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Science-policy solutions for a more sustainable Europe

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Advancing sustainable development goals within Europe and globally: the role of the EU

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1 Recommendations

1. EU should show leadership in orchestrating the implementation of the 2030 Agenda on EU, international, national, and local level.
2. New EU overarching political direction needs to be used to ratchet up ambitions towards achieving the 2030 Agenda, instead of the old "Jobs and Growth" agenda.
3. The MFF should be totally in line with the ambitions, objectives and targets of the 2030 Agenda (and the Paris Agreement).
4. Stakeholder engagement, on all levels, should be facilitated in a balanced way in the decision making process to implement the 2030 Agenda.
5. A better integration and coherence of the policies within the EU (e.g. CAP) with those supporting sustainable development outside the EU to reflect the universality and interconnectedness of the SDGs.

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2   Introduction

In September 2015, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development, including at its core 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UNGA 2015). The SDGs – though not legally binding – offer a framework for the implementation of sustainable development worldwide.

All governments of the world have committed to take ownership of and action on the achievement of the SDGs in their own country. The SDGs are intended to be transformational, while at the same time allowing each country to develop its own approach to implementation depending on the domestic context.

In contrast to international legal regimes, the SDGs do not have rules and associated compliance mechanisms, leaving space in implementation and governance for maneuvering policy mechanisms in order to utilize diversity of tools and actors, and of levels of governance (Kanie and Biermann 2017).

This paper reviews and reflects upon the role of the European Union (EU) in advancing the SDGs.

3   The state of play – muddling through

> *The EU has a strong starting position when it comes to sustainable development and is also fully committed to be a frontrunner in implementing the UN's 2030 Agenda, together with its member countries.*(European Commission 2016a)

Despite this ambitious statement in its official communication following the adoption of the 2030 Agenda in September 2015, the European Union overall has not been very active in the implementation of the goals – within and outside of the EU. It also stands in contrast to the EU's constructive, and in general strong support of an ambitious framework for Sustainable Development during the process developing the SDGs after Rio+20. The EU is not yet delivering the level of action they committed to in 2015. There is an obvious gap between words and actions.

This is not only a missed opportunity for leading this process as a global leader, but also internally the European Commission (EC) misses the boat in showcasing that the European Union can be the added value and inspirational for policy making at EU, Member State, and local level. The increasing euro-skepticism should be worrying enough to rethink the Future of Europe, in a way that taking care of citizens, their needs, and the environment should be a top priority. The EU has lost sight of its vision in the 2009 Lisbon Treaty "to promote peace, its values and the well-being of its peoples" and that it "shall work for the sustainable development of Europe." (Kloke-Lesch 2018) The SDGs could offer a frame for the projection on a long-term vision of Europe. Unfortunately, the EC has chosen to keep on going with business as usual, based on the 10 priorities of the EC's President Juncker and with five outdated scenarios for the Future of Europe (Juncker 2014).

This intertwining of the SDGs with a long-term transformative vision of Europe is also brought to the fore by Karl Falkenberg, Senior Adviser for Sustainable Development to the President of the European Commission, in his publication "Sustainability Now" with a strong analyses and recommendations. Falkenberg stresses the importance of stimulating a real change in economic and political thinking. He also warns for the increasing discontent of the European citizens and sees the 2030 Agenda as a great opportunity to build a more social and fair Europe (Falkenberg 2016).

The gap between words and action by the European Commission is increasingly being noticed. In June 2017, the Council of the European Union presented their conclusions on the 2030 Agenda, asking the EC to increase their ambitions and develop a strategy with clear targets and timetables (Council of the European Union 2017b). Furthermore, in its first monitoring report on the SDGs, Eurostat concluded in 2017 that the EU made significant progress over the last 5 years towards the overall achievement of 5 goals[1], and moderate progress for eight others[2], whereby it noted that progress towards a given goal does not necessarily mean that the status of that goal is satisfactory for the EU. For four goals trends could not be calculated

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[1] SDG 7 'Affordable and clean energy', SDG 12 'Responsible consumption and production', SDG 15 'Life on land', SDG 11 'Sustainable cities and communities' and SDG 3 'Good health and well-being'.
[2] SDG 4 'Quality education', SDG 17 'Partnership for the goals', SDG 9 'Industry, innovation and infrastructure', SDG 5 'Gender equality', SDG 8 'Decent work and economic growth', SDG 1 'No poverty', SDG 2 'Zero hunger' and SDG 10 'Reduced inequalities'

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due to insufficient data[3] (Eurostat 2017). Some think-tanks and commentators' assessments also share more or less the same message: The EU can do much better.

