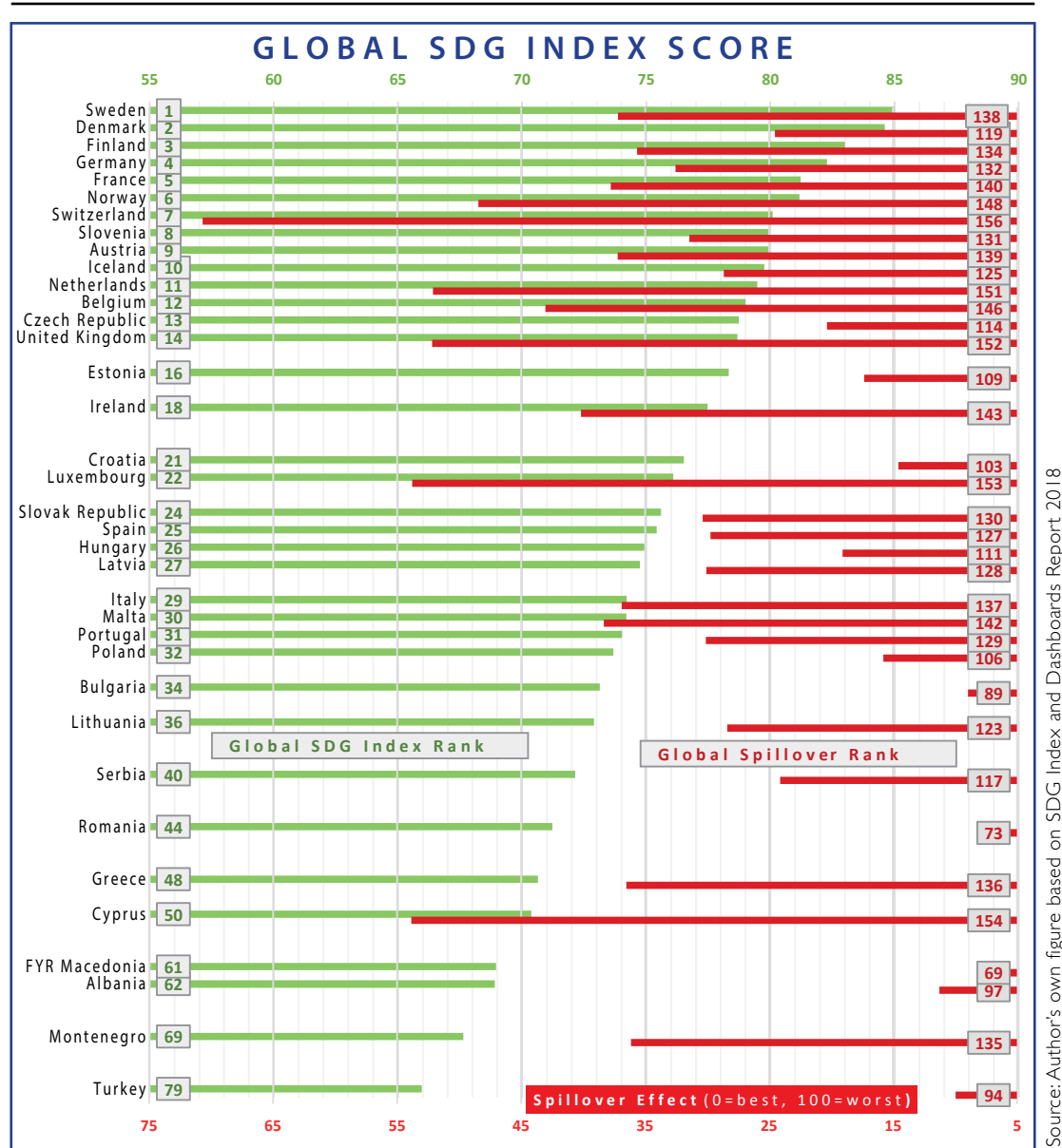


Figure 1: SDG - and negative spillover scores for EU member states (incl. EFTA and accession countries)

economic, and security spillover effects that undermine other countries' efforts to achieve the SDGs. EU member states and EU accession states populate the up-

per half of the SDG Index, ranging from Sweden in first place to Greece (48th) and Turkey (79th), with scores of 85.0, 70.6, and 66.0 (out of 100) respectively. (Figure 1)

The difference in score between Sweden and Greece is as big as that between Greece and countries on the last quarter of the list, like Rwanda (120th with a score of 56.1). These scores demonstrate both the scale of the remaining distance to reach even for countries like Sweden, on the one hand, and huge internal challenges in the EU and its member states, on the other.

