



**European Committee
of the Regions**

ECON-VII/014

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OPINION

Delivering on the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- believes that this opinion must be seen as encouragement for the European Commission to reinforce the SDGs as an integral part of European core values and identity, and thus give it an appropriately high profile in its overarching narrative and priorities;
- welcomes that the present European Commission has taken a strong political commitment to implementing the SDGs. However, this should be accompanied by specific internal governance arrangements within the European Commission, such as regular coordination meetings of the President's cabinet with other Commissioners' cabinets on SDG mainstreaming;
- asks the European Commission to renew the SDG platform or create another dialogue platform with clout and structured follow-up to foster expertise from all the different stakeholders from public and private institutions regarding the 2030 Agenda and to advise the EC directly;
- believes that keeping the focus of the European Semester as the framework for EU countries to coordinate their economic policies is possible with the integration of the SDGs and that SDGs should be reintegrated into the European Semester at the earliest opportunity;
- welcomes the preliminary results of the CoR-OECD survey on SDGs and recovery, showing that despite the pandemic, local and regional authorities are still mobilised for the implementation of the SDGs with 60% of local and regional respondents indicating their conviction that the SDGs can help take a more holistic approach to recovery, and 43% having a specific governance structure to implement them;
- reaffirms the commitment of the CoR to step up its partnerships with the OECD, EUROCITIES, AER, CEMR – PLATFORMA and Regions4 to accelerate the localisation of SDGs and advocate the SDGs as an overarching EU core value; commits to concluding other partnerships to further support SDGs' localisation in Europe and beyond.

Rapporteur

Ricardo Rio (PT/EPP), Mayor of Braga

Reference document

Delivering on the UN's Sustainable Development Goals – a comprehensive approach
Annual Sustainable Growth Strategy 2021

Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions – Delivering on the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030

I. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

1. considers the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as essential for all 194 countries that have adopted the United Nations Agenda for Sustainable Development, and believes that the ongoing pandemic and its expected health-related, economic, social, environmental and cultural consequences provide fresh impetus for meeting this objective; therefore urges European leaders to be ambitious and consistent in their domestic and foreign policy agendas and to declare with one clear purpose that, in the context of the UN Decade for Action on Sustainable Development, the European Union must be a leader and visible champion in the implementation of the SDGs at all governmental levels;
2. believes that this opinion must be seen as encouragement for the European Commission to reinforce the SDGs as an integral part of European core values and identity, and thus give it an appropriately high profile in its overarching narrative and priorities;
3. welcomes the political leadership of the European Commission to implement the SDGs through the European Green Deal and the refocusing of the European Semester on SDGs, as well as the Commission's approach to promoting an ambitious agenda concerning a more sustainable, competitive and cohesive Europe, open to the world and fit for the challenges of the 21st century, which has been reinforced by the additional Next Generation EU funds to create a greener, more digital and more resilient Europe;
4. continues to support, however, the request of the Council, the European Parliament, the CoR and the former EU multi-stakeholder platform on sustainable development to formulate an overarching strategy for the sustainable development goals, replacing the Europe 2020 strategy and realising the shared vision of the sustainable development model that we would like to promote for and from the European Union, enabling all local and regional authorities to share the same objectives and targets through the same language;
5. points out that the EU's trade policy review aims to promote greater sustainability in line with its commitment to the UN Sustainable Development Goals; only a sustainable and coherent trade model, that meets the fundamental values of the European Union, can contribute to the well-being and prosperity of all, both within the EU and in other parts of the world;
6. regrets moreover that the SDGs have progressively lost ground in the EU narrative, with a lower profile in EU policy-making, which is jeopardising their chances of implementation by 2030;
7. considers that the communication and peer-learning capacity around SDGs is a crucial element for raising awareness and commitment from all counterparts, which requires a stronger alignment between the EU's governance systems in economic, social and environmental

matters, such as the European Semester, the European Green Deal and the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights and sustainable development goals;

