ESDN Conference 2024 Discussion Paper

Upgrading Europe: Building transformative policies to reach the Sustainable Development Goals

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Introduction

This ESDN discussion paper takes a closer look at the concept of transformative policies and their potential in **shaping European efforts to achieve the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)** from the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. These global objectives were adopted in 2015 and are accompanied by 169 specific targets and integrate the 5 distinct dimensions of sustainable development: People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace and Partnership. However, Europe is currently not on track to achieve most of the SDGs. Transformative policies could possibly aid in intensifying and accelerating European efforts, which remains necessary.[1]

These transformative policies, policies which seek to change a dominant system structurally and radically, are increasingly seen as key to achieving the SDGs. The current Belgian presidency of the Council of the European Union has adopted them as a central theme for shaping the present activities of the Working Party on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The ESDN is focusing on the topic as well, having already organised two related workshops. The 22nd ESDN Workshop took place in Budva (Montenegro) on the 26th and 27th of March 2024. It looked at governance transformations for better SDG implementation. In Vienna (Austria), the ESDN Young Civil Servants Workshop followed on the 15th and 16th of April, tackling transformative policies from an intergenerational equity perspective. At the same time, scholarly research examining the subject has boomed, but remains fragmented, theoretical, and difficult to be translated in public policies. Many academic articles focus on specific theoretical frameworks and narrow selections of goals, especially on the heavily researched ones like SDG 2 and SDG 7, thus failing to incorporate a broader view. In addition, such scientific articles are often plagued by length constraints and lack the room for the inclusion of concrete policy advice. In short, much transformation science is not yet sufficiently actionable. This paper tries to remedy this, by providing a practical overview of the existing knowledge and introducing the speakers for the coming ESDN Conference, which is being organised on the 5th and 6th of June 2024, in cooperation with the Belgian Federal Institute for Sustainable Development (FISD) as part of Belgium's EU Council Presidency, and the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), which will be covering the subject of transformative policies for the SDGs.[2]

To ably deliver this basis, this paper contains four general chapters. To start, chapter one delineates what transformative policies are and how they are understood. It examines the discourses about these policies, their central, tangible characteristics, and the different phases in which they usually develop. The chapter also gives a brief overview of concepts related to transformative policies. This defining of transformative policies is studied in relation to the SDGs. Chapter two then follows with the vital question on why Europe needs such policies. It begins with an overview of European performance on the 17 SDGs and ends with an explanation of how transformative policies can potentially enhance the pace at which countries reach the SDGs. Chapter three examines if, and to what extent, such strong policies are already used in European governance regarding sustainable development and the 2030 Agenda. This is done on three levels: Europe in general (broad trends), the EU (supranational governance) and ESDN states (national and subnational governance). In the country examination subpart, national, regional, and even local policies are considered together, as they are all seen as vital for achieving the SDGs. For the remainder of this paper, these ESDN countries are defined as the 33 countries with country profiles on the ESDN website. The chapter however ends with an overview of all the government and stakeholder good practices that will be presented at the conference exchange space tables, thus offering some concrete examples. Chapter four then contains two

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[1] (*Key Findings*, 2024; Monitoring Report on Progress towards the SDGs in an EU Context, 2023, p. 10)

[2] (Allen et al., 2023, pp. 1250-1251; Brunori, 2023, p. 104; Malekpour et al., 2023, p. 251; Mulholland, 2024a, p. 3, 2024b, p. 3; *Transformatieve Overheid*, 2023, pp. 20 and 26)

key recommendations on possible improvements related to transformative SDG policies in Europe: firstly, building more directionality and secondly, building more inclusivity. The main chapters are introduced by teasers for the related conference keynote speeches.

Chapter 1: Transformative policies – What are they?

This chapter thus describes how transformative policies can be defined and interpreted, something that is evidently important for developing any kind of basic understanding on the subject.

During the upcoming conference, Åsa Persson, Research Director and Deputy Director at the Stockholm Environment Institute, will deliver her keynote on this important question: *Science to Policy - Pathways for Accelerating Transformations*. She will describe how scientific evidence must shape the policy process and is a requirement for transformations.

Discourses

Transformation is already very **inherent** to the sustainable development discourse. The idea of sustainable development fundamentally relates to the idea of transforming. It seeks to guide the world to a desirable state. Unlike the preceding worldwide Washington Consensus (important in the 1980s and 1990s), which merely sought to strive for maximal global economic prosperity through continuously strengthening the free market, this state is characterised as combining environmental, social, economic, peace-related, and partnership-related goals. Such ambition is evidently marked by transformative language. This was already true for 2030 Agenda (2015) precursors, such as Our Common Future (1987), Agenda 21 (1992), and the Millennium Development Goals (2000).[3]

Since 2015, **the discursive link has, however, increased** even further. The central UN 2030 Agenda theme is *Transforming our World*. From this perspective, it is, like the related Paris Agreement (2015), frequently seen as among the first democratically adopted roadmaps for humanity's future. In 2018, the Club of Rome, working with both the Stockholm Resilience Centre and BI Norwegian Business School, called for urgent transformative action in its report, claiming it is perfectly feasible to achieve the SDGs without exceeding planetary boundaries, given a smart approach towards transformational change is used. Moreover, the first and second UN Global Sustainable Development Reports (GSDRs) of 2019 and 2023, which were both written by independent scientists and informed the related UN High-Level Political Fora (HLPFs) events on Sustainable Development, used transformations as central concepts. The second GSDR was even called *Times of Crisis, Times of Change: Science for Accelerating Transformations to Sustainable Development* and pushed UN members to adopt their own transformation frameworks for the SDGs, adapted to the reality of present international cooperation, but also reflecting specific national contexts, needs, objectives, and capabilities. It also suggested that these resulting national action plans be presented to the next HLPF in 2024. Furthermore, transformative language is today more popular amongst sustainable development thinkers than ever. In this discourse, the idea of transformation is often linked to the idea of acceleration. Both are seen as necessary answers to the failure of business-as-usual politics with regards to achieving the SDGs.[4]

This discourse is important. It constitutes a social imagining that can help inspire stakeholders to engage with transformative actions for sustainable development. If such language creates a visible sense of transformative agency, helps actors identify with this agency and is not overly optimistic or pessimistic, it

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[3] (Brunori, 2023, p. 105; Lencucha et al., 2023, p. 2)
[4] (Henfrey et al., 2023, p. 212; Randers et al., 2018, pp. 6 and 36; *Global Sustainable Development Report 2019*, 2019, p. 1; *Global Sustainable Development Report 2023*, 2023, pp. 21, 39 and 103-104)

can have a **real effect** on the prevalence and effectiveness of transformative policies for SDGs. These views, however, still can and have to be translated into real practice. This is further discussed in the remainder of this background paper.[5]

Tangible characteristics

Fast, deep, and human-engineered transformations have already occurred. One example is the formidable Western European expansion of voting rights, education, healthcare, social welfare and social cooperation from the late nineteenth century until the 1960s. Another is the impressive democratisation, civil society building, and economic development of Central and Eastern Europe from the 1990s to the current century. Transformative policies played their part in both cases, as well as in many other comparable cases. Still, the question remains what these policies are. In essence, they are the sort of policies that strive to go beyond incrementalism and seek to **change a dominant system radically and deeply**, while also prioritising effectiveness over efficiency. These transformative policies do not solely address symptoms of perceived problems but attempt to **tackle root causes**. Lastly, new **values** are created, replacing old ones. Possible examples include climate justice, ecological embeddedness as a new horizon for trade unions, recognition of unpaid labour as real work, the basic income, making taxation popular again, reimagination of individual property rights, water as a global common good, and many more. Transformative policies can, therefore, be described via these three central characteristics.[6]

While this is a basic definition of a concept that has been defined in numerous ways, it still captures the key characteristics of what transformative policies are. Nonetheless, building on today's existing literature, this discussion paper synthesises ten further attributes of what can be considered as good transformative policies. The first of these attributes is a focus on **innovation**. Changing a system requires out of the box thinking and finding new pathways. Otherwise, transformation will not work out. Secondly, **strong political leadership** is a vital precondition. This is also the case for the third attribute: **careful planning**. Fourthly, transformative policies should originate from **directional** thinking. This entails a clear vision for change. Fifthly, these types of policies also must be policies for the **long-term**. Short-termism is a typical problem for democracies, as election cycles and party campaigns are typically geared towards the feelings of voters in the present. This frequently entails a continuous crisis management, where problems considered most pressing and immediate are tackled, but long-term issues are neglected. Such a system harms sustainable development, including the needs of the coming generations and beyond. Developing real future-oriented governance, bolstered by an independent and transformative civil service, is therefore imperative. Sixthly, transformative policies need an **inclusive** character, strengthened by a multi-level, whole-of-government, and whole-of-society approach. Because transformative policies are quite likely to trigger unconventional and tense interactions between different stakeholders, this can prove tricky, but even the more essential. Then looking at the seventh element, **policy mixes** have to be preferred over single policy solutions, since transformative action is highly complex. Eighthly, these policies should strive to actively **shape market dynamics**, meaning all governments must step up by changing the choice environment of market actors through hard and soft instruments. This can entail regulating, taxing harmful practices, removing subsidies for harmful practices and increasing subsidies for beneficial practices. One powerful tool here is public procurement, which can reap beneficial production and consumption effects, especially in those economic sectors where governments represent large demand shares. Ninthly, transformative policies need both **flexibility and reflexivity**. There are always unforeseen policy outcomes and policymakers should learn

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[5] (Riedy & Waddock, 2022, pp. 1-7)

[6] (Allen et al., 2023, p. 1250; Askenazy & Didry, 2023, p. 156; Brunori, 2023, p. 104; Fransolet & Vanhille, 2023, p. 109; Goubran et al., 2023, p. 1; Hujo & Carter, 2019, p. 8; Lohan, 2017, pp. 22-24; Pichler, 2023, p. 7; Standing, 2023, pp. 112 and 117; *Global Sustainable Development Report 2023*, 2023, p. 63; Van Reeth & Vught, 2023, p. 65)

from experience. Tenthly, a **holistic** approach is crucial, especially for sustainable development. Synergies between different goals must be strengthened and trade-offs, even more prominent in highly developed regions, managed. Transformative policies should therefore be coherent policies, something that is often connected to the above-mentioned inclusivity of policies.[7]

