

Briefing on the outcomes of the
UN High-level Political Forum 2020

PROGRESS REVIEW ON IMPLEMENTING THE AGENDA 2030

IEEP briefing paper
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1. Executive summary

The message across different reports monitoring global progress is clear: not enough progress is being made on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to achieve the targets of Agenda 2030 by its deadline. To make matters worse, despite the temporary drop in emissions it has caused, the Covid-19 pandemic now threatens to reverse many years of work towards the SDGs.

Encouragingly and true to the urgency of Agenda 2030, the Covid-19 pandemic did not derail the 2020 UN High-level Political Forum as it had for so many other political events throughout 2020. Most HLPF delegates agreed that the SDGs and Agenda 2030 presented the best framework for recovery and that the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic presents an opportunity to accelerate strategies to achieve them.

'Building back better' was a recurring theme of the meeting. However, by the end of the two weeks, it remained unclear what 'better' exactly meant, leaving this key question to be answered by the future recovery strategies of individual states.

As for the EU, the 2020 Eurostat report states that it has made progress in the last five years towards almost all of the SDGs. However, progress does not necessarily mean that the status of the goal is satisfactory, given the need to achieve the goals by the 2030 deadline. Furthermore, the EU continues to create negative spill-overs on a global scale that undermine both its internal progress and the ability of other countries to accomplish the targets of the SDGs.

The [European Semester process](#) – a framework for the coordination of economic policies across the Union – has made some promising inroads towards further implementing SDG targets in 2020. The Commission has specifically stated that it views the European Semester as the key means for putting SDGs at the heart of EU's policymaking and action in the future.

The [Country-Specific Recommendations](#) (CSRs) in the 2020 Spring Package explicitly highlight the "interconnectedness of economic, social and environmental spheres and the need for a holistic approach to recovery". The semester, together with mainstreaming SDGs in the [EU's better regulation](#) agenda, could present an achievable way for the EU to work concretely towards the targets of SDGs 12-15, and Agenda 2030 holistically, in the future¹.

¹ See [Delivering the Green Deal through the European Semester](#) and [European Semester Spring Package](#)

2. Context and scope

Despite widespread disruptions caused by the global pandemic, monitoring of the SDGs has not stalled. So far official and independent progress reports released in 2020 have illustrated a global shortfall in efforts to achieve the targets of the SDGs, despite some apparent short-term successes. SDGs 12-15 – those which most address climate change, biodiversity and the environment – have been particularly poor performers.

While many other high-level events have been postponed and cancelled during the pandemic, the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) was held as scheduled in July, albeit with significant changes to the format.

The words of UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres – delivered virtually – captured the necessity of the forum and increased action for the goals: “the COVID-19 crisis is having devastating impacts because of our past and present failures, because we have yet to take the SDGs seriously”

This policy brief aims to provide a comparative review of key global reports and analyse the status of progress in 2020 towards achieving the SDGs and Agenda 2030, with a particular focus on the SDGs linked to the environment. The briefing will also provide a summary of the key outcomes of the HLPF held (mainly) virtually from 7th – 16th July.

The briefing will pay specific attention to the European Union (EU) and its progress in a global context and in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic that has profoundly changed many aspects of our global society in 2020.

The briefing is informed by official and independent reports that measure, through different methodologies and with a different focus, global progress towards the SDGs:

- [The UN Global Sustainable Development Report 2019 – Hereafter GSDR 2019](#)
- [The 2020 Progress Report of the UN Secretary-General on progress towards the sustainable development goals – Hereafter UN Report of the Secretary-General/Report of the Secretary-General](#)
- [The Sustainable Development Solutions Network \(SDSN\) Sustainable Development Report 2020 – Hereafter SDSN Report](#)
- [The Eurostat Sustainable Development in the European Union Report 2020 – Hereafter Eurostat Report](#)

3. Where are we globally?

The message across different reports monitoring global progress is clear: not enough progress is being made on the SDGs to achieve the targets of Agenda 2030 by its deadline.

The GSDR 2019 already identified SDGs 12-15 specifically as being the furthest away from their targets being achieved². The progress report of the UN Secretary-General similarly expresses concern about the lack of progress on the underpinning environmental goals despite some recent successes elsewhere. The 2020 SDSN Report highlights unclear progress towards climate targets in the light of Covid-19 and warns that SDGs 12-15, together with SDGs 2 and 10, are currently moving backwards within the OECD countries.