3.1   Institutionalisation of SDGs within the EU

Incorporation of the SDGs into the institutional landscape of the EU has mainly taken the shape of tacking the goals to existing policies and mechanisms, and declaring the intention to thereby align the policy implementation with the SDGs. Essentially, the Commission follows the idea that the SDGs are already integrated in current EU priorities and policies. Some additional internal coordination mechanisms have been established to address the cross-cutting and holistic nature of Agenda 2030.

The Council of the European Union established a Working Party on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to assist the Council to regularly follow up, monitor and review the EU internal and external implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development across policy sectors at the EU level and to provide a forum for information exchange about implementation at Member State level. (Council of the European Union 2017a)

Within the European Commission, the first Vice-President of the European Commission is charged with the horizontal responsibility for sustainable development in order to ensure policy coherence and to play a coordinating role in implementing the 2030 Agenda. In 2016 the current Vice-President, Frans Timmermans, launched the High-Level Multi-Stakeholder Platform on SDGs. This platform brings together stakeholders from civil society, non-governmental organizations, and the private and corporate sector in regular meetings to support and advise the European Commission on the implementation of SDGs at EU level.

Until now the MSP worked on their input for a reflection paper to be published by Timmermans in December 2018. Having collected first from all members their most important topics for the input, the drafting team organised interactive meetings to put all ideas together. This useful exercise showed clearly that achieving sustainability also means being confronted with the vested interests. It was obvious for most the members that the current economic system was not leading us to sustainability in and outside Europe. That, also according the 2030 Agenda itself, shows we need a paradigm shift in thinking on the concept of 'progress' and acting in relation to our consumption and production patterns (MSP SDG 2018)

This all is well in line with what the commission calls its first of two tracks to join up the SDGs to the European policy framework and current Commission priorities. This track being assessing where we stand and identifying the most relevant sustainability concerns. The second track will launch reflection work on developing further our longer term vision and the focus of sectoral policies after 2020, and reorient the EU budget's contributions towards the achievement of the EU's long-term objectives through the new Multiannual Financial Framework beyond 2020. Not much of this second track has yet been apparent.

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[3] SDG 6 'Clean water and sanitation', SDG 13 'Climate action', SDG 14 'Life below water' and SDG 16 'Peace, justice and strong institutions'

4 Barriers and challenges

The challenges to implementing the Agenda 2030 and achieving the SDGs, are more than policies on paper or in operation. There are significant substantial barriers and challenges as well as structural impediments like silo thinking, short-termism, and power relations (vested interests). We cannot deny that the EU is doing quite well compared to other regions in this world. However, despite all efforts and despite the region's prosperity, we face considerable challenges on our path to sustainable development, including (derived from the MSP (2018) report):

- Inequalities across the EU and Member States are rising or stagnating.
- The EU lacks a comprehensive regulatory framework in line with international obligations on migration.
- Europe is confronted with various ecological crises that put health and lives at risk.
- Food production systems are not yet in line with the environmental and climate targets and the Sustainable Development Goals.
- The EU is facing immense challenges to fulfil its obligations under the Paris Agreement to reduce GHG emission and in parallel to do justice to those suffering from the consequences of climate change globally.
- Economic system rapidly needs to transition to sustainable consumption and production patterns. Global value chains are too often linked to resource exploitation, pollution, deforestation, land grabbing, ocean degradation or violations of labour rights in developing and emerging markets.
- Loopholes in the international financial system facilitate corruption, money-laundering and tax-evasion which undermine the fiscal capacities of Member States and developing countries.
- Within the EU there is a serious backlash in some Members States concerning the rule of law and democracy, adequate space for civil society as well as Human Rights. This has hampered capacity for a coordinated policy response as well as the capacity of civil society to constructively engage in the governance process.

This list of challenges shows that to achieve the objectives of the 2030 Agenda, many existing policies need improvement. The appropriate governance models will help in doing so, as decision and strategic lines should create more ownership of all stakeholders, where public interests will play a more important role.

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5 Caught in the middle – orchestration

In fairness, it should be noted that implementing the Agenda 2030 and the therein embedded SDGs is first and foremost a responsibility of the UN Member States. As an observer with enhanced status, the EU can speak on behalf of the EU and its member states in the UN and present common positions, make interventions or present proposals.

The adoption of the SDGs and Agenda 2030 through a UN general Assembly resolution however, was a decision act by the UN member states, including all EU Member States. And Agenda 2030 places the responsibility for achieving the SDGs primarily on the Member States. It is thus first and foremost responsibility of the Member States to set their own national targets, guided by the global agenda, and to incorporate these targets in national policies.

