



European Economic and Social Committee

NAT/594
**Establishing sustainable
development goals**

Brussels, 18 September 2013

OPINION

of the

European Economic and Social Committee

on

**Establishing sustainable development goals –
European civil society's contribution to the EU position**
(exploratory opinion)

Rapporteur: **Ms Le Nouail Marlière**

On 6 December 2012 the European Commission decided to consult the European Economic and Social Committee, under Article 304 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, on

Establishing sustainable development goals – European civil society's contribution to the EU position
(exploratory opinion).

The Section for Agriculture, Rural Development and the Environment, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 3 September 2013.

At its 492nd plenary session, held on 18 and 19 September 2013 (meeting of 18 September), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 92 votes to 52 with 21 abstentions.

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1. **Conclusions and recommendations**

- 1.1 The EESC advocates that the EU institutions and the "open working group" established by the 67th UN General Assembly on 17 December 2012 apply and insist on the method of *ex ante* economic, social and environmental impact assessment, both for the phase of defining the sustainable development goals, and during the global negotiation of universally applicable goals, so that means are available to offset favourable or unfavourable differences that may arise or co-exist between geographical areas and sectors of activity.
- 1.2 All social programmes that are essential to achieving sustainable development goals, in the areas of education, health, and those targeting unemployed youth, should be protected from budgetary cuts as a matter of priority.
- 1.3 The Committee supports the EU's commitment to adhering to the plan to implement its 2020 strategy by means of the European semester, seizing the opportunity to make it meaningful by proposing a "decompartmentalised" social, economic and environmental strategy, as well as through the EU strategy for *integrated* sustainable development.
- 1.4 It proposes that European civil society be involved in this through CSOs, the social partners and national ESCs and similar institutions.
- 1.5 It urges the Member States and the EU institutions to:
 - 1.5.1 actively continue their efforts on development partnership by means of the EU's Agenda for Change and external development-aid and cooperation policy, and also take account of their own interests and those of their partners in bi- and multi-lateral external trade negotiations, *with due regard to human, economic, social and cultural rights*;

- 1.5.2 bolster and stabilise the European social model in order to secure a solid foundation and competitiveness that is based on their capacity not only for technological innovation but also for innovation towards social progress;
- 1.5.3 make every effort to develop a green economy that is resource-efficient and driven by an efficient use of primary and secondary energy, that benefits all of their citizens and – through fair technology transfer – their trading partners, an economy based on an energy transition geared towards controlling requirements, and providing the best carbon-storage and low-carbon technologies;
- 1.5.4 strengthen public and general-interest services to ensure that Europe is an area of fair prosperity within its borders as well as in its presence outside its borders, in its delegations and public cooperation;
- 1.5.5 define public services in Europe, on the basis of fundamental rights guaranteed to Europeans, by means of a framework directive on public services, moving away from the approach of pure self-regulation;
- 1.5.6 require both European and non-European companies with a presence in their territory to add an effective green strand to their CSR. Indeed, companies should be accountable for the social and environmental consequences of their management. This accountability should be explicitly implemented in the principal/sub-contractor chain from transnational to local level, in an established, transparent and traceable way. The requirement for transparency and independence should also concern rating and assessment agencies;
- 1.5.7 encourage and support the development of SMEs and enterprises in the social and solidarity-based economy;
- 1.5.8 act effectively on environmental issues, ensuring a genuine universal right to environmental information and better implementation of the Aarhus Convention and, more specifically, empower employees, by means of their representative bodies, with environmental alert capabilities;
- 1.5.9 redirect the tasks of banks and channel savings into industry and the "real economy", in order to foster the environmental transition, the financing of the construction and adaptation of housing, education, energy policies, food security, access to water, hospitals, road, port and rail infrastructure, etc., as these are essential conditions for sustainable development in Europe and across the world, in economic, human or environmental terms;
- 1.6 The Committee encourages the EU to:
 - 1.6.1 pursue the path of curbing financial speculation and fostering longer-term investment;

- 1.6.2 combat informal, undeclared, and improperly declared work within Europe, and outside Europe through stakeholder European companies, ensuring the enforcement of international labour standards, the collection of social contributions and the fight against money laundering, by introducing a proper system of penalties and bolstering independent inspection mechanisms (labour inspection);
- 1.6.3 also combat, in all their forms, the undercutting of international labour standards and the devaluing of the work and dignity of certain workers (all whose rights are not respected), and promote a general culture of stable jobs and secure social protection, ensuring prosperity and social comfort.