However, taking a longer-term perspective, there has been *some* progress; and a comparison between the 1990s and today on several indicators shows that we have come a long way in the last 20-30 years. Additionally, we are seeing an increasing number of commitments to environmental targets and standards across the political and business world.

According to the SDSN Report, before Covid-19 all regions were making progress towards SDGs. From a global perspective, the most progress was being made from Asia and the Pacific regions. However, the progress is not fast enough or consistent across all SDGs.

For example, under the current trajectory, poverty would be reduced to 6% of the global population by 2030, falling significantly short of the target to eradicate extreme poverty under Agenda 2030. Progress towards SDG2 on zero hunger is currently going backwards with increased undernourishment and increased obesity since 2015.

The SDSN's global country-specific SDG index continues to have a top 15 made up by European countries, 12 of them EU Member States. This indicates that the social and environmental management in the region is leading the way globally, and although these qualities have not necessarily translated to outcomes in health amid the Covid-19 pandemic, there are many lessons for advancing on the 2030 Agenda that can be learned from Europe.

However, despite overall performance being relatively high for European countries, the SDSN report emphasises the detrimental spill-over effects caused by developed

² See page 10 of [GSDR 2019](#). SDG 12 (Responsible consumption and production), 13 (Climate action), 14 (Life below water, 15 (Life on land) – the most relevant - but not *only* – SDGs for the environment.

countries, calling specific attention to the EU. Through its trade and consumption patterns, the EU undermines the ability of other countries to achieve SDG targets (See Chapter 3 below).

The report of the UN Secretary-General on progress towards the SDGs voiced concern that the Covid-19 pandemic has the potential to reverse many years of work towards the SDGs.

Following on from the GSDR of 2019, **the UN Secretary-General report** highlights that poverty, maternal and child mortality, access to electricity and environmental governance were all steadily moving in the right direction. However, hunger, inequality and accelerating climate change have stalled and reversed progress on several SDGs at the same time.

Selected findings from the report on SDGs 12-15 are:

SDG12: According to the report of the UN Secretary-General, worldwide consumption and production is having a profound impact on the environment and our natural resources. To achieve the targets of SDG12 will require vastly more sustainable practices. In the wake of Covid-19, the UN has suggested that the pandemic presents an opportunity for countries to shift focus and devise plans for a more sustainable recovery.

SDG13: Climate action is considerably off track for achieving the goals for global warming reduction specified in the Paris Agreement. Greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions are predicted to fall in 2020 by 6% - largely a result of the pandemic – and air quality has improved, however, these improvements will only be short term, and the lessons learned during the pandemic need to be actively used by policymakers in order to speed up progress and, importantly, to prevent rebound effects after economic activities pick up again.

SDG14: Oceanic environmental deterioration, acidification, CO₂ saturation and unsustainable fisheries continue to impede the successful realisation of SDG14 on life below water. Although conservation efforts and sustainable practices are increasing in some regions, the forecast predicts several potentially irreversible damages in the future, including the loss of certain marine species.

SDG15: The story is no more positive with SDG15 on life on land, where forests continue to be in decline, key biodiversity areas are deteriorating, and species are becoming extinct at accelerating rates. However, on the positive side continuing efforts are being made to reverse these outcomes; and with some positive effects, such as the EU's Natura 2000 network of protected areas. However, positive progress has not yet been sufficient to turn the tide of decline.

The **SDSN Report** similarly focuses on the impact of Covid-19 on the achievement of Agenda 2030 and outlines the direct and indirect impacts of the pandemic on the SDGs. The report is more explicit than the UN reports in drawing attention to, and condemning, the lack of progress made before the pandemic:

The SDSN Report concludes that "if the Covid-19 disaster accomplishes anything good, it should be to shake the world from its complacency, so as seriously commit to the hard work of investing in a sustainable and inclusive future for humanity".³

The key message from the SDSN report is that the impact of the pandemic on climate is unclear. Covid-19 has resulted in a significant reduction in pollution and harmful emissions due to the reduced use of air, sea and personal transportation, and lockdown measures forcing many buildings and entire cities to close.