8. notes that links between the listed initiatives and the SDGs sometimes appear tenuous. Stresses in this connection that the Commission should involve all relevant Commission departments and avoid "silo initiatives";
9. welcomes the European Commission's Staff Working Document on Delivering SDGs by 2030 as a useful report on implementation, but regrets that it merely lists initiatives labelled under SDGs;
10. for instance, the updated new Industrial Strategy¹ presented in May 2021, does not mention SDGs, and therefore cannot be part of a broader, extensive effort of policy coherence and sustainable development. This limits the Staff Working Document's usefulness for SDG implementation;
11. welcomes the commitment expressed in the "Communication on Better Regulation" of 29 April 2021² to mainstream the SDGs across all policies as well as to identify relevant SDGs for each proposal and to examine how the initiative will support their achievement, thereby echoing the CoR's previous request³. Moreover, the CoR considers transparent and broad-based ex-ante impact assessments as especially important for proposals' sustainability-check;
12. welcomes the focus of the staff working document on the importance of stakeholders' participation and on the recognition of the role and work of both the European Committee of the Regions and local and regional authorities. Also points out the important role of national, European and international associations of regions and cities;
13. notes that the previously announced means for further exchange and dialogue via conferences and periodic events held by the European Commission have not yet materialised and is calling for closer collaboration between the European Commission, the Council, the European Parliament and the European Committee of the Regions on the implementation of SDGs at EU level;
14. underlines that the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the importance of sustainable development and that SDGs can help move towards a coherent, holistic vision within the NextGenerationEU and in the establishment of the National Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRPs) as part of the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), in particular;

¹ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the regions "Updating the 2020 New Industrial Strategy: Building a stronger Single Market for Europe's recovery", 5 May 2021, https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/communication-industrial-strategy-update-2020_en.pdf

² https://ec.europa.eu/info/files/better-regulation-joining-forces-make-better-laws_en

³ Point 42, Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions – Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): a basis for a long-term EU strategy for a sustainable Europe by 2030, Arnoldas Abramavičius. <https://webapi2016.cor.europa.eu/v1/documents/cor-2019-00239-00-00-ac-tra-en.docx/content>

15. considers that the lack of involvement of local and regional authorities in some Member States and the lack of a meaningful consultation process in the formulation of NRRPs, through the designation of priorities and planned action, is compromising the success of the plans in these Member States, as the regional perspectives of far-reaching economic, social and environmental transformation are only partially reflected. There is a clear urgency to support the localisation of the SDGs in order to build back in a better and fairer way;
16. stresses that there are two crucial subsidiary approaches: more cohesive coordination between the SDGs and the main policies of the European Union and a new push to implement the SDGs at local and regional levels. This must be done with clear incentives for all stakeholders. In this regard, greater interaction between the EU institutions and the local and regional levels would benefit all parties;

The governance of SDGs and European institutions

17. welcomes that the present European Commission has taken a strong political commitment to implementing the SDGs. However, this should be accompanied by specific internal governance arrangements within the European Commission, such as regular coordination meetings of the President's cabinet with other Commissioners' cabinets on SDG mainstreaming;
18. declares that the EU Multi-stakeholder platform on SDGs was a good step for including civil society and local and regional authorities in decisions on SDGs at European level; the Platform's recommendations to implement the SDGs in the EU should be used for further actions⁴;
19. recognises the European Climate Pact as a step to encourage more people to take action, but only focusing on green areas topics and dedicated to encouraging stakeholders to take action, whereas the platform was covering all SDGs and acted as a structure for dialogue to support and advise the European Commission on their timely implementation;
20. recommends the use of the report presented at the end of mandate of the previous platform to prepare any further structured dialogues. Also advocates that future structured dialogues should remain as representative as possible of the wide range of SDGs stakeholders from civil society organisations, the private sector, trade unions, academia, regional and local governments and minority or vulnerable groups, who represent the four dimensions of sustainable development (economic, environmental, social, governance) and have a proven track record and experience working on SDGs at EU level. In exchange, stakeholders should be held accountable to their "constituencies", collecting inputs and reporting back to them;
21. stresses the importance to mainstream gender equality and equal opportunities for all in the EU policies and programmes implementing the SDGs, as highlighted by the recent report by the European Court of Auditors on gender mainstreaming in the EU budget⁵;

⁴ https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/sgd_multi-stakeholder_platform_input_to_reflection_paper_sustainable_europe2.pdf