This last attribute is a popular one. In fact, many institutes have launched theoretical frameworks to help achieve transformative and holistic sustainable development. These helpful frameworks identify broad domains where synergies can be multiplied and trade-offs diminished, so-called entry points. They also pinpoint multiple levers and tools that have the capacity to kickstart progress along these different entry points.[8] Here, two concrete examples are visualised. The first comes from the second GSDR (2023) but is
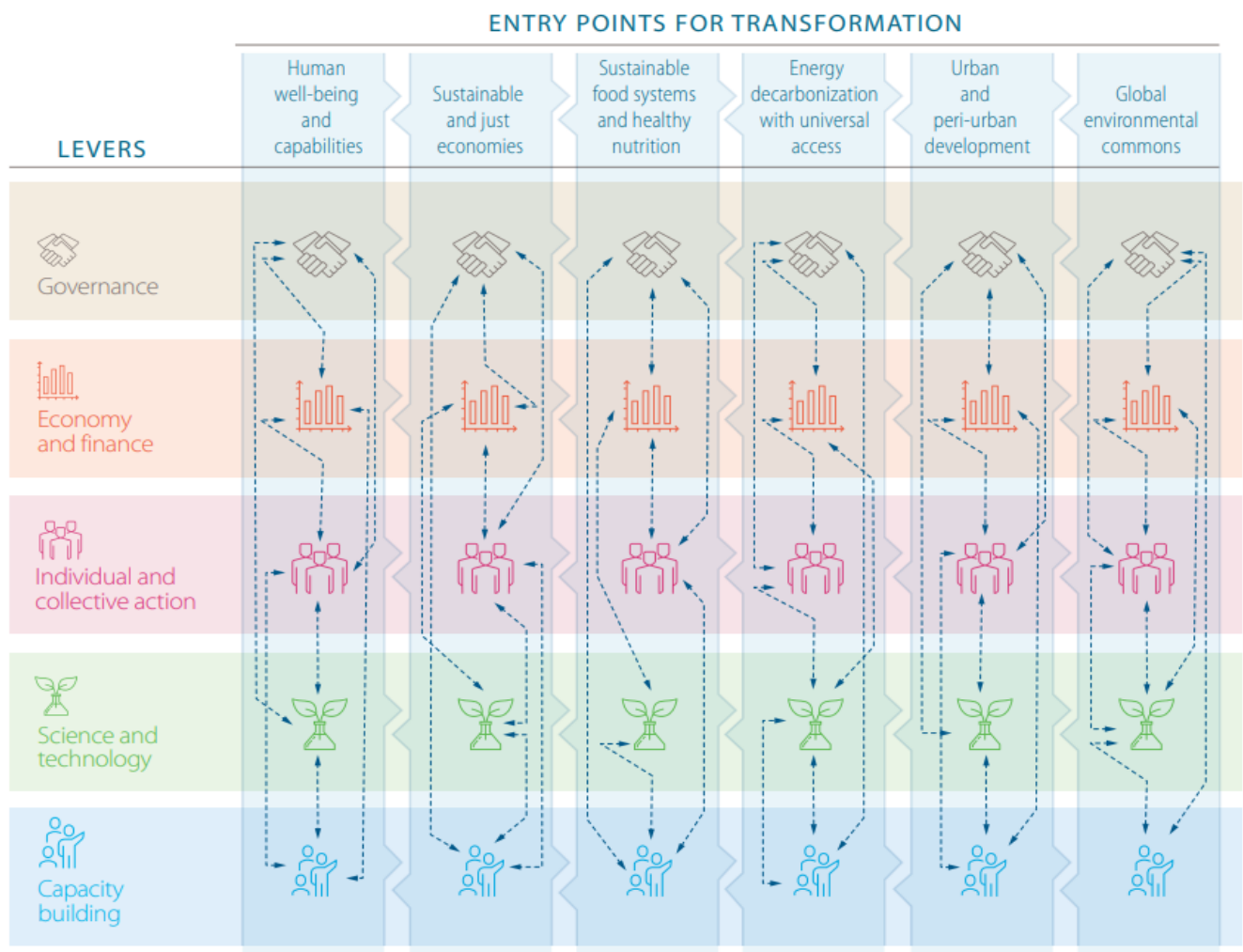

Figure 1 (GSDR framework)

[7] (Allen et al., 2023, p. 1261; Brunori, 2023, pp. 106-108; Casula, 2022, p. 508; Coderoni, 2023, p. 95; *How Far Is Europe from Achieving the SDGs?*, 2023, p. 21; *Transformatieve Overheid*, 2023, p. 15; Hujo & Carter, 2019, p. 4; Janssen, Wanzenböck, et al., 2023b, pp. 28-31; Kivimaa et al., 2023, p. 683; Lukkarinen et al., 2023, p. 56; Mähönen et al., 2023, pp. 11-13 and 23; Sundqvist & Åkerman, 2024, p. 10)
[8] (*Global Sustainable Development Report 2023*, 2023, pp. 44-48)

heavily based on the first GSDR (2019), only adding the lever of capacity building.[9] The second is a similar variant that is being used by the German Government since 2021.[10]

Figure 2 (German framework)

Tangible processes

A process view on transformative policies is also relevant. To start, it is not a surprise that transformation remains applicable throughout the entire policy cycle. It deserves attention and action through the five different phases of problem defining, agenda setting, policy designing, policy implementing, and policy evaluating. Transformational change cannot merely remain an idea but must be operationalised and put to work. In fact, policy feedback, a sixth component of the cycle that is rarely added, in part because it

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[9] (*Global Sustainable Development Report 2023*, 2023, p. 45)
[10] (*German Sustainable Development Strategy. Update 2021*, 2021, p. 60)

loops throughout the cycle, is of paramount importance. To ably realise transformative policies, a circular model, with feedback constantly redefining government approaches, should be used.[11]

Transformation also develops in its own specific way, however. It is frequently seen as evolving through three separate phases. The first stage is called **emergence** and witnesses the birth of innovations. For example, governments in Germany, the Netherlands and Switzerland are currently experimenting with universal basic incomes, a measure that is deemed interesting but has not broken through yet. The second phase is **acceleration**, which starts after a tipping point is reached. This tipping point can be a critical mass (when approximately 20% to 30% of a society adopts an innovation) or critical price (when an innovation has become sufficiently cheap). Acceleration is considered a decisive phase, as it can be triggered by public policy, in general, and strategic interventions (public interventions that use opportunities for small inputs generating large outputs). The present expansion of governmental food support in France is considered an illustration of this stage. Thirdly, **stabilisation**, characterised by universalisation and institutionalisation follows. The recent Norwegian announcement of 2025 as the date by which the sale of fossil-fuelled vehicles will be banned, is a representative case here. During these three phases, innovations, the central concept, become increasingly cheap and effective. It is important to note that innovations are not merely technological but include an undeniable societal component. Co-creation by different stakeholders is vital, which relates to the whole-of-society approach. As the Norwegian example shows, it is necessary to add that the rise of a new system causes the often-forgotten reverse process for a dominant system, which goes through **destabilisation**, **breakdown** and **phase out**. Both are mostly caused by mixes of exogenous pressures and planned transformative policies.[12] This results in an x-curve, as seen below.[13]
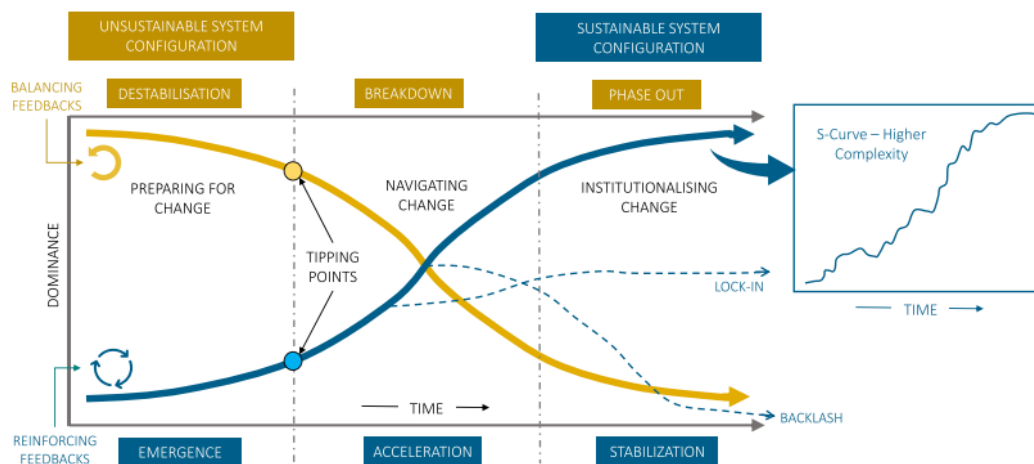

Figure 2 (Cameron Allen's and Shirin Malekpour's framework)

Transformative policies for sustainable development remain vital in this view. Emergence can come forth from slow moving, creeping trends or sudden crises which present possible windows of opportunity, but governments still need to act on these with levers. During this initial phase, policymakers should facilitate, and contract wanted change, rather than prescribing it. NGO or business initiatives work better than their government counterparts, although EU Member State instigations can fulfil the same role at the EU level itself. Hard measures are thus best reserved for the acceleration and stabilisation phases. Transformation is namely **always influenced by enabling and impeding conditions**, including reinforcing feedback from

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[11] (Brunori, 2023, p. 104; Haddad et al., 2022, p. 20; Hujo & Carter, 2019, p. 13)

[12] (Allen & Malekpour, 2023, pp. 1940-1953; Laranja & Pinto, 2023, p. 21; Pattberg & Bäckstrand, 2023, p. 108; *Global Sustainable Development Report 2023*, 2023, pp. 64, 72 and 85)

[13] (Allen & Malekpour, 2023, p. 1942)

supporters and balancing feedback from opposers. When successful, transformative policies can lead to the adoption of a sustainable system. When unsuccessful, they can deteriorate into lock-ins (resulting in a balance between the old and the new system), backlashes (resulting in a return to the old system) and system breakdowns (resulting in a state that is worse than the old system). Both reinforcing and balancing feedback can become self-strengthening and form **feedback loops**. Therefore, triggering positive loops is key to creating a new consensus between early supporters and former opposers. If this does succeed, an adopted transformation often becomes self-perpetuating, signalled by the amplification of technologies and an increase in societal acceptance, which can be very beneficial.[14]

Related concepts

Transformative policy remains a somewhat general term, covering and bordering many variants, however. It is the main subject of this discussion paper and the conference, but for the sake of integrity, three more refined concepts are briefly described here.