However, as the lockdown measures have eased in some parts of the world it is becoming clear that the environmental relief of the past months will, unfortunately, be short-lived. As countries return to pre-pandemic levels of travel, trade and interaction, policymakers must resist pressure to reduce both environmental safeguards and the implementation of conventions on biodiversity and the environment. In the pursuit of economic recovery, this will be a significant challenge.

The SDSN report highlights that in responding to the pandemic South Korea has emerged as an exemplar. The country has demonstrated that it can manage the crisis, limiting disruption and economic damage as measured by GDP in a way that other countries have been unable to do, including the world's most developed nations and economies. The OECD meanwhile has been vocal about its commitment to 'build back better' including a commitment – at the level of rhetoric - to the Agenda 2030 principle 'leave no one behind'.

Both the SDSN report and the 2020 report of the Secretary-General highlight the all-encompassing nature of the pandemic, and the challenges that it presents for the sustainability agenda. However, they also identify the opportunity to build back better and use the Covid-19 crisis as a springboard to develop drastically more ambitious policies to achieve the SDGs and Agenda 2030. Both reports also support increased global cooperation, making connections between multiple SDGs and proposing a framework of six 'SDG transformations' to aid policy formulation in the recovery from Covid-19.

³ SDSN Sustainable Development Report 2020 – Page 7

4. How is the EU performing?

The size and economic might of the EU are comparable to that of the biggest countries in the world including China, the US and India. It is therefore often discussed in such a context in reporting on country-level and regional progress and statistics. With the current US administration leaving the Paris Climate Agreement and moving away from the environmental ambitions of the previous administration, the EU is now considered a – or perhaps the – global leader in environmental governance. Measuring its effectiveness in achieving the SDGs and Agenda 2030 is therefore essential.

Initiatives by the EU are mentioned in positive terms in both the GSDR 2019 and the report of the Secretary-General. They highlight, for example, the EU's reporting of progress, including on nationally determined contributions (NDCs) to deliver the Paris Agreement, and the EU's participation in the UN Nagoya Protocol, Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the global agreement on eliminating illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing. The GSDR 2019 also commended the work of the EU in providing guidelines for sustainable finance, for improvements in the financial assessment of climate change risks, and its innovative emissions trading schemes and green energy targets.

The SDSN report, however, also identifies that the EU has absolute SDG performance gaps that are particularly high across SDGs 12-15. In the latest climate action tracker report⁴, referenced by SDSN, the EU is assessed as making insufficient progress to achieve the global warming targets of the Paris Climate Agreement.