⁵ <https://bit.ly/3fJXlaF>

22. therefore asks the European Commission to renew the SDG platform or create another dialogue platform with clout and structured follow-up to foster expertise from all the different stakeholders from public and private institutions regarding the 2030 Agenda and to advise the EC directly;
23. renews calls from different sectors and particularly the European Committee of the Regions as a champion of subsidiarity in action, for the EU's concerted actions to be more grounded in the sharing of best practice, impact assessments and a better link-up with the so-called quadruple helix (science, policy, industry and society). The greatest impact comes from integrating knowledge and experience across disciplines, policy sectors, and all SDGs. The EC Intelligent Cities Challenge is an excellent example to encourage and develop in other DGs and policies, as is the smart specialisation strategy (S3) platform for the SDGs, which could be used more by European regions;
24. believes the EC should select a few indicators of social, economic and environmental data at local and regional level, indicators where the local and regional level can have an impact, to examine the evolution of the 2030 Agenda across the EU and when possible, the impact at international scale. In this regard, the efforts already made to that end in some countries should be taken into consideration;
25. insists that monitoring and data are key communication tools to interact with citizens and civil society at local and regional level. The CoR and local and regional authorities are committed to the "localisation" of SDGs and are important collectors of data. For instance, the CoR works with the OECD and periodically gathers data on local and regional engagement on SDGs and believes this is an exemplary case of partnership founded on evidence-based research;
26. calls on the European Commission to increase the robustness of its Eurostat SDGs monitoring report, by including levels of achievement of the SDGs that can be easily quantified and determined in a non-bureaucratic way. The Commission should, in the framework of the European Semester, make further use of these reports and enrich them with data and best practice from local and regional authorities, as the current monitoring includes no NUTS-2 level data;

The role of SDGs in the European Semester for a sustainable recovery

27. pays tribute to the major work undertaken by the European Commission to incorporate the SDGs into the European Semester in the 2020 Semester cycle. The progressive incorporation of SDGs into the Annual Sustainable Growth Strategy (ASGS), the Country Reports and the National Reform Programmes has shown a genuine commitment by the EU to a change of paradigm in the direction of sustainable development;
28. supports the European Green Deal and calls for a more synergistic interpretation of the SDGs in tackling climate change and here highlights the utility of the SDGs and in particular SDG 13 and the opportunity to work on trade-offs and policy coherence with the SDGs framework;

29. considers it is necessary to better align the priorities of all funding programmes in order to mainstream the SDGs universally. For instance, 100 Climate Neutral Cities in 2030 is a move to accelerate the SDGs. Investment in social issues is beneficial for the climate as well;
30. therefore encourages the European Commission to reintegrate SDGs explicitly into a reformed European Semester, leading to a place-based sustainable recovery, which should fully involve local and regional authorities and complement reforms and investments in the Member States, which should be SDG-proofed and of European added value;
31. reiterates against this background the need for the European Commission to provide a definition of "structural reforms" within the context of the European Semester. Such a definition is required in order to ensure that these reforms would be limited to policy areas, which are relevant for the implementation of the EU Treaty objectives and the overarching policy strategies of the European Union, including the SDGs, and which, with due respect to the principle of subsidiarity, relate directly to EU competences⁶;
32. asks the Commission to consider contributions to meeting the SDGs to be a common and crosscutting objective for all EU funding programmes under direct and indirect management;
33. therefore, believes its recommendations to improve the accountability of the European Semester are all the more relevant now, with an urgent need to involve regions, cities, rural municipalities and stakeholders in the process and make the governance more democratic and transparent. Notes that the Staff Working Document on Delivering the UN's SDGs also points in this direction by reaffirming the need to involve stakeholders to implement SDGs;
34. repeats its call for the adoption of a European Code of Conduct to involve local and regional authorities and their representative associations in the European Semester and notes that the European Commission should lead by example and create structured dialogue with stakeholders on the European Semester, especially after the gap left by the non-renewal of the EU high-level multi-stakeholders' platform on SDGs;
35. proposes as a first step in this direction the organisation of a stakeholders' conference on the European Semester with the support of both consultative Committees, and/or the consultation of the committees ahead of the publication of the next Annual Sustainable Growth Strategy;
36. stresses that the promotion of the twin transitions and the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) and its attendant Action Plan, in the NRRPs is insufficient to cover the SDGs in a coherent, consistent way in order to provide a clear path leading to the achievement of milestones and headline targets. The current crisis has shown that the EU needs the SDGs as a broader approach which also includes and links up with other policies such as biodiversity and health to avoid future crises;

⁶ See CoR opinion 3764/2018 on The Reform Support Programme <https://webapi2016.cor.europa.eu/v1/documents/COR-2018-03764-00-00-AC-TRA-EN.docx/content>.