To kick off, adaptive governance is another view on policies for sustainable development. It places heavy emphasis on bottom-up processes and promotes bringing all types of actors from all levels together in the policy cycle. Adaptive governance is strongly resilient, flexible, reflexive, and learning based. In essence, it creates an image of sustainability transitions as being highly dynamic exercises. At the same time, adaptive governance does not advocate system change, but still remains within an incumbent system, consequently lacking some transformative punch.[15]

This is not true for the second concept: anticipatory governance. This kind of governance likewise strives for the inclusion of a sufficiently diverse set of actors in sustainability-related policy processes. It entails a unique outlook though. Fundamentally, anticipatory governance concentrates on future-oriented policies and highlights careful planning for system change. Actors should form a consensus on a desired and, thus, sustainable future. They must also attempt to model possible futures through ex ante impact assessments, while accounting for uncertainties, and thus remain flexible and reflexive.[16]

Lastly, transition management, which strongly emphasises directionality, asks how an unsustainable socio-technological system can be guided towards sustainability. It sees transition arenas, comprised of scientists, different societal stakeholders and policymakers from all government levels, as important tools to achieve this. In arenas, all participants can freely engage in debate, open learning, experimenting, and visioning on transformative policies. Outcomes can then include strategic, tactical, and operational system adjustments of governance and society, aimed at transitioning towards sustainability.[17]

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[14] (Allen et al., 2023, p. 1251; Brunori, 2023, pp. 105-106; Casula, 2022, p. 508; Hujo & Carter, 2019, p. 12; *Global Sustainable Development Report 2023*, 2023, p. 64)

[15] (Allen et al., 2023, p. 1254)

[16] (Allen et al., 2023, p. 1254; Sundqvist & Åkerman, 2024, pp. 9-10)

[17] (Allen et al., 2023, p. 1254; Lukkarinen et al., 2023, p. 59; Sundqvist & Åkerman, 2024, p. 2; Transformatieve Overheid, 2023, p. 18)

Chapter 2: Transformative policies – Why do we need them?

Be it through the lens of transformative policies or other related concepts, achieving the SDGs must remain top priority for the whole of Europe. Without a doubt, the European continent must keep doing absolutely everything to *Transform Our World*, while also trying to be a global leader and pressuring others to follow suit. At the same time, Europe should safeguard its commitment to the principle of *Leaving No One Behind*. Europe's move towards the SDGs must benefit all people, inside and outside its borders. As this chapter demonstrates, transformative governance is crucial.[18]

Sandrine Dixson-Declève, Co-President of the Club of Rome and Project Lead for Earth4All, will deliver her keynote conference speech on this need: *SDGs for All - Developing Strategic Scenarios*. Through comparing a *Giant Leap* with a *Too Little Too Late* scenario, she will demonstrate the need for transformative policies.

European performance on the SDGs

Today, more than halfway towards the 2030 deadline, **European progress towards most SDGs is still too slow**. This was already the case during the first years after the 2015 adoption of the 2030 Agenda. A swathe of crises, including but not limited to global instability, societal unrest about increased migration, farmer protests, COVID-19, the Ukraine War, the energy crisis, the cost-of-living crisis, and a post-crisis austerity shock, has recently turned this already slow progress down even further, frequently devolving towards stagnation or regression, especially since 2020. Meanwhile, worrying trends, including the rapid ageing of European nations, and democratic backsliding, can inflict further damage. Yet, these negative occurrences can also help to kickstart positive transformative change. They can form exogenous pressures and policies must follow on any windows of opportunity they form. The 2024 UN Summit of the Future will be one.[19]

Based on the Europe Sustainable Development Report 2023/2024 by Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN), most optimism regarding European efforts must be reserved SDG 1 (no poverty) and SDG 10 (reduced inequalities). Slightly more than 50% of the ESDN states (numbering 33 in total) have already achieved or are on track to achieve these two goals, being mostly concentrated in Northern, Western, and Central Europe. The picture is bleaker for SDG 4 (quality education), SDG 5 (gender equality), SDG 7 (affordable and clean energy), SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth), SDG 11 (sustainable cities and communities), SDG 13 (climate action), and SDG 14 (life below water). Here, only small minorities of ESDN countries have achieved the goals or are on track. The strongest negative results are related to SDG 2 (zero hunger), SDG 3 (good health and wellbeing), SDG 12 (responsible consumption and production), SDG 15 (life on land), and SDG 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions), where no ESDN members have achieved the goals or are on track to achieve them.[20]

Most of the UN 2030 Agenda targets are largely off track, especially, but not limited to the environmental ones. This can prove somewhat counterintuitive, as Europe is, for most SDGs, a frontrunner. Based on the older Sustainable Development Report 2023 by SDSN, which is its last work studying the entire world and

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[18] (Lencucha et al., 2023, p. 2; Mulholland, 2023, p. 10)
[19] (*A Crucial Time to Localise the Sustainable Development Goals in the EU*, 2023; *Global Sustainable Development Report 2023*, 2023, pp. 7 and 26-27; Allen & Malekpour, 2023, p. 1939; Dorling, 2023, p. 34; Hujo & Carter, 2019, p. 15; Lafortune et al., 2024, p. 16; O'Cinneide, 2023, p. 74)
[20] (*EU & Country Profiles*, 2024; *Interactive Map*, 2024)

not just Europe, the top twenty is exclusively comprised of ESDN countries, with Poland, Czechia, the Baltic, Western Europe, and Northern Europe doing very well. Finland, Sweden, and Denmark are on top, also in the recent Europe Report. Meanwhile, following the 2023 SDSN Spillover Index (which calculates beneficial and harmful spillover effects in three different domains: environmental and social impacts embodied into trade, economy and finance, and security), Europe does generate more negative international spillovers than other regions, however. This is even more true for Northern and Western European countries, with Finland and Sweden being the only exceptions. Overall, the international spillover balance is still positive, but attention is needed, because all ESDN states are in the bottom sixty of the 2023 SDSN spillover rankings and Luxemburg, Belgium, Switzerland, and finally the Netherlands are said to cause slightly more negative than positive international spillover effects within the 2023/2024 Europe Report.[21]

European need for transformative policies

Europe does not meet expectations concerning both its own SDG progress and its effect on SDG progress elsewhere. Meanwhile, it is increasingly recognised that **transformative policies are needed to remedy this**. Intensified incremental actions can create some speeding up when compared with business-as-usual approaches, but not to the same extent smart, transformative policies can. The academic sector has been interested in the potential of such policies for the last 25 years. The public policy field followed later, with some pioneering experiments and the UN 2030 Agenda itself being an initial step towards a transformative perspective. Amongst the early supporters of transformative policies were the OECD and the EU, with the latter utilising transformation language in various conclusions by the EU Council and the European Green Deal. However, real, and substantial attention for the concept has only boomed in the last few years. For example, UN Secretary-General António Guterres launched a large Rescue Plan for the People and the Planet in 2023, calling on world leaders to rescue the SDGs via three main breakthrough possibilities: firstly, by equipping governance and institutions for sustainable and inclusive transformation, secondly, through prioritising policies and investments that have multiplier effects across the SDGs, and thirdly, by securing a surge in SDG financing and an enabling global environment for developing countries. Lastly, countries are also engaging with these policies in their own right. In this manner, the Swedish Research Council for Sustainable Development is currently funding a research project called Transformative Partnerships 2030. This project considers global partnerships as crucial policy innovations for creating transformative change towards attaining the SDGs.[22]

This turn to transformative policies is well-grounded. In the modern world and the modern Europe, policy problems are growing in complexity, as the SDGs illustrate perfectly well. They are sometimes described as **wicked problems**, consisting of multiple goals, values, and actors at the same time, and require equally sophisticated and, thus, transformative solutions, characterised by the good traits discussed above. In the end, transformative policies are Europe's best hope in mitigating what would otherwise be great costs associated with non-transition. Non-transition can lead to dangerous social and irreversible environmental damage. It can cause systematic financial stress and increased conflict. This must be avoided at any price.[23]

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[21] (*A Crucial Time to Localise the Sustainable Development Goals in the EU*, 2023; *Country Profiles*, 2023; *EU & Country Profiles*, 2024; *Rankings*, 2023; *Rankings*, 2024; *Global Sustainable Development Report 2023*, 2023, p. 103)
[22] (Brunori, 2023, p. 104; Casula, 2022, p. 507; Lundvall, 2022, p. 1; Mulholland & Piciga, 2021, p. 8; Pattberg & Bäckstrand, 2023, p. 109; Randers et al., 2018, p. 14; Widerberg et al., 2023, p. 166)
[23] (Financing for Development at a Crossroads, 2024, pp. 4 and 164-166; Lafortune et al., 2024, p. 1; Laranja & Pinto, 2023, p. 10; Sundqvist & Åkerman, 2024, p. 2)

Chapter 3: Transformative policies – Where does Europe Stand?

This chapter tackles if, and to what extent, Europe already uses these transformative policies for the 2030 Agenda, looking at all levels of government.

Jutta Urpilainen, EU Commissioner for International Partnerships, will give a keynote on the achievements of the last European Commission: *Achievements of the Commission's Last Term and What Still Needs to be Done for the SDGs*. She will thus explain how the Commission utilised transformative policies for the SDGs.

Wim Schaerlaekens, Chair of the Working Party on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, will do this for the Belgian Presidency of the EU Council: *Accomplishments of the Belgian EU Council Presidency on Guiding Europe towards Transformations for the SDGs*. He will present the goals, activities, and results of the Belgian Presidency in this regard, connecting the work of the ESDN to that of the EU Council.

Europe in general

To develop this coherent view on transformative policies for sustainable development, it is necessary to understand the regional context, because insights from solely the global perspective do not suffice. Europe has more political, economic, scientific, and social capacity than many other regions, for instance boasting a strong, service-based social market system. One example of European leadership is the rise of circular economy policies in European polities. These policies try to advance the reuse, reduce, and recycle aspects of used materials and products, things that are extended for as long as possible. In this manner, circular economy policies try to deeply transform the traditional make-waste linear economy approach. In Europe, the accompanying and central objective is to reconcile both economic and social development with the achievement of environmental goals, as those goals are seen as lagging the furthest behind. Nonetheless, this circularity is only part of a true transformation. Another good illustration is the development of social enterprises, a deeply transformative phenomenon where Europe's economies are again frontrunners.[24]

Still, while there has surely been a European turn towards transformative policies, especially during the last few years, large improvements are once again needed. **The pace remains too slow**. A more pessimistic example in this respect is the yet lacking transformation of care systems in Europe. Analysts believe this is being caused by sectoral divides and social norms, which form impeding conditions to the development of transformational perspectives and hamper progress towards the SDGs. An overarching problem is the lack of true transformational action in Europe. While such action generally receives much attention during the policy cycle phases of problem definition and agenda setting, it is addressed far less in later parts of the cycle, such as in policy design, policy implementation, policy evaluation and policy feedback. This inspires some analysts to believe that transformative policies are merely part of European discourses, without truly changing governance, integrating old goals into new SDG language.[25]

Another large weakness of European engagement with transformative policies is its insufficient attention towards other world regions. The globe of today is, despite mounting economic and political instability,