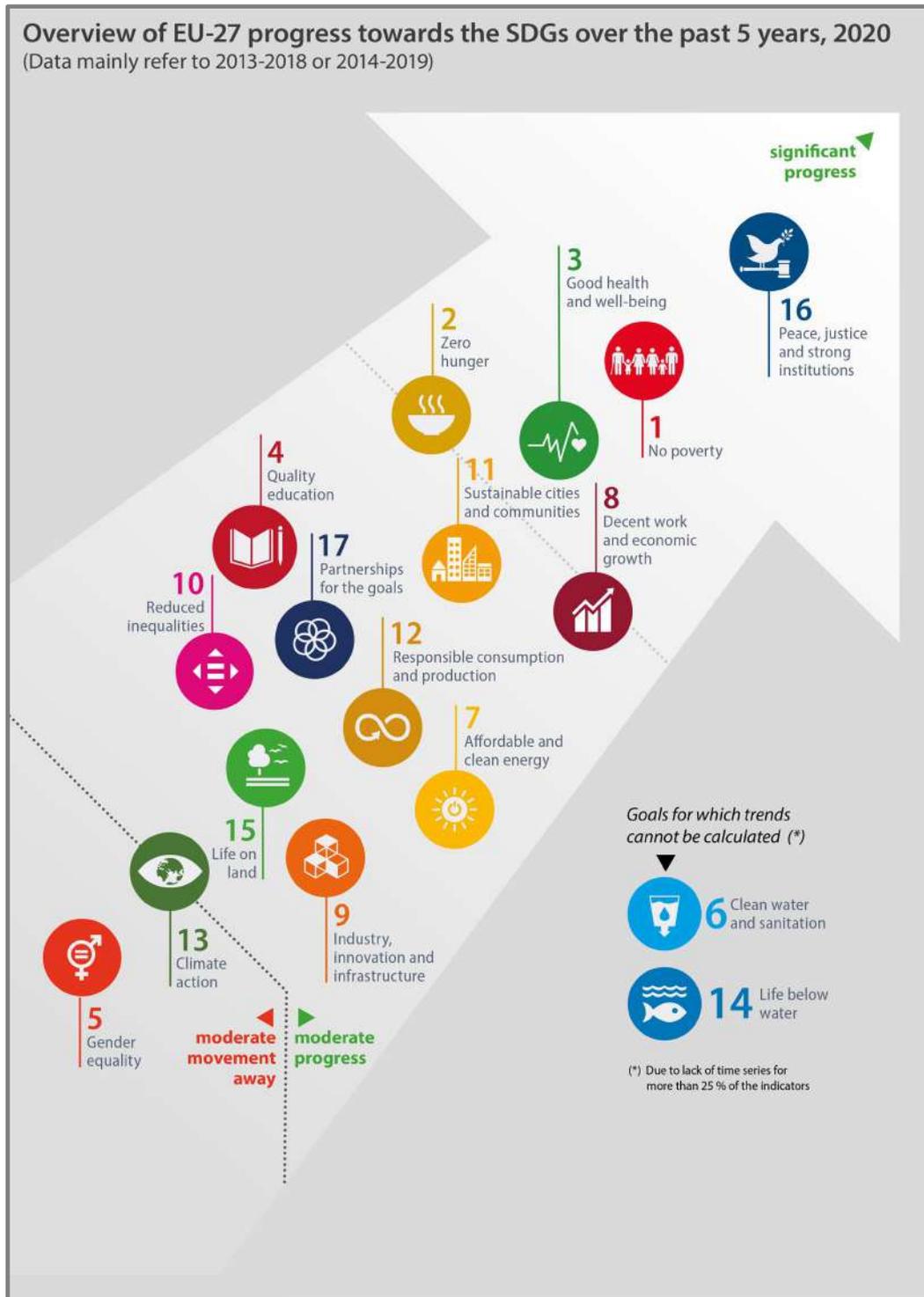
According to the 2020 Eurostat report, the EU has made progress in the last five years towards almost all of the SDGs. As the report states, however, progress does not necessarily mean that the status of the goal is satisfactory in light of achieving the goals by the 2030 deadline.

Like the outcomes of the SDSN report, the Eurostat report identifies that the SDGs most closely linked to environmental aspects of sustainability have been those where performance has been least convincing. Progress in achieving climate, energy and circular economy targets – SDGs 7, 13 and 12 respectively - has slowed down, and ecosystems and biodiversity (SDG15) have been detrimentally affected by human activity in the region. Insufficient data for SDG14 on life below water continues to prevent Eurostat from accurately assessing progress towards the goal; although the number of coastal bathing sites with excellent water quality has increased in the EU,

⁴ Climate Action Tracker (2020). A Government Roadmap for Addressing the Climate and Post Covid-19 Economic Crises. New Climate Institute and Climate Analytics.

increasing ocean acidity is highlighted as a concerning global trend, corroborating with the UN Report of the Secretary-General.

Figure 1: Synopsis of SDG progress (Eurostat 2020)



In line with the Eurostat reporting, the SDSN Report ranks EU countries as the best performers on the SDGs. Sweden is the number 1 ranked country with a score of 84.7, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Austria, Czech Republic, Netherlands, Estonia, Belgium, Slovenia and Ireland populate all but three of the remaining top 15 ranked countries. The lowest EU performer is Luxembourg – ranked 44 – with a score of 74.3.

However, the SDSN report and also the GSDR 2019 single out the EU for creating negative spill-overs that on a global scale undermine its internal progress. These negative spill-overs occur mainly as a result of the EU's trade and consumption patterns and undermine the ability of other countries to accomplish the targets of the SDGs.

In addition to the SDG index, the SDSN report also ranks countries by their spill-over effects, measured across three axes: effects related to economy, to finance and governance, and to security. Within the EU, Luxembourg is ranked lower than only Guyana and Singapore in the spill-over index and in general, the EU countries performing best in SDSNs overall SDG index, perform substantially worse on their spill-over index (Table 1).