37. calls on the European Commission, since Europe is at a crossroads, to use the next Annual Sustainable Growth Strategy 2022 to formally reintegrate SDGs into the European Semester, better link SDGs and the RRF and explicitly affirm SDGs as a way for the EU to shape a sustainable recovery;
38. believes that keeping the focus of the European Semester as the framework for EU countries to coordinate their economic policies is possible with the integration of the SDGs and that SDGs should be reintegrated into the European Semester at the earliest opportunity;
39. encourages the European Commission to start such reintegration during the assessment of the NRRPs by mapping SDGs in the NRRPs presented by Member States; emphasises that such visualisation would be carried out by the European Commission's departments as regards how the plans contribute to the SDGs. This would give a useful overview of the comprehensiveness of these plans, while not representing a further administrative burden on reporting;
40. calls on the Commission to consider establishing a simple, non-bureaucratic environmental scoreboard, which would complement the social scoreboard under the European Semester and prepare for the formal reintegration of the SDGs into the next European Semester cycle;
41. calls on the Commission to come forward with proposals to better align corporate responsibility requirements with the implementation of the Agenda for Sustainable Development. This could include consideration of a simple, non-bureaucratic European corporate responsibility passport for large companies, setting out requirements relating to the sustainable development goals in terms of industrial relations, gender equality, supply chain management, taxation and financial transparency;
42. considers that the Commission's proposal for a revision of the Stability and Growth Pact, to be presented in the final quarter of 2021, should pave the way for sustainability-based reform of the EU's budgetary and macroeconomic surveillance mechanisms, with a view to ensuring a sufficiently high level of high-quality public investment in the sustainable transformation of the European Union. This should include proposals to integrate simple and non-bureaucratic indicators into the fiscal framework which reflect the path towards achieving the SDGs more effectively than GDP;

Local and regional contribution for the SDGs

43. points out that the OECD estimates that 65% of the 169 targets of the 17 SDGs cannot be reached without involvement of, or coordination with, local and regional authorities⁷;
44. notes that local and regional authorities were responsible for 53% of total public investment in 2018 on average in the EU⁸. Most of these investments relate to infrastructure for basic services,

⁷ The OECD quoting the UN Sustainable Development Solution Network in "A Territorial Approach to the Sustainable Development Goals: A role for Cities and Regions to leave no-one behind" (2017) – OECD.

⁸ 2019, Key Data on Local and Regional Governments in the EU – OECD.

for which cities and/or regions have core competences, and which are sometimes the subject of dedicated SDGs such as education, health, social infrastructure, drinking water, sanitation, solid waste management, energy, transport and housing. Also notes that an entire SDG - the eleventh one - is devoted to cities and local communities;

45. considers that local and regional governments are key to triggering local, regional and, consequently, national policies in important fields related to the SDGs, such as the environment, public services, education, health, and economic and territorial development, and they contribute to many other goals, such as gender equality, sustainable consumption, employment, innovation, inclusive societies, good governance and partnerships. Therefore, it is important to reinforce the existing consensus to upscale territorial priorities within the framework of EU policy. Many networks have established task forces in which members share information and experience on the implementation of the SDGs in their respective countries – in some cases with peers in partner countries and advocate their goals to the European Commission and at international fora. It is also important for local and regional authorities to be able to exercise at EU level the powers they have in their respective countries as this will make it easier to encourage public policies promoting the SDGs at all levels;
46. welcomes the preliminary results of the CoR-OECD survey on SDGs and recovery⁹, showing that despite the pandemic, local and regional authorities are still mobilised for the implementation of the SDGs with 60% of local and regional respondents indicating their conviction that the SDGs can help take a more holistic approach to recovery, and 43% having a specific governance structure to implement them;
47. pays tribute to the work of international and European associations and organisations to support the localisation of SDGs at European and international scales through decentralised cooperation and calls for more efforts to foster such partnerships¹⁰;
48. encourages the further development of the UN initiative "Localising the SDGs" to accelerate and scale up efforts to reach the SDGs by 2030. Pledges to cooperate with the UN and the European Commission to stimulate an increasing mobilisation of cities and regions for the localisation of the SDGs and the drafting of Voluntary Local/Regional/Subnational Reviews which ultimately can contribute to Voluntary National Reviews;
49. stresses the need to go local in measuring progress towards SDGs. The EU should help cities and regions to monitor their progress towards reaching SDGs based on their own situation¹¹;

⁹ CoR-OECD survey: SDGs as a framework for COVID-19 recovery in cities and regions. Ran from 10 May until 18 June 2021.