Furthermore, Europe produces significant negative spillover effects. There is a clear indication that the EU is not on track to negate spillover effects, even though data is still limited and difficult to compare. Two-thirds of the 40 countries with the worst negative spillover effects are EU member states, or are linked to it via the European Single Market or their respective candidate status. One should, therefore, not be deceived by high SDG scores that certain EU member states have received for their implementation of the SDGs domestically, for they come with costs for other countries and, ultimately, the planet. If the EU and its member states want to be serious about achieving the SDGs, they need to translate the global SDGs into European and national targets compatible with the global goals set for 2030.

WAITING FOR A REFLECTION PAPER

When the 2030 Agenda was adopted in New York in 2015, the priorities for the current Commission (2014–2019) had already been set by European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker as per the terms of his “Agenda for Jobs, Growth, Fairness and Democratic Change.” It was commendable that Juncker entrusted

First Vice-President Timmermans with the horizontal responsibility for sustainable development.

There have also been laudable but isolated initiatives in areas like the circular economy and sustainable finance. But the fact remains that the UN 2030 Agenda—specifically, the SDGs—largely did not inform the current Commis-

sion's priorities and work programs. As political attention moved to other issues like migration or Brexit, one got the impression that the option of fully embracing the SDGs as a road-map for the EU's future has been left to the next Commission and the period after the European Parliament election in 2019.

In the meantime, some preparatory work has started, which is essential for delivering an actionable plan. The

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Source: Author's own figure based on SDG Index and Dashboards Report 2018

2017 Council conclusions entitled *A Sustainable European Future: The EU Response to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* urged the Commission “to elaborate, by mid-2018, an implementation strategy outlining timelines, objectives, and concrete measures.”

Since then, a lot of foundational work for an ambitious action plan could have been done, bolstered by the Multi-stakeholder Platform on the Implementation of the SDGs set up by the Commission and the work of Eurostat. Unfortunately, to date neither a gap analysis nor an implementation strategy has been presented. All that can be expected now is the publication of a Commission Reflection Paper, which will reportedly be entitled *Towards a Sustainable Europe by 2030* and published by the end of 2018.

Considering such slow progress, it is questionable whether the EU will be able to present an ambitious and concrete first report on the internal and external implementation of the 2030 Agenda by the EU at the United Nations’ High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) in 2019, as per the current schedule. In contrast, 24 EU member states (and 3 candidate countries) are already among the slightly over 100 countries that have presented Voluntary National Reviews (VNR) at the HLPF.

The best way for the EU to shape its future would be to prepare an overarching EU 2030 Strategy based on the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs.

Clearly, there are big differences in scope and ambition between these VNRs—with some countries comprehensively translating the SDGs into national goals, including the means of implementation—and others just relating existing policy objectives to some of the SDGs. An optimist would say that there is notable movement at the level of member states upon which the EU can continue to build its efforts. This is crucial, since responsibility for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda lies with states in the first place.

The EU should focus on its responsibilities and the added value it can provide. Under its Better Regulation agenda, more specifically with its principles of subsidiarity and proportionality, the Commission wants “to be big on the big issues and small on the small ones,” to quote a recent statement by Juncker.

As the SDGs are a big issue, there clearly is a role for the EU in areas of exclusive and shared competencies. But other roles also come to mind, like supporting, coordinating, and supplementing the actions of member states. Acting on the SDGs would also help build cohesion within the EU and could provide frameworks for EU-wide discussions and implementation.

To promote the SDGs internally and externally, the EU should use its broad range of policy instruments, like legal acts, budgetary means, and external action initiatives. Furthermore, the EU’s Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development (PCSD) toolbox can ensure that all EU policies contribute to, or at least do not hamper, the achievement of the SDGs.