The Eurostat report recognises that negative spill-overs are an issue, but the report states that inadequate data suitable for official statistics is yet available to measure this. There is, therefore, no ranking or measurement of spill-overs in the Eurostat report, highlighting a substantial gap in the EU reporting of SDGs.

Table 2: Comparison of spill-over ranking and SDG Index ranking for the EU Member States

Country	Spill-over Index Score	Spill-over Index Rank	SDG Index Rank
Austria	56.3	154	7
Belgium	59.9	149	11
Bulgaria	85.4	112	39
Croatia	83.1	113	19

Cyprus	59.9	150	34
Czech Republic	69.7	129	8
Denmark	66.4	141	2
Estonia	69.4	130	10
Finland	66.6	140	3
France	51.1	158	4
Germany	57.0	153	5
Greece	69.4	131	43
Hungary	77.1	124	29
Ireland	57.8	152	14
Italy	69.0	132	30
Latvia	70.4	127	24
Lithuania	65.6	144	36
Luxembourg	33.5	164	44
Malta	56.3	155	32
Netherlands	44.9	159	9

Poland	81.8	117	23
Portugal	66.7	139	25
Romania	91.6	101	38
Slovak Republic	72.7	126	27
Slovenia	66.4	142	12
Spain	61.3	146	22
Sweden	67.4	137	1

Source: Author's compilation of data from the SDSN Sustainable Development Report 2020 – Spill-over Index (Table 13 in the report)

5. What is the status of the environment in the EU?

Our basic needs for environmental and climate goods and services from land are undersupplied, and markets are not functioning effectively for their provision (Box1) Food and fibre production and yields have been prioritised in previous decades to great effect and are well provided.

SDG 12: Responsible consumption and production

The Eurostat report summarises the EU's progress towards SDG12 by stating that increases in energy and resource productivity have largely been a result of increased GDP growth and that therefore the positive trend in SDG12 does not, in fact, reflect greater sustainability in the consumption of natural resources. Circular material use in the EU has stagnated, and waste generation is increasing, as is the consumption of toxic chemicals; and the decrease in CO₂ emissions from passenger cars has stopped, meaning that the EU is not on track to achieve its respective targets for 2021.

The SDSN report highlights that in the wake of Covid-19 globally there has been a short-term reduction in the demand for and use of natural resources - due to the reduced economic activity brought about by the pandemic. However, as countries recover, the pressure to loosen regulations aimed at achieving a circular economy, and at meeting the targets of the Paris Climate Agreement, is increasing.

A further potentially detrimental implication of the pandemic is that the substantial production of personal protective equipment (PPE) used to protect individuals from spreading and contracting the coronavirus, will lead to increased plastic pollution. Overall, SDSN finds that the OECD, including 22 of the 27 EU Member States, faces serious challenges in achieving SDG12.

SDG 13: Climate action

The EU continues to make a significant contribution to efforts towards SDG13 globally, however, increased action and leadership are required to help to bring other high GHG contributors into line, in order to get back on track to achieving the SDG targets globally. The Eurostat report states that the EU's progress towards SDG13 has been 'neutral' with some areas making progress and other areas experiencing a negative trend.

The EU has achieved its emissions reduction target for 2020, reducing GHG emissions by 20% compared to the 1990 levels; however, an increase in emissions between 2014 and 2017 shows a concerning upward trend that could derail progress towards the target of a 40% reduction by 2030. The Eurostat report is optimistic; it states that the data does not reflect the developments and pathways established in Member States' National Energy and Climate plans that indicate that the EU *will* meet its 2030 target of 40% GHG reduction versus 1990 levels.

Support for climate action, in general, is increasing and the EU is working with the Member States to reform and redesign energy and climate targets at the national level in order to better combat the negative impacts of climate change. Those impacts are increasingly felt in the region: for example, financial losses from extreme weather and climate disasters are increasing, as is ocean acidity; and the impacts have contributed to the increased willingness of states to participate in climate change mitigation, and to commitments at the sub-national level, including more signatories to the Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy.

Measuring progress in the OECD countries against SDG13, the SDSN report confirms challenges to the OECD countries as a whole – including the 22 EU Member States who are also members – in achieving SDG targets based on current trends. The Eurostat report maintains more optimistic than the SDSN report but recognises the dangerous climate trends of rising surface temperatures, monetary impacts and ocean acidity in the region. However, the policy instruments to mitigate these negative effects, and the recognition of the urgency required to combat them, are significantly lacking.