2. Introduction

- 2.1 The decision to launch a process leading to the establishment of sustainable development goals was one of the major decisions of the Rio+20 conference. The process was launched in January 2013 with the setting-up of an intergovernmental open working group mandated to provide a report with a proposal to the UN General Assembly at some point between September 2013 and September 2014. According to the Rio+20 outcome document, this process needs to be coordinated and coherent with the processes to consider the post-2015 development agenda.
- 2.2 This opinion should be seen in conjunction with the NAT own-initiative opinion adopted by the EESC in June 2013 on *The green economy – promoting sustainable development in Europe*¹ and the REX opinion on the Commission communication *A decent life for all – ending poverty and giving the world a sustainable future*². With a view to Europe's sustainable development, the European social model – which is inextricably linked to making a successful transition to a green economy – should be safeguarded and consolidated. The wait for an international agreement on the definition of the SDGs must not serve as a pretext for delaying or reducing development-aid and cooperation policy commitments made by industrialised countries.
- 2.3 In the referral letter for this exploratory opinion, the Commission makes the link between sustainable development goals, an inclusive green economy and poverty eradication. It asks the Committee to explore how the economic, environmental and social dimension might be successfully integrated into a future framework of universal SDGs. The Commission would like the views of the EESC's international counterparts to be brought into the discussion.
- 2.4 Over the course of two meetings of its Sustainable Development Observatory, the Committee held a hearing of representatives of the so-called major groups recognised by the UN at the Rio+20 conference.

¹ [OJ C 271, 19.9.2013, pp. 18-22.](#)

² [OJ C 27, 19.9.2013, pp. 144-150.](#)

2.5 For its part, the UN set up a high-level group of government representatives with a view to putting forward an initial report in September 2013. Achim Steiner, the UN under-secretary-general and executive director of the United Nations Environment Programme, addressed the EESC on 14 May, along with other representatives of civil society, on the topic of *Advancing sustainable development post-Rio+20*. He stressed the need for a fully inclusive consultation process on the SDGs that must involve governments, civil society and the private sector. Kitty van der Heijden, the Netherlands' ambassador for sustainable development, and member of the "open working group", shared her experience of that UN group.

3. General comments

3.1 The idea of including SDGs in the Rio+20 Declaration was put on the table by the Governments of Colombia, Guatemala and Peru. Building upon Agenda 21 and the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation, they suggested, in a joint proposal, establishing a limited set of measurable goals in order to secure renewed political commitment to sustainable development. The three Latin American countries (with the later contribution of the United Arab Emirates) proposed eight possible areas of action for SDGs: food security, water, energy, cities, oceans, natural systems, resource efficiency, and employment.

3.2 According to the Rio+20 outcome document *The Future we want*, the SDGs should:

- be based on Agenda 21 and the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation;
- build upon commitments already made;
- focus on priority areas for the achievement of sustainable development, being guided by the outcome document;
- address and incorporate in a balanced way all three dimensions of sustainable development and their interlinkages;
- be coherent with and integrated into the United Nations development agenda beyond 2015;
- not divert focus or effort from the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals; and
- include active involvement of all relevant stakeholders, as appropriate, in the process.

Moreover, they should be action-oriented, concise, easy to communicate, limited in number, aspirational, global in nature and universally applicable to all countries (while taking into account different national realities).

3.3 Ideally, the Rio +20 conference should provide a roadmap featuring a world in which every human being can enjoy their human rights, live equitably and free from the injustice of poverty, on a planet that has the natural resources to sustain them.

3.3.1 According to Oxfam International (Oxfam, Post-2015 Development Goals: Oxfam International Position, January 2013), for example, the post-2015 framework should support this vision, set goals and objectives in line with it and demonstrate progress toward achieving

it. Achieving well-being for all within the means of the planet would require a fundamental re-orientation of economic, social and political development.