Responsibility remains state-centric with great room for state sovereignty, self-regulation and respect for national circumstances (Jönsson and Bexell 2017). The responsibility of the EU can be derived from its self-obligation ("*is fully committed*" (European Commission 2016)), through the subsidiarity principle, as well as from the fact that policy targets agreed at national level in the European Union are often a translation or further specification of European (or other global) targets – only few targets are covered only by policy targets agreed at national level. (Lucas et al. 2016).

The question of how the EU is performing in achieving the SDGs, subsequently is largely one of how the aggregated collective efforts of the 28 Member States contribute to achieving the SDGs. The role of the EU thus mainly is to facilitate, strengthen, and create synergies and coherence between these efforts by member states – and ultimately, making these efforts more than the sum of all achievements by Member States. To make matters more complicated, these achievements, as well as the baselines from which they started, differ substantially between Member States (Kloke-Lesch 2018).

Additionally, it is crucial how, in particular the Commission, makes use of the policy spaces it has to pro-actively shape ambition in the EU and its Member States. Sticking to the 10 point list of priorities formulated by the President of the Commission in 2014 might not be sufficient. Similarly, the Council might have asked the Commission for a more ambitious approach, but as long as the leaders of the member states who make up the Council are not equally or even more ambitious at home, such calls sound hollow.

The SDGs are form of goal-based governance which sets objectives for sustainability outcomes. It is important to understand that implementation of governance through goals (Kanie and Biermann 2017) is not a single action or policy but a "perpetual cycle of policy that is driven by new information, experience, and political pressure" (Victor, Raustiala, and Skolnikoff 1998). In addition, there is not one single implementing authority – neither globally, nationally, nor in the EU. Multi-stakeholder's consultation at every level of governance has to be meaningful in regards to implementation of SDGs, and align with the subsidiarity principle which is at the core of EU values.

While caught in the middle between the Member States and the global ambitions of Agenda 2030, the European Union, and in particular the European Commission, are well positioned to actively facilitate orchestration.

Orchestration is an indirect and soft mode of governance, in which an actor (or a set of actors) as an orchestrator, works through another actor (or set of actors) as intermediaries, to govern a third actor (or set of actors), the target (Abbott et al. 2012; Bernstein et al. 2014).

Orchestration encompasses intergovernmental organisations and non-state actors as agents alike, while taking into account their symbiotic interactions with one another, the limits of their agency, and the persistent central role of states (Abbott et al. 2012). Importantly for the governance of SDGs implementation, orchestration lends itself well for governance by goal-setting – not only in terms of governance design, but also in order to achieve implementation, as Abbott et al. (2012). According to an analysis on the governance architectures for SDGs (Bernstein et al. 2014), the following elements would be pivotal to orchestrate and implement coherent governance building on existing institutions: Leadership, Science, Monitoring and Review, and Mobilization of Means of Implementation, and convening of stakeholders. All these elements could be provided by the European Union.

There are little or no strong hierarchical elements of accountability relationships in the global regime of the SDGs. This could be supportive of more integrative policies, however, only if there is a strong sense of shared responsibility among actors, and institutions such as parliaments and audit institutions using their formal mandates to oversee and evaluate policy, and civil society and the media doing the same on more informal mandates and finally the internal monitoring and evaluation system of the government (Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen, Dahl, and Persson 2018). Within the EU and among most of its Member States, the sense of shared responsibility seems present. The EU Parliament does have a responsibility in holding the Commission accountable, and utilize that responsibility to demand more ambitious and more integrated policies, especially post-2020.

Many Member States frame their contributions to the SDGs through their implementation of EU policies, as does the EU itself. To the extent these policies actually do directly or indirectly advance achieving the targets of the SDGs, this approach is synergistic. It should however be noted, that many of the existing national or European regulations and policies have different target years than Agenda 2030. In the EU, a number of policies are focusing on 2020, some even were supposed to be met already by now (Lucas et al. 2016; Kloke-Lesch 2018). This mismatch of target dates, is something the EU – acting as orchestrator – could use to ratchet up efforts in line with Agenda 2030 which requires member states to set (new) agendas guided by the ambitious SDG targets (UNGA 2015, para. 55).

There will be an opportunity to ensure that any new EU policies, directives, and regulations coming in place of those running out well before the year 2030, should be better aligned and more ambitious – be it the next research funding mechanism Horizon Europe, soon replacing the current Horizon 2020 framework programme, or the long overdue reform of the Common Agricultural Policy, and certainly also the new Multiannual Financial Framework 2021-2027 currently already well on track in the policy process.