SDG 14: Life below water

Limited data continues to prevent the EU from making any definitive progress updates on SDG14 in the Eurostat report. However, progress has been made through the implementation of the Natura 2000 network of protected areas to increase the marine territory under protection in the region. Coastal bathing sites with excellent water quality also continues to increase, both in number and coverage, although the rate has slowed down recently. A prominent concern, however, as referred to under SDG13, is the increasing acidification of the world's oceans that has reached "*an unprecedented high over pre-industrial levels*"⁵.

The SDSN report identifies the short-term benefits to marine ecosystems globally as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and its effects in terms of lower volumes of trade, transportation and tourism. SDSN voice concern that in recovering from the economic shock of the pandemic there will be heightened pressure to reduce marine biodiversity and ecosystem safeguards; these temptations must be ignored.

The SDSN report includes assessments of marine biodiversity threats embodied in imports as well as fish caught by trawling and from overexploited stocks and identifies negative trends across these indicators. This provides additional useful information that can aid policymaking within the EU, but which is, however, not currently present in the Eurostat official reporting.

SDG 15: Life on land

The area protected under the EU Natura 2000 network continues to increase, pollutant concentrations in rivers are decreasing, forest cover is increasing,

⁵ Eurostat report – p. 16

and the land area at risk of soil erosion by water has shrunk over the last 10 years within the EU – signifying positive progress on some indicators of SDG15. However, alongside this progress pressures on biodiversity also continue to increase, with detrimental consequences for common bird and grassland butterfly species in particular. The Eurostat reporting acknowledges findings from other reports – that contain additional indicators - concluding that the EU’s status on ecosystems and biodiversity is not satisfactory. It ultimately recognises that, despite some successes in other SDG15 targets, EU consumption patterns are having negative impacts on global biodiversity⁶.

The SDSN report again identifies the potential short-term benefits of Covid-19 for SDG 15, such as a reduction in activities that put pressure on biodiversity and ecosystems. However, as with SDG14, the report notes the short-term nature of these benefits and warns against potential pressure to reduce environmental safeguards in recovery, including reducing commitments to international conventions.

The SDSN report identifies some positive trends for SDG15 within OECD countries; notably, the Natura 2000 network has contributed significantly to the area of freshwater and terrestrial sites protected that are important to biodiversity. The SDSN report includes the indicator ‘terrestrial and freshwater biodiversity threats embodied in imports’ – a key data point that is missed in official EU reporting and that highlights negative or unclear impacts outside of the OECD.

6. Key outcomes of the 2020 HLPF

Encouragingly, most HLPF delegates agreed that the SDGs and Agenda 2030 presented the best framework for recovery and that the recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic is an opportunity to accelerate strategies to achieve them. 'Building

⁶ Other reports including European Environmental Agency (2015), [State of nature in the EU](#): biodiversity still being eroded, but some local improvements observed; European Commission (2015), [Mid-term review](#) of the EU Biodiversity Strategy to 2020 (COM/2015/0478 final); and Díaz et al. (2019), [Summary for policymakers](#) of the global assessment report on biodiversity and ecosystem services of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on biodiversity and Ecosystem Services.

*back better' was a reoccurring theme of the meeting. However, by the end of the two weeks, it remained unclear what 'better' exactly meant*⁷.

In the light of the failure to accelerate progress on SDGs, it was disappointing to note that ministerial input to the HLPF had been fraught with delays and a seeming lack of the very urgency that was frequently called for throughout the event. The general debate that has previously taken place during the Ministerial Segment was cancelled, with Heads of State, Government and ministers instead invited to send written or recorded statements for posting online. As a consequence, the high-level messages from the meeting were scarce and generated little uptake in the mainstream media.

Furthermore, the HLPF 2020 ended without the adoption of a ministerial declaration. IISD reporting suggests that the wording around 'climate change' in the draft statement had been an issue, with references to strengthen global cooperation on climate change and to accelerate action becoming a stumbling block to reach a consensus⁸.