¹⁰ Like the OECD and its pilot project on a territorial approach to the SDGs; the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR) and its work to help national associations of regions and cities to draft the Voluntary Subnational Reviews covering whole countries; the Assembly of European Regions (AER) for its work regarding the implementation of SDGs at local and regional level; Regions4 and its community of practice on SDGs; EUROCITIES and its taskforce on SDGs; PLATFORMA and UCLG and their training for the trainers on SDGs; the EU URBACT SDGs; the City Mayors Foundation for the promotion of sustainability; and the ICLE, a leading network for cities all around the world for sustainability programmes, to name but a few.

¹¹ Like, for instance, as is happening now in Portugal with the CESOP Local projects by the Catholic University of Portugal and ODS Local by the University of Lisbon.

50. asks the Joint Research Centre to continue its work on Voluntary Local Reviews in the form of handbooks and to integrate this into smart specialisation mechanisms to support cities and local governments in using cohesion and other financial instruments. In addition, the EC should create incentives for cities and regions to localise the SDGs at local and regional level. The CoR should coordinate this broad process;
51. notes there is also a need to strengthen capacity-building at local level on implementing SDGs. The CoR considers it is fundamental to jointly develop strategic management models and specific management tools for sustainable development and to offer training courses to the decision-makers and staff of local governments and local stakeholders. The EU could support European networks for joint development and such training opportunities. The CoR also believes that research – scientific and technological as well as humanist – has a key role to play in achieving the SDGs and that knowledge and innovation generation centres should therefore receive adequate funding;
52. notes the need to accelerate a culture of collaboration across all sectors and levels implementing SDGs;
53. therefore requests that the EC create direct incentives for local and regional authorities to cooperate directly with the private sector and civil society to advance the SDGs;
54. highlights the crucial role of regions to design and implement SDGs on the ground as fundamental partners of national and local entities in the spirit of collaboration embodied in SDG 17. Regions' financial and technical support is essential to help and build local capacities to localise SDGs and guarantee that sustainable rural and peri-urban areas interact with cities in a sustainable way;
55. strongly supports the share of local and regional best practice and believes it is fundamental to promoting the SDG agenda, for example through the recently created Urbact Network pilot of cities localising SDGs. Nevertheless, the EU must create a new programme for the exchange of good practice between cities and regions across the EU, including cities from other continents, to identify global good practices and promote bilateral agreements;
56. notes the CoR is committed to joining forces with other European institutions to organise "Science meets regions" events and action projects on SDGs – piloting, experimenting, prototyping and scaling up; in particular, harnessing the experience of regions whose policies are guided by the SDGs, and then promoting their replicability and scalability;
57. asks the EU to create incentives to promote participatory measures from the public and local organisations to implement the SDGs. These incentives should improve the dissemination of the 2030 Agenda and promote the SDGs among the general population, both in Europe and beyond through multi-level and multi-stakeholder partnerships;
58. reaffirms the commitment of the CoR to step up its partnerships with the OECD, EUROCITIES, AER, CEMR - PLATFORMA and Regions4 to accelerate the localisation of SDGs and

advocate the SDGs as an overarching EU core value; commits to concluding other partnerships to further support SDGs' localisation in Europe and beyond;

59. refers to its opinion on *Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): a basis for a long-term EU strategy for a sustainable Europe by 2030*¹², which presented the CoR's political views on the Reflection Paper entitled *Towards a Sustainable Europe by 2030* and which still holds true as regards its calls for the "European Commission to take a leading role in setting up multi-level, multi-stakeholder and cross-sectoral governance, enabling the mainstreaming of all dimensions of the SDGs in all EU policies".

Brussels, 1 July 2021

The President
of the European Committee of the Regions

Apostolos Tzitzikostas

The Secretary- General of the European
Committee of the Regions

Petr Blížkovský

¹² Rapporteur: Arnoldas Abramavičius (LT/EPP), adopted 26 June 2019, COR-2019-00239.

II. PROCEDURE

Title	Delivering on the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030
Reference(s)	/
Legal basis	Own-initiative
Procedural basis	Rule 41(b)(ii) of the Rules of Procedure
Date of Council/EP referral/Date of Commission letter	N/A
Date of Bureau/President's decision	04/02/2021
Commission responsible	Economic Policy (ECON)
Rapporteur	Ricardo Rio (PT/EPP)
Analysis	February-March 2021
Discussed in commission	22 January 2021 (exchange of views)
Date adopted by commission	20 April 2021
Result of the vote in commission	Majority
Date adopted in plenary	1-2 July 2021
Previous Committee opinion	Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): a basis for a long-term EU strategy for a sustainable Europe by 2030 – COR-2019-00239-00-00. Adopted 26/06/2019.
Date of subsidiarity monitoring consultation	N/A