

STUDY

Europe's approach to implementing the Sustainable Development Goals: good practices and the way forward

ABSTRACT

The 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development offers a unique framework for transformative pathways towards sustainability worldwide. The 2030 Agenda also requires a paradigm shift in governance, - at and between all levels. This study examines the governance frameworks put in place for SDG implementation in all EU Member States, and the resulting country fiches constitute the first comprehensive comparative overview of these. The study also provides an overview of the developments at EU level and has a special focus on the role of parliaments in implementing Agenda 2030.

Our analysis shows that EU Member States are integrating SDGs into national strategies. While Member States have taken steps to enhance horizontal policy coordination, there is a continuing need for better mainstreaming sustainability. Member States innovate with SDG budgeting, science-policy interface, and stakeholder participation mechanisms for making these strategies more operational. Parliaments show increasing activity on the SDGs and the EP could benefit from enhanced collaboration. The EU could learn from and support these initiatives. Dynamising the multi-level governance bears a great potential for sustainable progress for all players and is a requisite to accelerate SDG implementation at all levels. By capturing the two-level character of SDG implementation at the EU and the Member State level, the study contributes to an overarching joint voluntary EU report at the HLPF 2019.

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Executive Summary

The 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) offer a unique framework for transformative pathways towards sustainability worldwide. It is universal, to be implemented by all countries within their national context, and calling on all sectors, levels and actors in society to work coherently. The paradigm shift implied with Agenda 2030 requires changes in governance – at and between all levels from the local to the global.

This study examines specific governance frameworks put in place for the implementation of the SDGs in EU Member States and presents the results in 28 Country Fiches. This constitutes the first comprehensive comparative overview of SDG governance arrangements in the 28 EU Member States. The study also provides an overview of the activities and policy developments at EU level. A special focus has been put on the role of parliaments in implementing Agenda 2030, both at national and EU level.

SDGs at Member State level

Where Member States stand with institutional responses to SDG implementation can be summarised as follows:

- The majority of countries has or is about to update their National Development Plan or SD strategy with the SDGs. In around half of the countries these strategies are actually operational.
- Half of the countries have clear coordination mechanisms between ministries, often with Prime Minister leadership; the link between domestic and external dimension remains weak as does vertical coordination.
- Extensive efforts are made to improve stakeholder participation and SDG implementation in many countries and follows an inclusive approach. In a few countries, stakeholder participation remains absent.
- Most Member States have regular progress reports and indicators on the SDGs but there is room for improvement in the area of target setting and independent review.
- Sustainability impact assessments and budget checks are still rare, but many countries are planning to undertake efforts in this direction.
- In an increasing number of countries, parliaments have special committees or arrangements dealing with Agenda 2030.

SDGs at EU level

- The Commission has not developed an SDG implementation strategy in the more than three years that have passed since the adoption of the SDGs. Council and Parliament, as well as most other actors have criticised this but not vigorously. Many EU actors argue that monitoring and assessment of progress on the SDGs should be integrated into the European Semester. Monitoring by Eurostat on the SDGs at EU level does not tell where the EU stands and where to and how fast it would need to go in order to achieve the SDGs, which is inter alia due to the lack of targets in most areas.
- The Commission has so far not fulfilled its intention to mainstream the SDGs in all policies, in particular through the better regulation tools, and other instruments such as structural funds. There is scope to revise the Commission's impact assessment in the light of Agenda 2030, as the economic dimension currently dominates the environmental and social dimensions.

- The Commission's Multi-stakeholder platform on SDGs has successfully produced a joint statement in its first year (2018), showing that an ambitious EU approach to sustainable development is supported across the various civil society, business and think tank groups.
- For the important horizontal coordination, the Commission has a good basis in regular practice, but there is room for improvement and dynamisation. The Council has taken an extra step with its new Working Party for Agenda 2030, explicitly aiming at better linking the internal and external dimension. It has gotten in full swing with regular meetings in 2018, is planned to continue, and will prepare council conclusions on the EU's SDG activities early 2019.
- The SDGs imply the need for supplementing the traditional coordination between different levels of administration with collaborative mechanisms in an improved multi-level governance.