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[24] (Allen & Malekpour, 2023, p. 1954; Casula, 2022, p. 508; Janssen, Wanzenböck, et al., 2023a, p. 24; Klös & Parthie, 2023, p. 4; Lehtimäki et al., 2024, pp. 1-3; Malekpour et al., 2023, p. 250; Re et al., 2024, p. 143; *Global Sustainable Development Report 2023*, 2023, p. 35; Utting, 2018, p. 10)

[25] (Biermann, Hickmann, Sénit, & Grob, 2022, p. 10; Hujo & Carter, 2019, p. 37)

highly interconnected. Global supply chains play a central and fundamentally vital role in this regard. As previously stated, Europe generates more negative spillovers than its counterparts, and these effects are highly relevant. About 57% of all 169 SDG targets have at least some transboundary components. If Europe is to make real use of transformative policies, it must also **do more to transform the system of global injustice**. This large injustice, which came very visibly to the fore during the COVID-19 pandemic, has many dimensions. Economic inequality between countries remains prevalent. Moreover, the average European is using 2.6 earths, vastly exceeding the use of the average world citizen. Until now, Europe has left the potential of transformative policies to address these global issues largely untapped.[26]

The European Union

When looking at the EU specifically, the same patterns are visible. Nevertheless, it also has some special properties. To start, it is unsure how transformative policies will develop during the future of the Union, as there are new elections and a new European Commission coming. This new Commission will be the main policy entrepreneur for any upcoming transformative schemes but will meanwhile have to face and tackle the consensual political environment that the EU represents. At the same time, the EU often fulfils a leadership role within the UN framework, something that can enhance its commitment to transformative policies for sustainable development.[27]

Up until now, **EU curiosity for this type of policy has increased considerably**. In its key 2020 staff working document: Delivering on the UN's Sustainable Development Goals - A comprehensive approach, an initial commitment to the principle of *applying deeply transformative policies* was made by the Commission. The EU engaged with such policies before, but the EU staff document is nonetheless symptomatic of a recent transformative turn.[28]

This young turn is also visible in the European Green Deal (EGD), which was adopted by the Commission in the same year and has been complemented by the more operationalised Eighth Environmental Action Programme from 2022 onwards. From all EU flagship initiatives, the EGD is the most extensive and is sometimes presented as a master strategy for the environmental SDGs. Indeed, the European Green Deal seeks to facilitate transformation in eight relevant areas: through increasing climate ambition via reducing greenhouse gas emissions with 55% by 2030 and then becoming completely carbon neutral by 2050 (1), supplying clean, affordable and secure energy (2), mobilising industry for a clean and circular economy (3), building and renovating in an energy and resource efficient way (4), towards zero pollution for a toxic-free environment (5), preserving and restoring ecosystems and biodiversity (6), constructing a fair, healthy, and environmentally friendly food system, mostly through the Farm to Fork Strategy (7), and accelerating the shift to sustainable and smart mobility (8). It mobilises related necessary funds, while hailing the principle of *Leave No One Behind*. On top of that, new follow-up initiatives are also expected, even though it is still unclear what these will look like. One already known future addition is the Social Climate Fund, which will support EU Member States with at least 86 billion euros over the 2026-2032 period, aimed at protecting

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[26] (Heidegger, 2023; Lencucha et al., 2023, p. 2; Sandul, 2023, p. 79; Silva et al., 2023, p. 2; *Global Sustainable Development Report 2023*, 2023, p. 2)

[27] (Karo & Kattel, 2018, p. 239; Kreienkamp et al., 2022, pp. 732, 738 and 744; *Steering Europe towards Sustainability with the Green Deal 2.0*, 2023, p. 5; Monitoring Report on Progress towards the SDGs in an EU Context, 2023, p. 23)

[28] (Mulholland & Piciga, 2021, p. 9)

the most vulnerable during the green transition. Still, some advocate for a true, holistic Social and Green Deal, going further.[29]

Simultaneously, the EU promotes the circular economy and community energy, pushing Member States to do the same. A daring proposal to revise the Energy Taxation Directive, utilising it to harmonise energy taxation policies and remove exemptions that favour fossil fuels, has also been mooted. The EU likewise supports ideas such as the social and solidarity economy. In its 2023 Strategic Foresight Report then, the Commission aims to transform the economy, making it a wellbeing and carbon net-zero economy, which also strengthens the EU's recent model of open strategic autonomy. Meanwhile, the EU also bolsters its transformative policy efforts in other manners. For example, it boasts Better Regulation Guidelines (2021) and a Better Regulation Toolbox (2023). This results in the mandatory mainstreaming of the SDGs, for all policies, and impacts on third countries, for important policy initiatives, in ex-ante impact assessments, thus making governance more anticipatory. The real impact of these assessments can be increased though. Still, the EU's policies for sustainable development are now becoming more transformative, mission-driven, directive, and holistic. Needless to say, the EU is more integrated than its counterparts and holds a large advantage with regards to capacity.[30]

However, this does not mean that it has already used the full potential of transformative policies. **In fact, an overarching European Strategy dealing with sustainable development is still lacking**, as the European Commission prefers mainstreaming, in spite of frequent critiques by the EU Council. The 17 SDGs are only integrated into large policy and strategy packages like the Climate Law (CL), European Green Deal (EGD), Farm to Fork Strategy (FTFS), Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), European Pillar of Social Rights, European Semester, Competitive Sustainability Agenda, Next Generation EU (NGEU), Horizon Europe, Team Europe Approach, Smart Specialisation Strategy, and Global Gateway Strategy. NGEU is arguably among the most transformative of all these, as its main centerpiece: the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) makes 700 billion euros available for Member State recoveries after COVID-19 but couples the approval of support to mandatory action in multiple sustainable development-related areas. The other packages likewise have transformative aspects, but they are generally imperfect. For instance, the FTFS sports the Framework for a Sustainable Food System, which attempts to instigate novel legislative initiatives on food production and consumption, thereby trying to make the European food system sustainable and integrate sustainability in all EU-level nutrition policies. It has been met by a balancing coalition using food security arguments, however, simultaneously failing to start a subsidy shift towards sustainable agriculture. The CAP is likely even less transformative. It is a collection of agricultural subsidies and farmer policies but is often seen as conflicting with the EGD. Meanwhile, the UN goals have received well deserved attention in the first EU Voluntary Review on the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which was published in 2023, examining progress towards the goals in a detailed way. Still, this review was not linked to any action plans or SDG budget reporting, indicating that the EU is not wholly committed to ambitious

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[29] (*EU Voluntary Review on the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, 2023, pp. 7 and 27; *Europe's Position as Leading Change Agent against the Triple Planetary Crisis*, 2022, p. 6; *Social Climate Fund*, 2024; Hereu-Morales et al., 2023, pp. 1-6)

[30] (*Better Regulation: Guidelines and Toolbox*, 2023; *Circular Economy*, 2024; *Better Regulation: Joining Forces to Make Better Laws*, 2023, pp. 1-2, 14-15 and 20-21; *EU Voluntary Review Does Not Support Rhetoric of Transformative and Participatory Change*, 2023; Strategic Foresight Report 2023, 2023, p. 7; *Global Sustainable Development Report 2023*, 2023, p. 36; Casula, 2022, p. 508; Haus-Reve & Asheim, 2023, p. 4; Kreienkamp et al., 2022, p. 737; Lehtimäki et al., 2024, p. 6; Rogowska et al., 2024, pp. 2-5; Rudus & Skjølsvold, 2023, pp. 1-6; Utting, 2018, p. 37)

transformative change yet. Again, aspirations and rhetoric are present, but they do not form a central paradigm, nor are they operationalised.[31]

Another problem is that the EU **fails to genuinely help transform the global system**. It is powerful enough to play a large and leading role in this regard, but efforts are lacking, jeopardising global SDG progress. The EU's embrace of the bioeconomy and renewable energy prove this. These cause negative transboundary impacts, including deforestation and social issues, for example in relation to the extraction of rare earth metals, cobalt, and lithium. Current remedies of voluntary schemes, due diligence market-based proposals and others have proven insufficient to remedy these. If the EU starts fully using its capacity, however, it can have a real impact on key issues. For example, a reform of the global intellectual property system is in order. Developing countries are facing severe difficulties in accessing new information and technologies, consequently missing out on potential opportunities to accelerate towards sustainable development. Here, the EU can push for change. The same is true for the global financial system. In a similar way, developing countries also have problems accessing loans and related means of monetary support, again hurting SDG results. More specifically, the EU has not been able to make its institutions and Member States reach their Official Development Assistance (ODA) targets, remaining below the agreed 0,7% of Gross National Income (GNI) in most cases. The EU remains the largest collective donor of ODA, but additional action is needed. The global trading system likewise needs a kindred transformation, as other regions lack the bargaining power to achieve their SDGs. While the EU has way more it can do, and where transformative policies with an international dimension remain largely absent, it has done some things, such as the consideration of global spillover effects in its own Voluntary Review (VR) and the successful use of agri-food trade policies to bolster overseas sustainability.[32]

The ESDN countries

Zooming in on the ESDN states and looking at national, regional, and local levels, the findings stay broadly similar. 27 of 33 countries are EU members as well, with Iceland, Norway, Serbia, Montenegro, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom being the exceptions. This is important, as EU policy orientations often provide the basis for directional, long-term visions on SDGs in the Member States. Nonetheless, these 27 countries are still relevant, because the EU is not exclusively competent for most of the SDG-related domains. This means that the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality apply here, thus giving Member States some leeway in developing transformative policies for achieving the UN 2030 Agenda goals. The crux of policy implementation lies mostly below the supranational level.[33]

The main distinction with regards to national, regional, and even local transformative policies for sustainable development cannot per se be made between the EU and non-EU countries. Almost all the ESDN countries are high-income countries, with Serbia being an upper middle-income and Montenegro a lower middle-income country. ESDN countries, therefore, generally enjoy a high capacity concerning their

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[31] (Berger, 2022, p. 6; Bernstein et al., 2023, p. 9; Björkbom, 2023, pp. 1-3; Brunori, 2023, p. 107; *Common Agricultural Policy*, 2024; How Far Is Europe from Achieving the SDGs?, 2023, pp. 1-7 and 18; *EU Voluntary Review Does Not Support Rhetoric of Transformative and Participatory Change*, 2023; Monitoring Report on Progress towards the SDGs in an EU Context, 2023, pp. 4 and 19; *Synergies between the Sustainable Development Goals and the National Recovery and Resilience Plans*, 2022, p. 3; Fleacă et al., 2023, p. 269; Janssen, Wesseling, et al., 2023, p. 405; Re et al., 2024, p. 548; Serger et al., 2023, pp. 35 and 50; Vardakastanis & Dubravská, 2016, p. 41)