3.3.2 Oxfam believes that post-2015 debates *lack clarity* on what the role of a framework is and how it can lead to real change for people living in poverty. Reaching a shared view on the "how" is crucial to informing the "what". The purpose of goals should be to galvanise political will and government-led action to end poverty and inequality, and protect the planet, by:

- expressing a shared vision and priorities for governments and the international community, that guide sweeping change;
- equipping citizens with a powerful advocacy tool to press for policy change, hold governments and the private sector to account, and initiate their own actions for change;
- helping drive change in national policy and decision-making – achieved via the advocacy, finance, peer pressure (e.g. from other countries or at a regional level), and better data collection and transparency, which must accompany new goals;
- facilitating dialogue and increasing accountability at all levels: between states and their citizens, states and the private sector, states and intergovernmental bodies, between development cooperation partners, and between citizens and responsible businesses; and
- bringing greater focus, coherence and transparency to the activities of international institutions, such as the United Nations and international financial institutions.

3.4 **Greening industries and creating jobs**

3.4.1 Any lasting recovery of the real economy would necessarily take the shape of a more resource-efficient production model. While endorsing a more ambitious and comprehensive European climate policy framework for delivering the broader 2050 climate targets, Europe should support its industrial base and its related sectors and competences.

3.4.2 How the objective of a resource-efficient low-carbon economy is to be reached and how the transition is managed are the key issues to be addressed. The two main focuses should be industrial policy and employment prospects on the road to a green economy that retains its industrial base (Béla Galgóczi, Greening industries and creating jobs, European Trade Union Institute, 2012).

3.4.3 Industry plays a leading role in research and development, trade and, to a lesser extent, in investment. The transition towards a low-carbon form of development, whereby energy efficiency is enhanced, sustainable work is valued more highly and health protected, has become crucial.

3.4.4 Europe is experiencing one of the lowest growth rates in its history since 1929. But there are two crucial factors that hold the key to achieving future goals for sustainable and lasting development: 1) low CO₂ emissions; and 2) democracy.

3.4.5 The EU should forge ahead with its efforts on research and development so as to create the number of jobs needed for its workforce, and also meet the future development needs generated by stronger growth on other continents, in areas as varied as services, education, health, the environment, transport, energy, housing, urbanisation, agriculture and food, etc.

3.5 **Jobs, social inclusion and sustainable development must be at the heart of EU and global action**

3.5.1 The IMF has recognised that the austerity medication was more potent than it first thought. The right lesson to draw is that the dosage must be reduced. All key social programmes, in the areas of education, health, and those targeting unemployed youth, should be protected from budgetary cuts. The need for funding in the EU Member States is critical following the global financial crisis, and the refinancing of the real economy is insufficiently covered by the agreement reached by the European Council on the EU's multiannual financial framework. The measures advocated by the troika of the World Bank, the IMF and the Council of the EU are not conducive to creating the conditions necessary for the economy to return to lasting, sustainable growth.

3.5.2 Smart social policies – such as programmes that help the unemployed find jobs or systems that provide social security to vulnerable members of our society – cannot just be considered a cost. They are an investment in our future.

3.5.3 Young people have been particularly hard hit in the euro zone as a whole, where youth unemployment has topped 22 per cent, with rates exceeding 50 per cent in certain countries like Greece and Spain. In 2010, the rate of *employment in temporary work* among young people aged 15 to 24 exceeded 50% to reach almost 70% (Eurofound, Third European Quality of Life Survey, 2012).

3.5.4 Everywhere, people have paid a high price for cleaning up the devastating consequences of practices in the financial sector that proved to be irresponsible.

3.5.5 The EU must bring real substance to the social dimension, including social dialogue, as announced in the roadmap for completing the European economic and monetary union. It should help Member States implement youth guarantee schemes, improve industrial diversification and innovation, boost effectiveness of labour market services, increase job creation and strengthen social investment (ILO, Guy Ryder, Jobs, social inclusion and growth should top EU agenda, 14 February 2013).

4. **Greening the European semester**

4.1 It has emerged from the initial hearings held by the Committee that the correlation between the contributions of civil society gathered by the EU and those being gathered by the UN system through direct consultation is not being met with the understanding and transparency that European citizens are entitled to expect. The contributions of organisations representing

civil society sit alongside those of private-interest pressure groups, at the same level as those of governments, under a timetable that leaves little room for holding debates with due regard for the independence of the organisations and the autonomy of social dialogue. Moreover, the impression that has emerged over the course of following the work of the Rio +20 conference, and of the "open" working group, is of a scenario aimed at adding impetus to a pre-determined approach, as though the die were already cast elsewhere.

4.2 Fortunately, the EU has decided to implement the whole approach by means of greening the Europe 2020 strategy and the European semester, in order to make a harmonised contribution in which Europe implements and speaks with one voice on the world stage.