SDGs in Parliaments

- There have been activities around Agenda 2030 in 22 national parliaments. In three countries there are planned activities, and only three have no recognisable activities or plans. Overall it can be said that the activities of parliaments have clearly increased since the adoption of the SDGs, hence indicating an increased awareness to sustainable development.
- In nine national parliaments, and planned in one other, there are specific institutional arrangements for SD in general or Agenda 2030 in particular (partly existing, partly new, and partly mixed council-like bodies). They are all very interesting for further exchange, and in particular the new set-ups or mandates in the parliaments of Denmark, Finland and Germany, and other examples to watch, in particular Hungary, Latvia, Romania and Spain.
- The European Parliament was an early mover at the EU level regarding commitment to Agenda 2030. However, it has not yet succeeded to response to the reinvigorated challenges and opportunities of Agenda 2030 in a satisfactory way. Activities have remained in the DEVE realm for long, and taking somewhat vigorous institutional steps has not succeeded. Now there is at least a co-leadership of DEVE and ENVI approved, with a joint report and a HLPF delegation. Putting at least this on an annual basis by the outgoing Parliament, as proposed by the two committees, would be highly recommendable.
- The many already existing good practices in national parliaments and the efforts in the European Parliament point to the potential for enhancing the interparliamentary cooperation and with this the role of parliaments in the SDG implementation in their legislative function, budgetary power, and scrutiny and monitoring. There are interesting examples in each area, in different national parliaments.

Conclusions and recommendations

Create a winning two-level dynamic

Implementation of the SDGs at EU and at Member State level could reinforce each other under some conditions:

- Joint multilevel governance mechanisms are needed to address urgent problems faster and tackle complex issues with an open mind - beyond silos. There is no time to wait until innovations at the bottom come to the top (to get the right framing) and that top steering reaches the bottom. Bottom-up and top-down are both necessary approaches, but both are generally slow.
- It is time for a front-runner approach, from coalitions of the willing that turn into coalitions of the winning. Looking through a two-level lens as motor for mutual dynamisation instead of mutual standoff brings about new perspectives and ideas for more joint and mutually reinforcing work.

- The moment is now. It is important that a new two-level dynamic will come into effect soon when the priorities of the next Commission will be shaped. The campaigns for the European Parliament elections are a good moment in time for (bottom-up) discussions on how to get to a sustainable future of Europe, and how the SDGs can provide guidance and give a bearing. Complementary, Head of States will hopefully show leadership on sustainability at the Sibiu informal council in May.

Dynamise the multi-level governance in Europe for the SDGs

The report offers 7 recommendations about how to 'dynamise' the two- and multilevel governance for SDGs:

- Develop a comprehensive post-2020 SDG implementation strategy, as requested in 2018 by the European Council, and since 2016 by the Parliament, building on the Commission's reflection paper on the SDGs and on work in Member States.
- Integrate the SDGs in the EU's economic monitoring (European Semester) and budgeting processes, including in the investment priorities of the new Multi-annual Financial Framework (MFF).
- Scale up the use of peer learning mechanisms at all levels of governance, taking the existing examples at EU level as inspiration for national peer-to-peer mechanisms for the Agenda 2030.
- Dynamise stakeholder engagement and full, collaborative multi-level governance which engages EU, national, regional and local authorities.
- Promote the use of the EU's Structural Reform Support Programme (SRSP) to reform policies and institutions to gear them towards implementing Agenda 2030.
- Promote interconnectedness, a core principle of the 2030 Agenda, between SDGs and between the external and internal dimension of SDG implementation, by making institutional silos 'dance' together, and by integrating the SDGs in the Better Regulation guidance.
- Join SDG implementation with the momentum for digitalisation (e.g. the EU's e-Government Action Plan), which offers an opportunity to improve coordination and integration of policies and policy learning between authorities and in interaction with stakeholders.

Key opportunities in 2019

2019 will be a crucial 'test' for sustainable development at the EU level and globally.

- The HLPF in July and the SDG Summit in September will be two good occasions to showcase progress on the 2030 Agenda and bring the EU to the fore as front runner.
- The momentum of the European elections and of the process of selecting a new Commission could inspire and fuel the debate on the Future of Europe and the May 2019 Sibiu Summit where the 2030 priorities for the EU and the new Commission will be set.
- When the new MEPs will be getting ready to take the helm, it is an opportunity not to be missed to inform about the SDGs and Agenda 2030.
- A political debate between the European Parliament and the new Commission around a new post-2020 strategy which is based on the Agenda 2030 could be organized in a timely manner and be followed by a 'joint sustainable development declaration' of the three institutions, which should consequently also be anchored in the Trio Presidency programmes.

How to get the European Parliament more ready

- All parliaments will need to 'teach their silos to dance': setting up internal working mechanisms to better tackle overarching issues, including Agenda 2030. At EU level, relations between the Council and Parliament would benefit if the Parliament established an interlocutor on the SDGs, such as the Working Party for Agenda 2030 in the Council.
- There is great potential to improve and use the interparliamentary dialogue and collaboration of the EP and national parliaments for cross-fertilisation to advance SDG implementation.