[32] (Anniina, 2023, p. 43; Deaconu et al., 2023, p. 1459; Kumeh & Ramcilovic-Suominen, 2023, p. 612; Lundvall, 2022, p. 16; O'Cinneide, 2023, p. 70; *Global Sustainable Development Report 2023*, 2023, pp. 36-37 and 109)

[33] (*Better Regulation: Joining Forces to Make Better Laws*, 2023, p. 10; Nauwelaers et al., 2022, p. 16; Sachs et al., 2023, p. 12)

ability to develop far-reaching transformative policies and innovations. Northern and Western European countries do have enough capacity for engaging with transformative governance. For example, dedicated national SDG strategies dominate in Northwestern Europe, especially since the last couple of years, while they are often just integrated in general national development strategies elsewhere. Italy also has a formidable National Sustainable Development Strategy though. Only a handful of governments, like the Austrian one, do not produce strategic documents and instead follow a mainstreaming approach. Nordic ESDN countries are, however, particularly successful. Finland profits from a strong tradition of cross-ministry cooperation, while Sweden and its governmental innovation agency: Vinnova, are often considered frontrunners in the field of TIP specifically. This agency has recently started the Viable Cities Programme, which is the largest Swedish public investment to date in research and innovation on climate-neutral and sustainable cities. The strategic innovation programme considers digitalisation and citizen engagement as key enablers and constitutes a fine example of a strong transformative policy. Meanwhile, Northern European states are also known for heavily strengthening their municipalities. In contrast to more traditional approaches, still prevailing somewhat more in the rest Europe, Nordic local governments mostly possess adequate means to enact independent transformative initiatives, utilising both whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches.[34]

Despite this Nordic head start, **the transformative turn is visible in all ESDN countries** and has reached national, regional, and local levels of government. The French Biodiversity Strategy, used from 2011 to 2020, is an early example of a large national plan with transformative characteristics. It was centred in the French environmental agency but was produced in discussion with different stakeholders. In addition, it contained strong language, calling for an ethical view on nature, creating a bio-culture and co-existing with animals and plants. Moreover, it was embedded in international agreements, adding national laws and participatory voluntary tools. Its only flaws related to transformation were the failure to address the power structures behind biodiversity loss and strengthen laws with coercive measures, which were measures needed during that particular phase. More general examples can be provided as well. In Croatia, Finland, Lithuania and Luxemburg, hybrid national sustainable development councils, consisting of governmental and non-governmental actors, are currently in operation, something that is beneficial for the openness of transformative policies. Furthermore, many ESDN countries are adopting wellbeing frameworks. Austria, Belgium, Estonia, Germany, Iceland, Italy, Portugal, and Sweden now use comprehensive sets of indicators measuring wellbeing. Finland, France, and Ireland even have wellbeing strategies, thus building ambitious visions for transformative change.[35]

However, regional wellbeing strategies also exist, for instance in Scotland and Wales, where they are very explicitly connected to the SDGs, more than their just mentioned counterparts. The Welsh Wellbeing of Future Generations Act was embedded in the Welsh Constitution in 2015. The act contains a wellbeing framework of seven goals: A Prosperous Wales (1), A Resilient Wales (2), A Healthier Wales (3), A More Equal Wales (4), A Wales of Cohesive Communities (5), A Wales of Vibrant Culture & Thriving Welsh Language (6), and A Globally Responsible Wales (7). Moreover, 46 indicators underpin this framework. These 46 indicators help all public bodies with their obligatory considerations of long-term policy impacts. The bodies must work with each other and communities as well. More concretely, they must design their own wellbeing objectives, publish related statements and report on their progress in an annual report.

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[34] (Berger, 2022, p. 6; Byenkya, 2023; Haus-Reve & Asheim, 2023, pp. 3-4; *Italy's National Action Plan for Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development*, 2022, pp. 3 and 9; Laasonen et al., 2022, p. 547; Lundvall, 2022, p. 2; Nauwelaers et al., 2022, pp. 3 and 10; Rohracher et al., 2023, pp. 337 and 344-346; Serger et al., 2023, p. 45; Westskog et al., 2022, p. 2)

[35] (Berger, 2022, pp. 7-11; Coffey et al., 2023, pp. 294-296)

Lastly, the region has introduced a new Future Generations Commissioner. All in all, the Act is an ambitious and far-reaching transformative policy.[36]

Transformative policies also exist on the local level. For example, the Dutch city of Rotterdam has launched a broad sustainable development plan, containing goals for a clean, green, healthy, safe, and economically robust city. Doing this, it expanded on its initial exclusively environmental goals and consequently enabled the development of true transformative change throughout the last years. Other municipalities launched similar policies. Florence boasts a 2030 Agenda Strategy with SDG indicators. Cities like Zagreb and Tallinn have also integrated the SDGs in their development strategies. A great deal of local governments are also cooperating to enable transformative policies for sustainable development. The SDG46 Network is a case from Finland grouping Helsinki, Espoo, Tampere, Vantaa, Oulu, and Turku.[37]

While there have been some examples of progress regarding transformative policies, this does not mean ESDN countries are now moving with the required speed. In fact, ESDN countries **do not fully utilise the potential of transformative policies yet**. For example, the EU promotes, as already said, engagement with the circular economy at the level of the individual Member States, something that has indeed occurred to a certain extent. Meanwhile, Europe is witnessing a big surge in private start-up attention for the circular economy. In general, however, many national governments currently fail to follow through on supporting hard measures to move related innovations from the emergence phase to the acceleration or stabilisation phase. A couple of governments, such as the Finnish administration, now do provide subsidies for circular economy-related experiments, but still do not match the amount of further action seen at the EU level. This results in a rather low uptake by mainstream businesses, which is worrying, given that private sector engagement is considered very important for the transition to a circular economy. Another issue is that most national governments, apart from a few leaders like the Netherlands, define the circular economy too narrowly. The European Commission has proposed a new Packaging and Packaging Waste Regulation that creates quantitative targets for recycling, reusing and reducing. Most countries only look at recycling. In reality, a true transformative circular economy entails recycling and more effective measures such as reusing, repurposing, repairing, remanufacturing and reducing. National uptake of the community energy idea is, despite growing popularity, also limited. Most Member States just follow EU requirements and only create two or three policies, with Northern and Western Europe doing slightly better on average. Portugal, Austria, Ireland and the Brussels Region use the most diverse policy mixes for community energy, but even these fail to empower the most vulnerable actors. Other areas that need transformation are also affected by slow progress, especially when euroscepticism, populism, and democratic backsliding hinder implementing EU policies on lower levels.[38]

Subnational levels also have their role to play. An estimated 65% of the 169 SDG targets cannot be reached without regional and local involvement, particularly regarding typical subnational competences like water management, land use, climate change, housing, transport, and infrastructure. However, it is found that regions and municipalities, even those with beneficial set-ups, demonstrate vastly different amounts of partaking in transformative change. Many of the smaller, rural, and local governments hardly engage with transformative policies, also in ESDN countries like Norway. This is caused by lower degrees of sustainable development institutionalisation and difficult political or societal circumstances. Nevertheless, the pace in even the most ambitious lower levels is frequently still far too slow, often due to a lack of means, when

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[36] (Berger, 2022, pp. 8-11; *How Far Is Europe from Achieving the SDGs?*, 2023, p. 21)

[37] (Allen et al., 2023, p. 1260; Localising the SDGs in a Changing Landscape, 2024, p. 42)

[38] (Lavtizar et al., 2023; Noonan et al., 2024, p. 5; Re et al., 2024, pp. 159-163; Rudus & Skjølsvold, 2023, pp. 9-16; Serger et al., 2023, p. 45; Sundqvist & Åkerman, 2024, p. 4; Monitoring Report on Progress towards the SDGs in an EU Context, 2023, pp. 7-8; Westskog et al., 2022, p. 2)

national governments fail to allocate enough financial and capacity building resources. A related problem is that SDG evaluation frameworks frequently fail to reach local governments. This is not a minor issue, as lower levels have demonstrated more willingness to play an experimenting, pioneering or testbed role with regards to transformative policies for sustainable development. By way of illustration, small and large cities, including Copenhagen, Amsterdam, and Glasgow, interact with circular economy approaches, but fail to address the full social, political, and environmental implications of a real circular economy transition, focusing instead on economic competitiveness, technological innovation, and techno-optimism. Besides, even a more ambitious circularity can only be one part of truly transforming unsustainable production and consumption patterns.[39]

Also hampering true transformation, ESDN countries still pay far too **little attention towards the rest of the globe**. This is slowly changing, as some, like Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Italy, Norway, Spain, Sweden, and the Netherlands, have looked at both beneficial and negative spill-over effects in their own VRs. The Government of Iceland has likewise teamed up with academia to assess Iceland's spillover effects. This culminated in a research report, which is only available in Icelandic, and a side-event at the 2023 HLPF, which can still be viewed in English. Due diligence laws are also being strengthened. Even so, more efforts are needed, chiefly from national governments. ODA and other international financing efforts remain too weak. This relates to the issues already addressed in the preceding part on the EU, as acting in concert is very necessary.[40]

ESDN Conference Exchange Spaces

During the event, 12 governmental and 12 stakeholder exchange space speakers will zoom in on concrete examples of transformative policies for sustainable development or initiatives strengthening such policies. They are also listed here, as illustrations of European engagement with transformative change.

GOVERNMENTAL GOOD PRACTICES

Table 1: Belgium - Just Transition Process

In May 2022, Zakia Khattabi, Belgian Federal Minister of Climate, Environment, Sustainable Development, and the Green Deal, launched an ambitious societal process: the General Estates for a Just Transition. Scientists, representatives of civil society, federal administrations, and citizens formulated opinions and recommendations which all fed into the Conference for a Just Transition in Belgium, which was held in November 2023. Belgium will return to this unique process, the main results that resulted from it and the lessons that can already be learned from it.

Table 2: Germany - Addressing Transformation in the National Sustainable Development Strategy

Germany will provide an overview of its latest initiatives to strengthen sustainability governance and, in particular, its first experiences working with Transformation Teams (TTs). These TTs were introduced with

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[39] (*A Crucial Time to Localise the Sustainable Development Goals in the EU*, 2023; *Achieving the SDGs in Cities and Regions*, 2024; Biermann, Hickmann, Sénit, Beisheim, et al., 2022, p. 797; Biermann, Hickmann, Sénit, & Grob, 2022, p. 209; Calisto et al., 2023, pp. 1331, 1336-1337 and 1360; Espey et al., 2023, pp. 3-4; Lepenies et al., 2023, p. 753; Lindvall, 2023, p. 277; Nauwelaers et al., 2022, p. 16)

[40] (Financing for Development at a Crossroads, 2024, pp. 5 and 78; *Managing Our Spillover Effects and Achieving the SDGs Globally*, 2023; *Side Event on Spillover Effects*, 2023; *Global Sustainable Development Report 2023*, 2023, p. 37; Hlynsdóttir et al., 2023, p. 1; Sachs et al., 2023, pp. 49-50)

the intent to strengthen intergovernmental cooperation and to develop more systemic approaches to align overall federal policy with sustainability and achieve rapid, targeted, and concrete progress, particularly in the domain of transformation management. Germany will share insights on how the TTs fit into the overall governance structure and how the TT-reports built the pillars of this year's Sustainability Strategy Review. Additionally, it will present some key lessons learned since the introduction of the TTs in November 2022 and how the TT-concept might be developed further in Germany.