4.3 It is important today to have sustainability as a thread running through key policy areas. That currently means the Europe 2020 strategy and the European semester as its central governance pillar.

The Committee has been very interested to learn from the Commission and the Council that the EU intends to implement and push forward the outcomes and processes agreed at the Rio+20 conference through the Europe 2020 strategy. The Committee will therefore be keeping a careful watch as to whether this is actually happening (Council of the European Union, Rio+20: Outcome and follow-up to the UNCSD 2012 Summit – Council conclusions, 25 October 2012, 15477/12).

4.4 The Committee has watched attentively as the circle of those involved in the European semester process has been expanding. DG Environment is involved this year even more heavily than before, and the EU Environment Council discussed the annual growth survey for the first time last December. The Committee will play its part in ensuring that civil society, too, is able to bring a sustainability dimension to bear in the process, namely through the national economic and social councils, some of which now have specific competences in this area, and also through the national sustainability councils.

4.5 As regards the annual growth survey, it should be pointed out that the connection between the various crises (the financial, economic, social, but especially the environmental crisis) is, in our view, not seen clearly enough, nor is the urgent need to get serious about transforming our entire economy to make it greener – not just in spite of, but precisely because of the crisis. Carrying on as before will not do any more.

4.6 In the context of the annual growth survey, the EU needs to speak with one voice. The EU cannot engage in international negotiations and advocate the greening of the world economy and then neglect the issue in its own most important economic policy documents.

4.7 The absence of any mention of a qualified concept of growth is also a bit strange in this context. How is it possible that the EU is, at international level, in the vanguard of the "beyond GDP" debate, but is fixated on GDP in its growth survey? That said, whilst the report does deal with social problems, the aim of living well within the limits of our planet's

resources (which is, by the way, also the title of the 7th Environment Action Programme) does not jump out of the pages.

4.8 There is, fortunately, much material available to guide the debate on the advisability of establishing additional indicators and this must now lead to implementation based on face-to-face meetings between institutional actors and representatives of civil society, as part of an approach that ensures the involvement in the decision-making process of all the interests at stake.

4.9 The Committee notes that the abolition of environmentally-damaging subsidies and the introduction of environmental taxes are now firmly embedded in the annual growth survey and the country-specific recommendations and that, this year, waste and water treatment and improved recycling get a mention.

5. **Linking the MDGs and the SDGs**

5.1 **A good agreement on the Union's budget should be reached on MDGs³**

5.1.1 Poverty reduction is a question of equity and justice and concerns access to services such as healthcare and education and employment. The MDG development was too donor driven. The future framework requires:

- greater ownership and participation of partner countries which are in the end responsible for carrying out most of the work;
- a stronger framework for mutual accountability of both donor and partner country; and
- flexibility to enable partner countries to tailor development goals according to their national context.

5.1.2 Using a time-bound and outcome-oriented approach, the eight MDGs have had a deep effect on international development policies. By focusing on a limited set of measurable targets, they have helped to increase and channel development aid more efficiently. However, as we are coming closer to the 2015-deadline, it is clear that the Goals will deliver mixed results, with successes and setbacks.

5.1.3 The current set of millennium goals need to be complemented by sustainable development goals. SDGs have two notable differences compared to MDGs: they would have a global reach (as opposed to MDGs which mainly focus on the South) and include dimensions beyond the meta-norm of poverty reduction (natural resources, consumption, production, energy, human rights, etc.).

³ [OJ C 271, 19.9.2013, 144-150.](#)

- 5.1.4 The next two years will be critical in defining the next development Agenda. Both processes – the revision of MDGs and the formalisation of SDGs – must provide crucial guidelines for the post-2015 sustainable development architecture.

These guidelines should include budgeting for gender equality as a cross-cutting dimension of public policies, as the primary factor in combating poverty and inequality⁴.

The task ahead is huge and must be rooted in a greater emphasis on human rights, and on civil society organisation participation in decision-making, as part of an approach centred on the economy and services as a means of human development⁵.

Brussels, 18 September 2013.

The President
of the
European Economic and Social Committee

Henri Malosse

⁴ [OJ C 76, 14.3.2013, p. 8-14.](#)

⁵ [OJ C 161, 6.6.2013, p. 82-86](#)
[OJ C 181, 21.6.2012, p. 28-34.](#)