The EU Commission is on paper aiming at just this two-tier approach - to mainstream the SDGs in the European policy framework and current Commission priorities for the EU and globally, and to launch reflection on further developing longer term vision and the focus of policies after 2020 (European Commission 2016). But paper is patience and no convincing examples yet show ambition on the post-2020 policies under development, yet.

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5.1 MFF – a closing window of opportunity?

In particular the new Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) beyond 2020 offers an opportunity for the European Union to make real headway on its second tier. The next MFF is supposed to also reorient the EU budget's contributions towards the achievement of the EU's long-term objectives. (European Commission 2016a). In practical terms, beyond the aspirations, there is little progress on serious adjustments to mainstream sustainable development throughout the MFF (Kloke-Lesch 2018).

The options being discussed address cosmetic issues like the merging of the European Development Fund and the Development Cooperation Instrument, or the creation of a single instrument for sustainable development cooperation (Jones 2018). A March 2018 Advisory report to the European Commission by the Multi-Stakeholder Platform on the Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals in the EU (MSP SDG 2018) sees the need to learn from the MFF 2014-2020 and to adjust the MFF post 2020. The platform recommends nine specific "sustainability proofing" measures:

1. Embedding a "think sustainability first" principle by inter alia adjusting the Better Regulation Guidelines to have an improved impact assessment already for the next MFF.
2. Adjusting "ex-ante conditionalities" to sustainability and to other funding lines of the MFF post 2020.
3. Introducing a clear definition for the "EU added value" that also refers to sustainability by taking into account social, environmental, climate and economic objectives as laid down in the Treaty.
4. Introducing a link between spending and the "rule of law" in the Member states by introducing regular assessments and conditionalities to the suspension of EU funds.
5. Transforming the "European Semester" to a delivery model for sustainability by introducing annual sustainable development surveys to help channeling EU funding.
6. "Benchmarking" or earmarking within funds to achieve specific sustainability objectives by setting binding expenditure targets for climate, biodiversity or social inclusion and ensuring that the money is administrated by the competent authorities.
7. Excluding "contradictory subsidies" by focusing on "hotspots" affecting the environment or the climate.
8. Adding "social, environmental and climate indicators" to the European structural and investment funds by inter alia adjusting the allocation criteria to better reflect economic, social and environmental aspects.
9. Moving to evidence-based, participatory and simpler approach for the MFF post 2020 by inter alia publishing and debating the spending review before taking decisions on the MFF.
10. The temptation for Member States and communities to withdraw and the climate of distrust in Europe and beyond are real threats to multilevel governance and the partnerships needed to address global challenges.

It is important that the next budget is indeed totally in line with the ambitions, objectives and targets of the 2030 Agenda.

6   Role of stakeholder involvement

Linking environmental and development policies, pushed by the Rio process (United Nations 1992), has led to new understanding of interlinkages and causalities. This implies a governance of change, where future generations are included, as well as linking the local with the global levels. It required a rethinking of consumption and production patterns. It should be aware of the consequences of overconsumption in our regions which leads to overexploitation of resources and environmental damage, which is mainly done in the Global South. By rethinking a whole economic system, we cannot limit ourselves for environmental sound policies or promoting technological innovation in case of resource efficiency, but see it in a broader societal change, also based on values and culture shift.

Governments at every level have a crucial role in facilitating and steering those changes, and see this as an ongoing process, as blueprints for sustainability do not exist. This process can only be done in close cooperation with all stakeholders. Many good examples of such cooperation already exist in Europe and should be strengthened. Local governments' international partnerships for instance, allow the empowerment and integration of various stakeholders (civil servants, NGO, private sector, politicians etc.) for the implementation of the SDGs in Europe and beyond.

A diversity of stakeholders present in Brussels do already play a significant role in the functioning of the EU. They are understood to be the best-positioned representatives and experts "that have a stake in the view of the wider implications of any policy regulation" (Kohler-Koch 2016). In this light, there is a clear political consensus that Civil Society Organisations represent a means to "increase ownership and improve inclusiveness and accountability"(Sénit, Biermann, and Kalfagianni 2017). However, it is important to recognize that different sets of stakeholders are relevant depending on localization of achievements, the internal or external efforts of the EU, or the particular SDG at hand.