The HLPF included much talk of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic and its effects on the SDGs. As was expected, many delegations used the pandemic to frame calls to action going forward through their own rhetoric and discussions. The lack of a specific SDG - or set of SDGs – as a focus for the event, as has been the case in previous forums, allowed states to identify where their priorities lie – which in itself is information that can and should aid multilateral discussions and detailed information exchange where it can be most relevant and effective. Predictably, developing states highlighted challenges in overcoming SDGs 1, 2 and 3 as their key priorities. These concerns have been exacerbated by the pandemic, leading those states to call for increased international financial support and assistance in the management of and recovery from the crisis. These calls echo some of the messages from key reports; however, OECD and developed countries have sadly not emphasised the need to raise ambitions for SDGs 1-3, and without their support and input, achieving the targets will continue to be challenging.

Presenting on Europe at the fourth session of the Regional Forum on Sustainable Development for the UN Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) – held virtually – Chair Vaqif Sadiqov said not a single country in the region is fully

⁷ International Institute for Sustainable Development [Earth Negotiations Bulletin](#)

⁸ International Institute for Sustainable Development [Earth Negotiations Bulletin](#)

on track to achieve all of the SDGs, corroborating the findings from the main monitoring reports. Among challenges and priorities, he listed: engaging youth, innovators, businesses, and cities; utilizing finance and technology to boost green products and services; and redirecting financial flows towards circular growth, carbon neutrality, and nature-based solutions. These priorities display a focus on the environmental SDGs 12-15.

Some sessions of the HLPF referred more directly to key policymaking decisions that would help in the achievement of Agenda 2030. Specifically in relation to SDGs 12-15, under the *Protecting the planet and building resilience* session held on 8th July, Sandra Diaz, Co-Chair of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), highlighted three IPBES recommendations for pandemic recovery efforts: do no further harm to the health of people and nature; employ subsidies, incentives, investments, and regulations as carrots and sticks; and mainstream the health of people and nature into all sectors. There was a widespread agreement of the need for greater consideration of environmental issues in policymaking, and concluding remarks pointed to the private sector needing to be more responsible.

Summarising in her closing statement at the HLPF, UN Deputy Secretary-General Amina J. Mohammed said: "We were not on track to deliver [Agenda 2030] when COVID-19 hit, and the road ahead is even steeper [...] [but] We can turn this around if we stay true to the 2030 Agenda".

7. Conclusions

Perhaps the key message from the HLPF 2020 was its persistence against all odds. The Covid-19 pandemic did not derail the event, as it had so many other political events throughout 2020. The HLPF's resilience should send an important message that, in the midst of economic recovery, we need to show determination in pursuit of the SDGs.

At the opening of the High-level Segment of the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and the Ministerial Segment of the High-level Political Forum (HLPF), UN General Assembly President Tijjani Muhammad-Bande commented that, due to the pandemic, the 'decade of action' had become the 'decade of recovery'. While this is likely to be an accurate assessment of the

setbacks caused by the pandemic and the outlook for the years ahead, the change in language perhaps also signals a worrying drift away from the urgent focus required if we are to achieve the targets of Agenda 2030. The UN should not allow this shift in thinking about the next ten years to be used as an excuse for looser commitments and decreased conviction.

With the 26th Conference of the Parties (COP26) – UN Climate Change conference – postponed to late 2021, as well as the UN Biodiversity Conference (COP15) being postponed until mid-2021, the urgency of environmentally focussed discussions at the highest levels has taken a dramatic hit. At a time when ‘building back better’ is key in our recovery from a pandemic, there is a need to keep reminding political institutions that ‘better’ needs to include a specific focus on the environment if we are to achieve the SDGs and the targets of the Paris Climate Agreement.

In the EU, the [European Semester process](#) – a framework for the coordination of economic policies across the Union – has made some promising inroads towards further implementing SDG targets in 2020. The Commission has specifically stated that it views the European Semester as key means for putting SDGs at the heart of EU’s policymaking and action in the future. The [Country-Specific Recommendations](#) (CSRs) in the 2020 Spring Package explicitly highlight the “interconnectedness of economic, social and environmental spheres and the need for a holistic approach to recovery”. The semester, together with mainstreaming SDGs in the [EU’s better regulation](#) agenda, could present an achievable way for the EU to concretely work towards the targets of SDGs 12-15, and Agenda 2030 holistically, in the future⁹.

⁹ See [Delivering the Green Deal through the European Semester](#) and [European Semester Spring Package](#)