When translating the SDGs into quantified and time-bound EU-wide targets, close attention should

be given to areas where EU action is of particular relevance to achieving the SDGs—across both the EU and globally. Existing EU policy targets and strategies should be adapted to match the ambition set by the SDGs. Beginning with the targets, the EU could enhance its strategies on issues such as reducing EU-wide inequalities or decarbonizing energy and other SDG transformations (i.e. agriculture). Similarly, linking competition and industrial policy with digitalization and sustainability could offer significant win-win potential.

The best way for the EU to shape its future would be to prepare an overarching EU 2030 Strategy based on the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. This is, in fact, the suggestion made in a recent paper

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issued by the European Think Tank Group entitled “Steering the EU towards a Sustainability Transformation.” Such a way forward could build on the experiences of the last two decades, thereby using previous long-term EU strategies as well as relevant implementation and monitoring instruments like the “European Semester.”

FROM REFLECTION TO ACTION

Three years after the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, the EU must move from reflection to action on the SDGs. Having lost much time and missed many opportunities, European leaders and Europe’s civil society must now use the few remaining forks in the road to make the SDGs Europe’s business (see table 2).

In October 2017, European Council President Donald Tusk presented his Leaders’ Agenda. It rolled out the key topics EU leaders were expected to have to deal with in upcoming meetings of the European Council. So far, the SDGs are not among them. Security, migration, and trade were placed at the top the agenda.

Nevertheless, the Leaders’ Agenda is a living document, so there is still plenty of opportunity to rise to the

Key steps for EU leaders and civil society to make the SDGs Europe's business
<p>Up to May 2019 (next European Parliament election) Include the SDGs as an overarching narrative in the campaign platforms of political parties Engage political parties and candidates for the European Parliament on the SDGs Establish commitment to the SDGs as a key criterion for the selection of the next President of the European Commission</p>
<p>18-19 October 2018 (European Council) Call on EU citizens, business, and political parties to embrace the SDGs as Europe's future</p>
<p>13-14 December 2018 (European Council) Set ambitious guidelines for integrating and operationalizing the SDGs across the next Multi-annual Financial Framework (MFF; 2021-2027)</p>
<p>21-22 March 2019 (European Council) Endorse the first report on the internal and external implementation of the 2030 Agenda by the EU at the High Level Political Forum in 2019</p>
<p>9 May 2019 (Informal meeting of the European Council, Sibiu, Romania) Identify key steps to operationalize the SDGs in the Strategic Agenda 2019-2024 and call for an EU 2030 Strategy for a Sustainable Europe to be adopted by year's end 2020</p>
<p>23-26 May 2019 (European Parliament election)</p>
<p>20-21 June 2019 (European Council) Ensure that the SDGs are integrated into the next Multi-annual Financial Framework (MFF) Adopt a Strategic Agenda 2019-2024 that includes a call for an EU 2030 Strategy for a Sustainable Europe Identify a next President of the European Commission who is highly committed to the SDGs</p>

Source: Author's own table

Table 2: Key Steps to Make the SDGs Europe's Business

level of the SDGs' ambition in the time ahead. It is fortunate that the Leaders' Agenda already includes two topics that are particularly critical to achieving the SDGs in the EU and beyond: the Multiannual Financial Framework 2021–2027 (MFF) and the European Council's Strategic Agenda 2019–2024.

EU leaders should embrace such opportunities and take substantial directional decisions to pave the

way for the achievement of the SDGs in and by the EU. In December 2018, they will need to set ambitious guidelines to integrate and operationalize the SDGs across the next MFF.

In addition, in March 2019 the European Council could show its commitment by endorsing the first EU report on the internal and external implementation of the 2030 Agenda by the EU, to be presented at the HLPF in July 2019.

Lastly, at their informal meeting scheduled to take place in Sibiu, Romania, in May 2019, EU leaders should ensure that the SDGs are given pride of place in their next work program: the Strategic Agenda 2019-2024 (to be adopted by the European Council in June 2019). In particular, the Strategic Agenda should endorse the proposal for an EU 2030 Strategy for a Sustainable Europe.

With the next European Parliament election fast approaching, the EU has entered a transitional period that will end only in autumn 2019 with the formation of the next Commission. This period must not lead to further gridlock in the context of implementing the SDGs. Instead, the parliamentary election and ensuing nomination of the next President of the Commission should be used to promote the SDGs as an integral part of the narrative for Europe's future.