Outlook

This study provides a comprehensive overview and light assessment of the institutional response to the SDGs in the Member States, at EU level and in (EU and national) parliaments. It is desirable to further deepen this assessment and repeat it regularly, partnering with other actors. With its two-level character, covering SDG implementation at the EU and the Member State level, the study contributes to an overarching joint EU report to be prepared for and presented at the HLPF 2019, complementing the 'Joint Synthesis Report' on development policy. The EU's overarching report needs to cover all external and domestic EU policy and the governance aspects, as well as an analysis of where the EU stands and how it will achieve the SDGs if current trends continue. These are key elements of the Future of Europe debate as well.

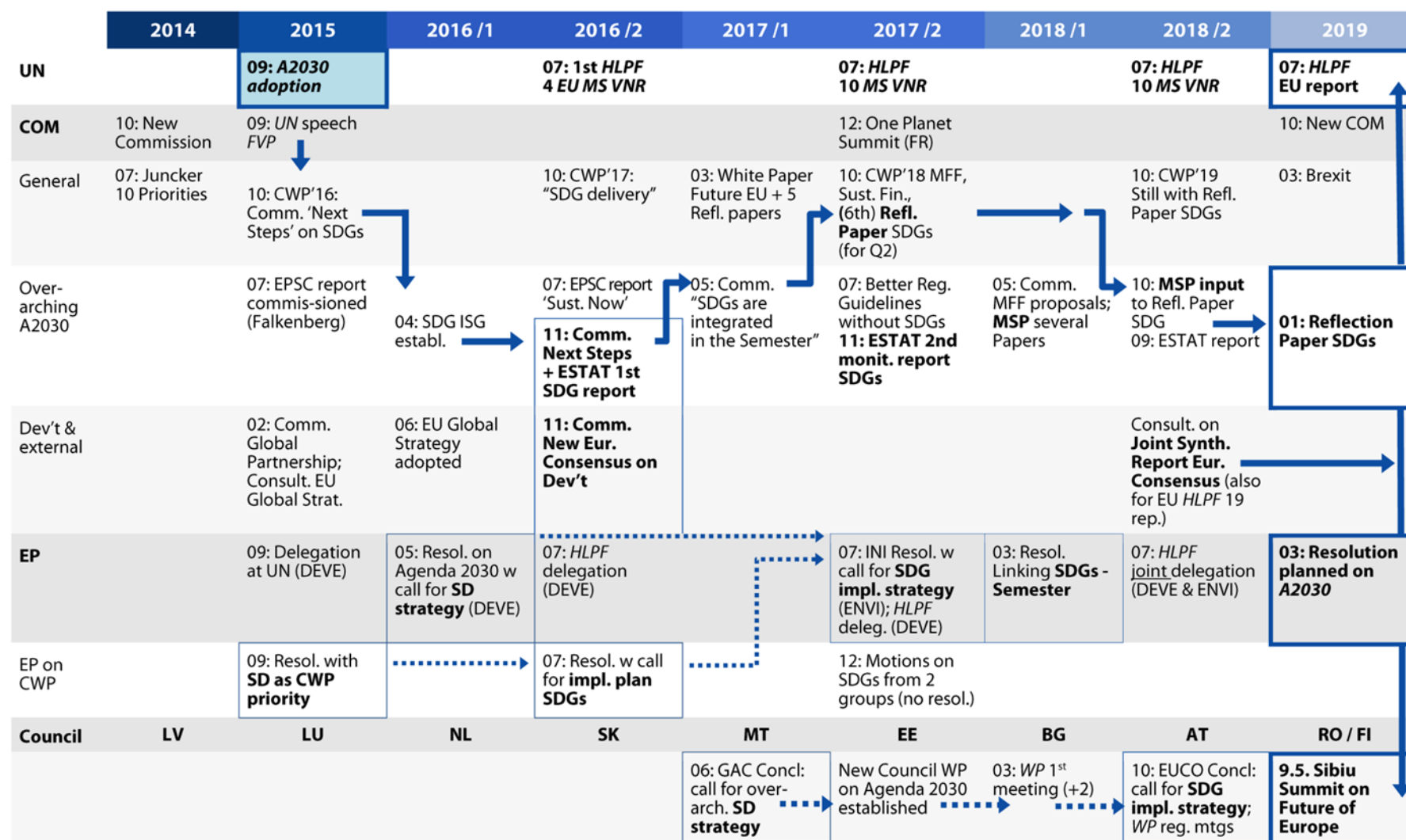
Figure 2: Agenda 2030 as taken up in the three EU institutions 2015 – 2018/2019 (planned)

Figure 4: Governance dimensions for SDG implementation in dimensions in all EU 28 – a light assessment