Table 3: Italy - Localising the SDGs through policy coherence for sustainable development

In line with the UN High Level Impact Initiatives, the EU Council Conclusions, and the G7 Climate, Energy, and Environment Ministers' Meeting Communiqué, Italy will present the work it has undertaken to support multi-level governance and engagement of subnational authorities in the definition and implementation of the National Sustainable Development Strategy and of the National Action Plan on Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development (PCSD NAP), which transpose the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs at domestic level.

Italy will present its approach to SDG localisation through policy coherence for sustainable development (PCSD). It will focus on actors, institutional mechanisms, and tools activated so far, providing an overview of what has been done and what remains to be done. Italy will show the connection between the topic of localisation and the topic of PCSD, framing PCSD as a key enabler to make multi-level governance a stable institutional process aiming at ensuring vertical coherence across policy levels and domains, and horizontal integration across different sectors and actors. This approach has led to the 2024 awarding of a dedicated project under the EU's TSI Programme.

Building on the link between good governance systems and policy coherence, or SDG 16 and 17, Italy will provide suggestions on the need to undertake action at the level of the European Union, which is already engaging, at various degrees, with both SDG localisation and PCSD. It will argue that, with a few years left, the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs would greatly benefit from the two topics to be rooted at subnational level, in coherence with specific needs and circumstances, but unlocking transformative change.

Table 4: Latvia - Transformative Power of Culture in Sustainable Development

Latvia's VNR process in 2022 revealed three factors that more than others facilitate the achievement of all SDGs: "money talks" (1), culture (2), and innovative approaches (3). Latvia even concentrated, in 2022, its HLPF side-event on the transformative nature of museums and libraries as safe spaces for dialogue and an understanding of the SDGs. Since then, culture has continued to accelerate its role. Latvia will present this role and invites participants to explore concrete activities with Latvia's State Chancellery and the Ministry of Culture.

Table 5: Malta - Process of SDG budget alignment

Malta's Sustainable Development Strategy for 2050 provides an overarching strategic framework for both strengthening and developing mechanisms for cross-sectoral policy integration, while likewise introducing measures and initiatives that reflect Malta's current and future needs. It builds on Malta's Sustainable Development Vision 2050 which was published in October 2018, the latter setting out Malta's long-term aspirations and priorities for mainstreaming sustainable development across all economic sectors and strata of Maltese society. It further aligns with the SDGs whilst also considering other developments and existing EU, international, and national commitments. Malta's Sustainable Development Strategy is built on five Strategic Goals and eighteen Strategic Objectives. The Strategic Goals will be monitored through a defined set of targets. These targets will be monitored by a set of national SDIs (Sustainable Development

Indicators) which will measure progress towards achieving the goals of Malta's Sustainable Development Strategy for 2050.

This is complimented by the work carried out by the National Expert Group on Sustainable Development Indicators, chaired by the National Statistics Office, and established in 2021, with the aim of facilitating the coordination of various stakeholder activities relating to the SDIs and effectively addressing any gaps present.

Furthermore, through the alignment of budget measures with the SDGs, an exercise that has been carried out annually since 2019, the Maltese Government is committed to further enhance PCSD. Malta will speak about this aspect and how it can unlock transformative change.

Table 6: The Netherlands - National Sustainable Development Report - Linking the SDGs to 6 Major Transitions

The Netherlands will present its 2024 National Sustainable Development Report. The main take-away this year is that the SDGs provide an important anchor in uncertain times. The report looks at the SDGs through the lens of six integrated transition challenges, as recommended by the UN 2023 GSDR. All sectors indicate that this is a very helpful way to strengthen both cooperation and the integration of interlinked goals. The urgency to speed up is also felt in the Netherlands. There is a lot of commitment and energy in all the sectors and with citizens at a local level who want to contribute. The government can build on that energy and commitment to accelerate the work around the SDGs. This requires a number of key levers to be used for transformative change.

Table 7: Romania - Upskilling public sector staff as sustainable development experts towards more transformative policies

Romania will present its efforts to train public sustainable development experts, enabling transformative change. Its Department for Sustainable Development (DCD), at the centre of the Romanian Government, has assumed, since its establishment in 2017, the leading role in coordinating Romanian implementation of the SDGs, having undertaken many concrete actions for setting up and operationalising the institutional framework that fosters a whole-of-government approach for PCSD.

With the approval of the Romanian National Sustainable Development Strategy 2030 in November 2018, the Romanian government has engaged in a constant effort to advance effective, efficient, transparent, innovative, and citizen-centered governance for sustainable development. This Strategy is the framework that guides the sectoral strategies supporting SDG implementation in Romania.

For the implementation of the Strategy, competent people, who have the right knowledge and skills, are able to address the challenges related to achieving the SDGs and can navigate the complex challenges our world faces these days, are needed in the public administration. Romania responded to this need and has prioritised the professionalisation of public staff in the field of sustainable development.

Table 8: Slovakia - Steering transformative policies for sustainable development from the centre of government

Slovakia will explain how transformative policies for sustainable development can be fostered through the centre of government. It will present on the opportunities and challenges of managing SDG policies in this

manner by sharing its recent experiences, not only with regards to PCSD, but also other aspects of effective and transformative policies.

Table 9: Flanders - Local policy planning aligned with the SDGs: the momentum of local elections in Flanders

In the Belgian region of Flanders, many cities and municipalities integrated the UN 2030 Agenda into their communications and policies in recent years, resulting in the use of SDG data to feed local context analyses, the monitoring of SDG indicators on municipal websites, systematically checking of local projects or policy proposals against the SDGs, the use of local politicians as SDG ambassadors, and many more. It can hence be stated without exaggeration that the local governments in Flanders are pioneers in localising the SDGs. Flanders will explain how the Flemish Association of Cities and Municipalities (VVSG) was able to motivate its members to do so, and how the impending local elections should reinforce this trend. The VVSG linked the SDG framework to existing municipal processes and offered very concrete tools for every step of the local policy processes. The annual Sustainable Municipality Week campaign also got a lot of municipalities excited about the SDGs.

Table 10: The Finnish view on the Nordic VSR and the Nordic Toolbox - Localisation and transformative policies, case: the city of Turku

Finland will talk about the results of the Nordic Voluntary Subnational Review (VSR), how they look from the Finnish perspective, and how Finnish municipalities do compare with their Nordic peers on promoting sustainable development.

The city of Turku is one of the Finnish frontrunners regarding sustainable development. The City Strategy indicators are linked directedly to both Voluntary Local Review (VLR) and SDG indicators. The youth and children's services are piloting phenomena-based budgeting, while likewise promoting social sustainability and inclusion. Turku is a member of the SDG46 city network for developing strategic steering of the SDGs in the largest cities of Finland. The network has also cocreated SDG analysis tools to further improve their organisations' ability for sustainability governance.

Table 11: Circular Economy

The EESC will present on The European Circular Economy Stakeholder Platform (ECESP): a joint initiative by the European Commission and EESC. The Platform is a European one-stop shop for the circular economy community. It is a place for dialogue and a bridge between existing circular economy initiatives. Through its unique position, the Platform's Coordination Group can also link policy development between the EU institutions, civil society organisations, and also businesses, in order to improve and further encourage the development of strategic exercises. Amongst other activities, the ECESP organises an annual stakeholder conference, EU circular talks, and it hosts a website that promotes toolboxes, good practices and strategies for the circular economy.[41]

The ECESP is a dynamic hub for the circular economy community to, firstly, advance the circular economy concept and keep the conversation at the top of the agenda in Europe, in the Member States and in their cities and regions, secondly, strengthen cooperation among stakeholders' networks, and thirdly contribute to identifying social, economic, and cultural barriers to the transition towards a true circular economy. The

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[41] Due to practical reasons, one stakeholder example, on the circular economy, will already be presented during Exchange Space 1.

European Circular Economy Stakeholder Platform is thus best described as a "network of networks", going beyond sectoral activities and highlighting both the key cross-sector opportunities and the challenges for transformation.

STAKEHOLDER GOOD PRACTICES

Table 1: Dematerialisation of the Economy

The International Resource Panel will talk about dematerialising the economy. It will argue that the process is absolutely needed to achieve real and ambitious sustainability transformations in Europe. A decrease in resource use is absolutely key and represents an elephant in the room that has to be tackled right now. As the main global scientific organisation on the subject, the International Resource Panel will explain how it contributes to reporting, knowledge sharing, and influencing on resource management issues and steering away from overconsumption, waste, and environmental damage.

Table 2: Future Generations Commissioner for Wales

The Office for the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales will present, as a Welsh non-governmental organisation, a mandate that is unique in Europe and the world: the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales. This Commissioner defends the wellbeing of coming Welsh generations and the long-term aspects of policies, having the power to monitor and advice public bodies in Wales with regards to both wellbeing and sustainable development. Future-oriented transformations are vital for the work of the Commissioner, who is empowered by the 2015 Welsh Wellbeing of Future Generations Act, as long-termism is one of the key aspects of good transformative policies and a focus of the mandate.

Table 3: Spillover Effects and Transformative Policies

The EU has launched the Global Gateway as its new development finance approach. It was launched as the European Commission's flagship strategy to invest in infrastructure across the globe, mobilizing €300 billion to promote global connectivity and provide a values-based alternative of finance for the Global South vis-a-vis China's growing investments in the world. In addition to the development agenda, it is closely interlinked with the EU's trade policies. However, the question remains what is the development offer of the Gateway projects. Despite nominally promoting economic development, strategic investment can lead to detrimental effects, such as biodiversity loss, water shortages, soil degradation, and damage to ecosystems. The spillover effects of the EU business-oriented approach to development poses risks to erode core development aid principles, and the approach poses major concerns regarding the limited civil society role, corporate lobby influence, accountability, transparency, and development.

The exchange space will explore various aspects of the Global Gateway strategy, examining and identifying where additional action is required to bridge gaps, specifically in financing for sustainable development and mitigating SDG backsliding. Good practices for engagement regarding the development approach relying on the private sector, such as the Global Gateway, will be discussed, as well as how to secure truly transformative policies needed to deliver on SDGs and provide quality financing for development.