It must be underlined that Europe's leaders who celebrate the universal nature of the 2030 Agenda at international conferences should no longer hesitate to do so boldly at party conferences and on the campaign trail. Civil society should engage political parties and candidates on the SDGs. In particular, fundamental commitment to

the SDGs should be established as a key criterion for the selection of the next President of the European Commission.

BUDGETING FOR THE SDGs

The EU budget is a strong tool to support European policies across its member states and worldwide. Although accounting for only roughly 1 percent of the EU's GNI—still (too) modest in size—its expenditures amount to 10 percent of overall public spending in many member states. Furthermore, the programs funded by the EU budget set standards and leverage additional funds for these ambitions.

Europe's leaders who celebrate the universal nature of the 2030 Agenda at international conferences should no longer hesitate to do so boldly at party conferences and on the campaign trail.

In May 2018, the Commission presented its proposal for the next Multi-annual Financial Framework (MFF) covering the years 2021–2027. Answering whether the proposed sum of €1.2 trillion will work as a powerful catalyst towards the SDGs will significantly affect the fate of the SDGs in Europe and beyond. Unfortunately, it appears that the Commission has shied away from this opportunity.

Although the proposal invokes prosperity, sustainability, solidarity, and security as its guiding principles, the draft's language on the SDGs seems to have been deliberately toned

down. It is fine to state that the investments lined out in the MFF ought to “hold the key to Europe’s future prosperity and its leadership on the global Sustainable Development Goals.” But unless both objectives are linked to each other and subsequently broken down by the individual programs, the rhetoric will ring hollow in practice. Indeed, simply using the word “sustainability” multiple times on many pages does not meet the ambition of the SDGs.

It is particularly deplorable that the specified results-oriented recommendations on the MFF, presented in March 2018 in an advisory report by the Commission’s Multi-Stakeholder Platform on the Implementation of the SDGs in the EU, went largely unheeded. The platform described the MFF as a unique opportunity amounting to a “make or break [point] in regard to the implementation of the SDGs in the EU.”

However, the Commission is not the sole actor to be blamed for such a failure. This is the price for a lack of political leadership over the three years since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda. The Council’s conclusion of June 2017 merely asked the Commission “to assess how the programs and instruments within the

next MFF can support the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.”

It is only in a footnote that the MFF proposal refers to the Reflection Paper “Towards a Sustainable Europe by 2030” that needs to be adopted by the Commission at the end of 2018.

This footnote does not even indicate any process of how the findings could be integrated into the MFF. The Commission would be well advised to present its Reflection Paper well before December 2018, when the European Council is due to discuss

progress achieved on the MFF.

It would make a huge difference if, for instance, the European Regional Development and the Cohesion Funds (€242 billion proposed for 2021-2017), the European Social Fund (€90 billion), and the Agricultural and Rural Development Funds (€324 billion) were used for the achievement of the SDGs in all EU member states. This could also help the many bottom-up SDG initiatives at regional and city levels and promote the SDGs among EU citizens as a guiding constellation for Europe’s future.

TWO-WAY BRIDGE

While the EU is still struggling with thoroughly mainstreaming the SDGs across its policies, Western

Fundamental commitment to the SDGs should be established as a key criterion for the selection of the next President of the European Commission.

Balkan candidate states have embraced the SDGs and accession to the EU as mutually reinforcing agendas. Pursuing the 2030 Agenda interacts both with the EU integration process and regional cooperation.

At a side event of the HLPF 2018 featuring officials from these states, UNDP Administrator Achim Steiner noted that “the language of SDGs can help illustrate to citizens the benefits of EU membership in terms that are relevant to everyday life—clean water, renewable energy, quality healthcare, fairness in governance, and leaving no one behind.”

Regrettably, it also became clear during the side event that the EU has in no way linked its Western Balkan enlargement policy to the 2030 Agenda. The recent April 2018 Communication on the EU Enlargement Policy does not even mention the SDGs. While the SDGs should not dilute the EU’s acquis under the many chapters of accession negotiations, it should be evident that the SDGs themselves are becoming part of the EU’s acquis, raising the ambitions of both member states and candidate countries. Looking at the chapters through the lens of the SDGs could help identify areas that need more attention, mobilize

societal support, and link the accession process to citizens’ daily concerns.