In the EU, the role of Civil Society Organisations was formally recognized in the White Paper on European Governance and there have since been tangible efforts made to involve them and other interlocutors into the EU decision-making processes (European Commission 2001b). This should be structured and institutionalized, but happens often at the request of stakeholders, otherwise known as "lobbying the institutions" (Rijnhout and Carlos 2017). Studies have confirmed the problems associated with imbalances in the amount of lobbyists in Brussels and the influence they can have at EU decisions, most notably in the areas of corporate dominance and conflicts of interest (Corporate Europe Observatory 2017).

In the light of efficient implementation of the 2030 Agenda, it is crucial that civil society organisations are actively involved at local, national and European level. But there are concerning developments of a downgrading of civil society spaces globally, otherwise known as the "shrinking space" of Civil Society (Unmüßig 2016). Even within EU Member States, worrying trends are taking place.

Having said this, the initiative of first Vice President Timmermans to set up a Multi Stakeholder Platform was well received. Currently this Platform is functioning in a few subgroups, giving advice on specific issues. Also drafting input for the Reflection Paper that Timmermans will publish in December 2018. The platform, and many other stakeholders, would like to see the

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2030 Agenda at the heart of the Future of Europe, but unfortunately in the recent State of the Union of President Juncker not one word made reference to sustainability.

7 EU implementation of SDGs and policy coherence for SD

As we embark on this great collective journey, we pledge that no one will be left behind. Recognizing that the dignity of the human person is fundamental, we wish to see the Goals and targets met for all nations and peoples and for all segments of society. And we will endeavor to reach the furthest behind first' (UNGA 2015)*.*

With this language in the 2015 United Nation General Assembly Resolution 70/1 which adopted the SDGs, the principle of *leaving no one behind*, became a cornerstone of the Agenda 2030. It means ending extreme poverty, and reducing inequalities among both individuals (vertical) and groups (horizontal) whereby it refers to both absolute as well as relative inequality (Stuart and Samman 2017). For relatively rich regions, like the EU, the principles of universality and leaving no one behind place additional responsibility on the EU and its Member States to support sustainable development in developing countries.

In November 2016, the Commission proposed a new Consensus on Development. It aims to update the development response to current global challenges and to promote the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in partnership with developing countries. The Commission insists that the new consensus "*reflects a paradigm-shift in development cooperation under the 2030 Agenda, responding to the more complex and interconnected challenges the world faces today*" (European Commission 2016b) and much of the language in the proposal is reflecting this. The proposed actions and strategies however do not.

Following the pre-SDG paradigm of addressing inequality as a development issue only, and not as an issue of sustainable development, much of the EU's efforts revolve around a re-labeling and re-structuring of pre-existing instruments of development cooperation. It does not consider interconnectivity between actions within and outside of the EU. For example, European Commissions actions on SDG-2 (*End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture*) make no mention of the Common Agricultural Policy[4] – without a doubt the EU policy most affecting both agriculture and food systems and security within and outside the EU.

As the world's biggest development actor, the EU and its Member States have a significant impact on achieving the SDGs worldwide. (European Commission 2016a). But to realize this impact in line with the SDGs, the EU should embrace the paradigm shift that came with the SDGs and not remain stuck in an ODA focused MDG paradigm.

The EU has made strong declaratory commitments to sustainable development – not just related to the SDGs but throughout the past decennia – to then adopt a strategy of ecological modernization, the framework within which the EU marries economic growth to its environmental protection policies (Baker 2007). This translation of sustainable development into ecological modernization is avoiding the structural problems of the current economic systems, and the need for transformative governance. The prevailing opinion in sustainable development governance research is that the current institutions are insufficient (Biermann

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[4] https://ec.europa.eu/sustainable-development/goal2_en

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et al. 2010) and that incremental efforts to improve these institutions are not achieving enough (Biermann et al. 2012). A lot of the criticism regarding the EU's performance in advancing the SDGs can be located in the discrepancy between the declaratory support for sustainable development and the incremental tinkering with instead of transformation of existing mechanisms and policies when it comes to implementation.

The imbalance of active lobby groups in Brussels, where private and vested interests are still dominant, can be considered as one barrier into achieving real change. Another huge barrier is the incoherence between existing EU policies, as mentioned before, with the Common Agriculture Policy, but also Trade Agreements, focus on GDP growth (consumerism) etc. Those policies cause externalities that more than often are felt in the Global South.

The one thing that makes Agenda 2030 stand out from previous global sustainability and development agendas is its principle of universality. It is not an agenda just to support economic development in the Global South, nor one to just protect the environment in the North. It is an agenda for global sustainability. It is an agenda acknowledging and embracing the interconnections – something the EU often falls short at.

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