Table 4: EU Green and Social Deal Based on the Wellbeing Economy

The EESC will cover its support for a Green and Social Deal. In an era of multiple challenges stemming from the biodiversity, climate, and cost-of living crises, rising political tensions are placing the objectives of the

EGD increasingly at risk. These crises and tensions have exposed the fragility and limitations of our current economic system, but also offer an opportunity for transformative change.

Many EESC opinions and events call for a paradigm shift towards a wellbeing economy for a green and just transition, aligned with the UN Agenda 2030. This shift should be based on the participation of citizens and organised civil society, cross-sectoral approaches, foresight, and systemic thinking. While the current EGD commits to *Leaving No One Behind*, it still needs a comprehensive social dimension that addresses the root causes of these global crises. From the outset, the EESC has been repeatedly calling for a European Green and Social Deal.

The EESC's ongoing own-initiative opinion: *A Blueprint for a European Green and Social Deal, based on a wellbeing economy*, aims to, along with its associated event, help shape the agenda of the next European Commission. The wellbeing economy is further one of the six pillars of the just transition policy framework proposed by the EESC.

Table 5: Sustainable Food Systems

The EESC will cover food systems. EU food systems are at a crossroads, facing multiple challenges related to environmental, climate, health, and social matters, as recently shown by the farmers protests. In order to foster a food system transition towards more sustainable outcomes, the EESC, like various stakeholders, believes that our food democracy needs to be strengthened. By increasing the participation of the general public and the food system stakeholders, democratic innovations, such as food policy councils (FPCs), will promote the quality and legitimacy of food policymaking. Examples of FPCs include the Catalonian FPC and the Network of Food Policy Councils in Germany and the Liege Food Belt in Belgium.

The EESC also proposes the creation of a European Food Policy Council that would help achieve a more integrated and participatory approach to food policymaking, would accelerate the alignment of policies at EU, national, and local levels, and, most importantly, would increase the quality and legitimacy of EU food policies. This table will thus discuss and explore how food democracy can contribute to more sustainable food systems.

Table 6: Transformative Education for Sustainable Development

The Lifelong Learning Platform will discuss about transformative education for sustainable development. Important steps, which can support the transformation of our education systems in order to work towards sustainable and resilient societies, where humans can live in harmony with each other and nature, have been taken the last few years at the global and European level, from the Berlin Declaration on Education for Sustainable Development and the Transforming Education Summit at the global level, to the Council Recommendation on Learning for Sustainability and the GENE European Declaration on Global Education at the European level. These changes could not have been achieved without the push from education and training stakeholders and organised civil society working together with policy makers and plenty of other actors.

However, the backlashes on environmental and sustainability topics which are sweeping Europe ahead of the 2024 elections have shown the fragility of the gains made over the years, and the need to address this challenge and others present in order to strengthen the path towards making transformative education a reality in all our education systems. The Lifelong Learning Platform, gathering more than 40 European civil society organisations addressing training and education, continues to focus its own advocacy around these

efforts by bringing together the formal, non-formal and informal learning sectors in order to demand for changes that are truly holistic and will benefit all learners regardless of age and background.

Table 7: European Business Roadmap for Just Transition

Eurochambres, the Association of European Chambers of Commerce and Industry, will showcase how it supports businesses with different aspects of the green transition. Some of Eurochambres' initiatives are based on information or even foresight studies that identify trends and future prospects. Other initiatives are direct services such as training or awareness raising campaigns that support companies in their green transformation.

However, all the Eurochambres initiatives presented have one thing in common: they address the question of how the green transformation can be brought closer to companies and how its application can be made even more widespread, in particular by demonstrating the benefits for companies. This showcase will be followed by a discussion about policy developments on a European level.

Table 8: Energy Transition

The European Energy Research Alliance is the largest low-carbon energy research community in Europe. It coordinates research on three pillars: low-carbon technologies, materials, and systems. It will demonstrate the importance of systems, focusing on the role of energy demand reduction in the energy transition.

The rapid worsening of the geopolitical context has overshadowed climate change over the last two years. This is evidenced by the tectonic changes occurring in the post-Cold War geopolitical order, featuring the rapid transition from a unipolar world dominated by the USA, through a ruled based order structured by international institutions as pillar of multilateralism, to a situation of intense rivalry between the USA and China, the emergence of a multipolar world, being marked by the increasing influence of the Global South, a collapse of multilateralism, and the resurgence of territorial wars, notably at the border of the European Union.

At the same time, the climate crisis has likewise been worsening rapidly. While international negotiations have almost stalled, climate warming occurs faster than firstly modelled. Its effects are also much deeper and systemic than initially thought. While many of authoritative climate scientists believe we have already reached a 1,5°C warming (when compared to pre-industrial levels) there is increasing evidence that latest climate models fail to explain the observed acceleration of climate warming.

Globally, greenhouse gas emissions are still increasing (though flattening), while they should have, already for years, been sharply declining, therefore evidencing that the world is completely off track vis à vis any scenarios compatible with Paris Agreement targets.

In the European Union, despite the very ambitious and aggressive policies developed by the von der Leyen Commission, emission reductions, since 1990, only reached 32% in 2022. A recent study of the European Environment Agency expects reductions to reach 42% to 48%, depending on the policy scenarios, by 2030, well short of the 55% reduction target.

Such findings lead us to conclude that the decarbonisation of the energy supply side is not happening, not globally, but also not in Europe, at a pace compatible with our climate targets, and that ambitious policies should now be developed to decarbonise the demand side, thus to structurally drive reduction of energy

demand. The exchange discussion will therefore revolve around the various transformative strategies and policy recommendations able to drive energy demand down in EU.

Table 9: Transformational Tools for Civil Society Participation

The EESC will present the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI): a key element in making democracies fit for the future. As an instrument that allows people across Europe to make their voices heard and be formally recognised, and that puts issues onto the Commission's agenda, the ECI has a very strong potential to help overcome the democratic deficit by promoting active citizenship and participatory democracy. However, there appear to be some weaknesses in its functioning, including its limited political impact and visibility, bringing about a relatively low level of citizen awareness regarding the instrument, as well as its financial dimension, and aspects linked to national data collection standards and minimum age requirements.

To help overcome the barriers to active civil society participation, the EESC has initiated and been involved in a number of activities around the ECI, from preparing opinions, to setting up an ECI Ad Hoc Group, and from publishing a European Democracy Passport, to inviting ECI organisers to its meetings and organising the ECI Day, an annual event held for the first time in 2024 within the EESC´s new flagship initiative: Civil Society Week. In addition, the EESC actively promotes youth participation in the legislative process of the European Union. The Committee now formalised its longstanding commitment to youth voices by creating a dedicated Ad Hoc Group on youth engagement and adopting a methodology for implementing the EU Youth Test.

Table 10: Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships as a Lever to Achieve the SDGs

The Advisory Council for Sustainable Development of Catalonia will present on the Catalonia 2030 Alliance. In February 2020, the Catalonia 2030 Alliance was established in Barcelona, following a mandate from the Catalan Parliament to the Government. Articulated from the National Agreement for the 2030 Agenda in Catalonia, a founding document co-created by 39 organisations that were pioneers in the localisation of the SDGs, the 2030 Alliance is a coalition of public and private organizations committed to the 2030 Agenda and interested in working together to achieve the SDGs.

Facilitated by the Advisory Council for Sustainable Development, it has 84 members, including the Catalan Government, representatives from the local world, the Councils of Women, Children, and Adolescents, youth organisations, elderly organisations, the LGTBI+ Council, the third social sector, and the professional field, as well as the main trade unions and business associations. All these organisations have signed the before-mentioned Agreement and presented a list of commitments to be achieved in relation to the SDGs.

The Alliance is a fine space for the mutual recognition of organisations of very diverse nature, composition, structure and mandates (an element that gives it, on the other hand, great richness), as well as a space for knowledge exchange, dialogue, sharing of good practices and the promotion of joint projects. Ultimately, it tries to create opportunities for transformative action, making organisations leave their comfort zones and specialisation areas in order to boost transformative change. Among others, the Alliance is responsible for a big conversation on education for the SDGs and has contributed to the VSR that Catalonia will publish in July 2024.

Table 11: Local Governments for Sustainability (ICLEI Europe)

Transformative change is a deeply challenging endeavour. Despite the best of intentions, efforts to make European cities greener and climate neutral run the risk of exacerbating existing inequalities and patterns

of exclusion, or even of producing new ones. It is therefore critical for all levels of government to put in place policies that enable a just transformation.

ICLEI Europe's table will showcase how local governments from across Europe are taking up the challenge of integrating sustainability and justice, for instance through participatory and deliberative local green deal processes. It will also build on ICLEI Europe's work aimed at fostering better collaboration between local governments and community-led initiatives, as well as at empowering urban residents to play more active roles in local governance.[42]

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[42] Due to practical reasons, one government good practice, on local sustainability governance, will only be presented during Exchange Space 2.

Chapter 4: Transformative policies – How can we improve?

Looking at these results, it is clear that the whole of Europe is using transformative policies for sustainable development. However, the pace needs to be picked up, not only regarding the transformation of Europe, but also regarding Europe's part in transforming the world. This chapter goes back to two of the ten good attributes of transformative policies described above, highlighting directionality and inclusivity.

The ESDN Youth Network Members will first zoom in on: *Driving Europe Forwards - ESDN Youth Voices on European Transformations*. The ESDN Youth Network has identified key European transformations from their own youth perspective: climate change and environmental degradation, shrinking civic space, youth unemployment, and also youth participation. Elisabeth Hosszu, the United Nations Youth Delegate for the French-speaking part of Belgium, will present youth insights on climate change. Daviti David Esatia, the United Nations Youth Delegate of Georgia, will discuss youth insights on shrinking civic space. Lukas Svana, the European Union Youth Delegate, will address youth unemployment. Together, they will explore the transformation of youth participation and share youth opinions on desired future developments.

Patrizia Heidegger, The European Environmental Bureau's Deputy Secretary General and Director for EU Governance, Sustainability, and Global Policies, will look at the EU-level: *Enhancing European Governance for Transformative Policies*, uncovering the governance aspect of the European transformative policies for sustainable development.

Judith Maas, the Director of SDG Nederland, will then focus on societal cooperation: *Bringing Together all Sectors in Society to Cooperate on the SDGs for Integrated Policymaking*. While national governments are responsible for achieving the SDGs, they cannot do so without strong involvement of all parties in society: companies, knowledge institutes, civil society groups, local governments, the youth, and many others. In the Netherlands, SDG Nederland brings together all sectors of Dutch society in their efforts to achieve the SDGs in the Netherlands, whilst avoiding negative impact elsewhere. Thus, it aims to accelerate and scale up efforts in society to achieve the SDGs, by informing, inspiring, and activating organisations, institutions, and organised groups in Dutch society. Judith Maas will share main achievements and lessons learnt in the past eight years, and her views on how to bring the Agenda 2030 ambitions closer.