Under the next MFF, a total of €12.8 billion is proposed for the Instrument for Pre-Accession As-

sistance. It should be designed to assist candidate countries and potential candidates in linking their paths to both fulfillment of the accession criteria and achievement of the SDGs. This should be even more self-evident as these states (still classified as developing countries) have a special

track-record on translating the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) into national strategies that they are now building on while pursuing the SDGs.

Perhaps the SDGs will prove to be a two-way-bridge between the EU and the candidates—something from which the EU and its actual member states can draw adequate lessons.

TRANSFORMING OUR WORLD

Accounting for six percent of the global population and 22 percent of global GDP, the EU is the world’s second largest trading power and its third biggest greenhouse gas emitter. While the combined military expenditure of the EU member states is still second

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only to the United States, the Union and its member states collectively provide 57 percent of global Official Development Assistance (ODA) and therefore easily outpace any other global actor.

Nonetheless, despite a few success stories, the EU sails below its potential. The Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy (2016) aims to make better use of such potential. The Strategy rightly acknowledges that "prosperity must be shared and requires fulfilling the Sustainable Development Goals worldwide, including in Europe." This was a bold statement to make just a couple of months after the adoption of the SDGs. When calling for a more collective approach and realignment of priorities so that they better suit all countries and regions, the Global Strategy even saw the SDGs as an opportunity to catalyze greater coherence between the internal and external dimensions of policies and across financial instruments.

The strategic environment has changed dramatically since the adoption of the Global Strategy. The rules-based order and shared values have been increasingly questioned and can no longer be taken for granted.

The SDGs in their entirety are of geopolitical significance. Projecting European soft power by building on the SDGs as a globally shared agenda offers huge potential for Europe's role in the world.

Against this backdrop, the first two reports on Implementing the Global Strategy placed even more importance on "closer-than-ever" cooperation with the United Nations (2017) whilst maintaining that the EU "is playing a leading role in driving forward and upholding global agreements" (2018), which includes the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Climate Agreement. This can be seen as part of a slow but steady realization that the SDGs in their entirety are of geopolitical significance.

Projecting European soft power by building on the SDGs as a globally shared agenda offers huge potential for Europe's role in the world. However, further efforts at implementation will need to be made to fully grasp the opportunity on offer across all the EU's regional and bilateral cooperation arrangements. Implementing the 2030 Agenda only in partnership with developing countries, as rolled out in the 2017 European Consensus on Development document, entitled *Our World, our Dignity, our Future*, is an insufficient approach harking back to pre-2015 times and is not in line with the new and universal concept of sustainable development and the transformative ambition of the 2020 Agenda.

Judged against the SDGs, all countries are developing countries. Therefore, the EU needs a new and different, truly universal concept of international cooperation for sustainable development that addresses all types of entities, rich and poor alike.

Global leadership and influence are best exerted if actors shape their international strategies in a way which ensures their domestic agendas and values, their global interests, and the concepts and projects they sell to the world reinforce each other. The United States did so after World War II when it built an alliance of liberal market economies around the world. Today, China's Belt and Road Initiative can be seen in a similar vein, linking Asia, Europe, and Africa to the Chinese development pathway. For Europe, preserving its values and prosperity in a peaceful world depends critically on achieving the SDGs, both inside its borders and globally.

That is why it will be critical for the EU to review and reassess all of its foreign affairs and partnerships through the SDG lens. This would inevitably lead to the revaluation of existing partnerships, crisscrossing traditional political, economic, or military ties. In

order to prioritize and design future partnerships, the EU should focus on countries and regions where transformative change is particularly necessary and mutually beneficial. So far, the Global Strategy has not yet translated the SDGs into an operationalized agenda that would inform its "cooperative regional orders" policy towards countries and regions as varied as Russia and the United States, China and Canada, ASEAN and MERCOSUR, or the EU's neighborhood and Africa.

To be up to the task, the EU needs to think big and consider a Transformational Partnerships Initiative under which it would offer transformative partnership agreements to all countries in the world, from North and South America to Africa, Asia, and the Pacific. These reciprocal agreements would provide frameworks for cooperation aimed at overcoming critical bottlenecks to achieving the SDGs. If underpinned by political leadership and the involvement of business, civil society, and academia, the Transformational Partnerships Initiative could become Europe's geopolitical response to increasing tensions between great powers, particularly China and the United States. ●

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