Åsa Hildestrand, Nordregio's Senior Project Manager for Nordic VSR, will speak about local governments specifically: *Nordic Voluntary Subnational Review - The local level as a driver for transformational change*. It is well known that about two thirds of the SDGs will not be reached without proper local engagement. Localising the SDGs is therefore a crucial factor for the final success of the UN 2030 Agenda. The Nordic countries have a long tradition of strong local governance and score high in national-level SDG rankings. In the first Nordic VSR ever produced, developed jointly by the Nordic associations of local and regional Governments and Nordregio, it was thus asked what the Nordic municipalities have achieved in terms of transformative governance and practices, how they are supported by the national level, and what their remaining concerns are. Based on a survey of Nordic municipalities and other sources, the review shows that many of the local authorities actively contribute to the SDGs by integrating them in strategies and steering systems, taking part in peer learning networks, and engaging local stakeholders in implementation. But there are still many obstacles to overcome locally and nationally. The overall aim of the Nordic VSR is to stimulate local-level SDG action, peer learning and collaboration, by worldwide sharing of what Nordic municipalities have learned from their efforts to transform their communities, and how local government associations and national governments can support the process. Municipalities have also provided some

of their key methods and measures for the VSR. These are featured throughout the review and also in a separate Nordic Toolbox.

Kalina Arabadjieva, Senior Researcher at the European Trade Union Institute, will speak about how crises are becoming an almost permanent feature of our societies, occurring ever more closely together and increasing uncertainty, and setting back progress towards achieving sustainable development goals. The recent crises have had profound effects on key institutional arrangements underpinning our societies, such as labour markets and welfare states. The post-pandemic period offers a unique opportunity to transform the global economic system, making it more resilient to future shocks, while also ensuring environmental sustainability, intergenerational fairness and a dignified existence. It is thus a time to cast a new social-ecological contract for the future, one that is now based on equality, equity, social justice, and planetary boundaries. This contract needs to be underpinned by a strong eco-welfare state and innovative policies, some of which might include a job guarantee, universal basic services, new eco-fiscal policies, and worker participation as a means to economic democracy. Her speech is therefore named: *Transformative Ideas - Ensuring a just share of progress for all*.

Jan Noterdaeme, Senior Advisor and Co-Founder of CSR Europe, will speak about how the EU Green Deal sets ambitious climate goals. However, without a strong European Industry Deal (as recommended by the Antwerp Declaration and CSR Europe's Business Manifesto 2024-2029), and a "Delors Plan" to make the most vulnerable a cornerstone of all EU policies and decisions, it risks falling short. He will ask how the EU institutions, governments, business, science, and civil society can open a new era of collaboration to drive economic competitiveness, environmental responsibility, and social equity at the same time. To answer this challenge and this question, Noterdaeme will share five compelling proposals that enterprises from CSR Europe will convey to the new EU leaders after the 2024 European elections: An Industry Alliance for Inclusive Prosperity (1), European Sector Alliances for Due Diligence and Local Sustainability Networks (2), a European Social Investment Framework (3), Integrating Behavioural Science (4), and lastly a European Sustainability Dialogue (5). In his keynote: *Sustainable Development Transformations in the Private Sector*, He will attest that by leveraging CSR Europe's combined expertise, they are confident they can significantly accelerate the pace towards a Just Industrial Transition for a Sustainable Europe 2030.

Building more directionality

In any case, building more directionality is vitally important. Clear, sufficiently ambitious visions for change and potent transformative aspirations are indispensable. These ideas are already present. Many European policies have engaged heavily with the stages of problem definition and agenda setting, thereby creating transformative roadmaps. Nonetheless, strong imbalance between all different dimensions of sustainable development remains difficult to overcome. This big imbalance, partly proven by European performance on the SDGs, has sparked the *Beyond Growth* movement that advocates letting go of the traditional focus on classic economic growth. In 2018, for example, the Club of Rome claimed conventional growth to be incompatible with the 2030 Agenda. In recent years, this movement has critiqued prominent EU initiatives like the European Green Deal, which only formulates that the EU's economic development must simply be decoupled from other sustainability domains, thus not forming a *Beyond Growth* vision. Other European governments have, however, demonstrated a very similar preference for economic objectives. Presently, some thinkers respond by going even further, replacing *Beyond Growth* with *Degrowth*. Letting go of these specific paradigms for now, Europe must still do more to **balance** prosperity-related SDGs with other SDGs. Important steps have already been taken. For instance, the EU is now also planning to complement GDP

measurements with wellbeing measurements. Nonetheless, current directional visions for transformative sustainable development policies must become stronger and more ambitious.[43]

This directionality must provide rebalancing, but also avoid creating a new imbalance. Social, economic, environmental, and other aspects of sustainable development need to be considered together. In doing so, European policymakers must dare envisioning proper system transformations. The British economist Kate Raworth provides one possible inspiration. In 2012, she launched her doughnut conceptualisation of a sustainable economy, further elaborating through integrating the UN's 17 SDGs in 2017. This doughnut economy means keeping economic growth between a social foundation and an ecological ceiling. Like so, a safe and just space for humanity can be created via a regenerative and distributive economy, at least according to the model. In the end, these kinds of ideas can help European governments in making true transformative promises. At this day, the Brussels Region is supporting BrusselsDonut, an organisation that examines both the regional and global applicability of the doughnut economy, and meanwhile hopes to promote appropriation of the model by different actors. Such initiatives can enhance directionality.[44]

Directionality also relates to the other element of long-termism described above though. Increased usage of tools like foresight analyses and scenario developments can feed back into political visions and promises, making them more ambitious. With swathes of elections coming, this is highly relevant.[45]

Building more inclusivity

Still, promises alone will not suffice. The stages of problem definition and agenda setting must be followed by policy design, policy implementation, policy evaluation, and policy feedback. These are often the most lacking with regards to transformative policies for sustainable development, as hitherto mentioned. In fact, **stronger inclusivity** can potentially help solve this. It is agreed upon that policies generally become less inclusive during the later stages of the policy cycle, something that is a large issue for transformative SDG governance. Tackling this issue and making a difference with old, traditional, top-down approaches can therefore prove vital in growing policy effectiveness and policy legitimacy, arguably even more so than building additional directionality. This does not mean radical pluralism is the answer since consensus and ambition remain needed to guarantee directionality. However, more inclusivity is surely of use.[46]

Firstly, an initial step in this regard is pursuing further increases in the use of multi-level governance. All levels: supranational, national, regional, and local governments must be included in operationalisations of transformative ideas. In Europe, more efforts are needed to localise SDGs. Municipalities are increasingly seen as being crucial for policy implementation, but they are also generally the weakest governments and therefore face difficulties acting in this role. To create successful transformative policies for achieving the SDGs, this must change.[47]

Secondly, the whole-of-government approach, already promoted by the EU and numerous ESDN countries must be strengthened. Although steps have often been taken to break down traditional silos and increase cooperation between command levels, more action is needed. Only then can sustainable development be

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[43] (Brunori, 2023, p. 109; Coffey et al., 2023, pp. 294-296; Gottenhuber et al., 2023, p. 555; How Far Is Europe from Achieving the SDGs?, 2023, p. 5; Strategic Foresight Report 2023, 2023, p. 12; *Transformatieve Overheid*, 2023, p. 22; Randers et al., 2018, p. 6; Westskog et al., 2022, p. 2; Zezza, 2023, p. 83)

[44] (Brunori, 2023, p. 105; *Together for an ecological and fair transition in Brussels*, 2024)

[45] (Sundqvist & Åkerman, 2024, pp. 9-10)

[46] (Arias-Arévalo et al., 2023, p. 4; Brunori, 2023, p. 104; Sundqvist & Åkerman, 2024, pp. 3, 7 and 10)

[47] (Ranga & Kim, 2023, p. 2)

accomplished, as satisfactory policy coordination has been rightly marked as an important precondition for transformative acceleration.[48]

Thirdly, the whole-of-society aspect is equally important for inclusivity. For sure, European policymakers, lawmakers, and civil servants must keep on engaging with transformative SDG policies. This is impossible without broader interactions, however. To start, independent scientists have their own role to play. They can enhance existing academic and interdisciplinary knowledge on system transformations but must also bridge the gap between theory and the practical world of policymakers. As said, this does not yet happen enough. Likewise, more involvement by and with the private sector is needed. Still, a true and trustworthy evaluation of private contributions to sustainable development transformation is largely lacking, which results in unclarity and accusations of corporate greenwashing. Business must be more directly and more transparently involved in the current transformative policy process. In addition, Europe faces a sustainable development financing gap, which means that public funding must be increased and be complemented by private funding. Heightening the inclusion of civil society is every bit as important. Some argue for proper civil society organisations to be embedded in government frameworks like the EU structure. In a general sense, multi-stakeholder partnerships and collective bargaining, with established and new stakeholders, are critical. For innovations to move beyond emergence, all people depending on the old system must be protected. This already happens in a great deal of polities. In Germany, for example, the speedy phase out of unsustainable lignite mining is compensated by financing and other support at the level of vulnerable regions. This can be a model for the rest of Europe. Sustainable transitions must *Leave No One Behind* and be just, allowing all parts of society to embark in transformative policies, in line with the 2030 Agenda.[49]

The fourth, final, and most important advice for enhancing the inclusivity of transformative policies for sustainable development in Europe is daring to gaze over its borders. In part, this means national borders, as ESDN countries in Southern and Eastern Europe are often confronted with more obstacles when seeking transformative change. Powerful ESDN countries have the responsibility to provide adequate incentives to others wanting to pursue the achievement of the SDGs. The same is true for Europe's collective attitude towards other regions. Europe is a prominent region and must act on its prominence, not only through development cooperation, but also through mutually transformative cooperation partnerships. Only then can true transformation be achieved.[50]

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[48] (Mulholland, 2023, p. 16; *Global Sustainable Development Report 2023*, 2023, pp. 78-80)

[49] (Biermann, Hickmann, Sénit, Beisheim, et al., 2022, p. 797; Brunori, 2023, pp. 106-110; Coderoni, 2023, p. 96; Ewing & Didry, 2023, p. 137; *Global Sustainable Development Report 2023*, 2023, pp. 32, 73 and 84-85; *Transformatieve Overheid*, 2023, p. 35; Widerberg et al., 2023, p. 169)

[50] (Arias-Arévalo et al., 2023, p. 6; Lafortune et al., 2024, p. 7)

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