ESDN Policy Note

Halfway to 2030 – How Europe moves forward with the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs

Introduction

The focus of this Policy Note is on the halfway point to achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The world has 7 more years to make good on the 2030 Agenda. Given that the Covid-19 crisis and several other crises that have plagued the world, it is no secret that no country is on track to reach the SDGs. Much of the progress that had been made towards reaching the SDGs up to 2020 has not accelerated at the necessary rate to see any country achieve the SDGs by 2030. Therefore, the ESDN addressed this topic as a clear call that efforts need to be redoubled and actions need to be bolder on sustainable development if the 2030 Agenda is to be realized in time.

This Policy Note draws from keynote presentations and the results from participant interactions from two ESDN events that took part in the run-up and during the United Nations High-Level Political Forum (HLPF). The first event was the ESDN Conference, which took place on 15-16 March 2023 on the topic of "Halfway to 2030 – Where does Europe stand and how does it move forward?". The Conference brought together over 100 participants made up mainly of sustainable development policymakers, experts, youth, and civil society representatives from 23 European countries.

The second event was the ESDN Side-Event at the HLPF on 10 July 2023 in New York City. The ESDN, in keeping with the spirit of the halfway point to 2030 decided to evaluate the progress the Network had made on one of its hallmark exchange formats that was first introduced in 2016, namely the ESDN Peer Learning Platforms and Visits. The Peer Learning events bring together national level civil servants from European countries to exchange with one another on pressing policy issues in sustainable development. The ESDN wanted to see how far it

had come and what it could recommend to others looking to establish peer learning events. Given that peer learning is a very strong contributor to SDG 17: Partnerships for the Goals, it was an excellent point in time to see how the ESDN can continue to be a force that helps, and accelerates, the uptake of the SDGs in Europe. The ESDN Side-Event at HLPF 2023 had over 50 participants from many countries, both inside and outside of Europe, and drew on keynote presentations from ESDN representatives and other organizations that have worked with peer learning.

The European Sustainable Development Network (ESDN) is a non-profit, pan-European peer-learning, networking, knowledge, and advocacy platform for sustainability professionals in the public sector working in collaboration with other organisations and institutions dealing with sustainable development issues. It is based on the transparent and trustful cooperation of these actors. It collects, compiles and shares information on sustainability policies, strategies, and practises, and provides expertise to political decision-makers at European, national, and sub-national levels. The ESDN also fosters sustainable development through active communication and continued cooperation with other stakeholders and civil society.

The recommendations from the Conference and HLPF Side-Event are listed below.

Recommendations for moving the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs forward

1) **Concrete actions needed to accelerate progress on the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs**

The first Global Sustainable Development Report (GSDR) was published in 2019 and made calls to action to accelerate progress towards reaching the SDGs along six levers of transformation. The second edition of the GSDR, published in September 2023 in time for the SDG Summit in New York, was also discussed at the ESDN Conference, where there were more concrete calls to action that built on the 2019 Report.

- Establish an **SDG transformation framework** in the form of national plans, with global commitments and non-state actor partnerships that should include the provision of finances and integration into state budgets.
- Design **clear and effective policies** that are **based on science**. This calls for a more comprehensive and active science-policy interface. This should also include **close cooperation with science** and **investments in evaluation research and knowledge sharing**.
- **Build and enhance capacities for transformation on all levels and for all stakeholders**, such as government official trainings, foresight studies, public engagement, and scientific expertise.
- **Improve critical and underlying conditions for SDG implementation**: this comprises schemes for conflict resolution and consensus-oriented approaches, ensuring fiscal space to make room in a government´s budget to provide resources for SDG implementation and a focus on marginalized groups in society to establish a more inclusive policy approach.

2) Foster whole-of-society approaches in addressing the SDGs

Halfway to 2030 has made it clear that governments alone cannot bear the sole responsibility for reaching the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. Being able to reach the SDGs requires all societal stakeholders to be involved, from the local to the global level. This was brought up in many discussions during the ESDN Conference, including a keynote presentation by a representative of Åland Islands in Finland (see text box).

- **Address global challenges locally** by taking a local, bottom-up approach to tap into local potential and knowledge.

- **Involve local communities** in the decision-making process to **build trust and social capital** to affect change.
- **Communicate clearly and practically the results and progress on sustainable development** to the public, the government, partners, nationally, and internationally.
- **Strengthen stakeholder engagement**, especially with the business sector, local governments, labor unions, and civil society.
- **Use stakeholders as multipliers** and provide them with an **active role** in communicating and raising awareness about the SDGs among the general public.
- **Increase the innovation capacity of the public sector** to support experimentation and explore innovative solutions to solve main SDG challenges, as well as make it a part of the policy process.
- **Strengthen international cooperation** on sustainable development and foster partnerships.

Åland Islands - Sustainability and development agenda

Åland's sustainability and development agenda was formed through participatory and deliberative processes. Hundreds of citizens and organisations took part in creating the vision for Åland "everyone can flourish in a viable society on the islands of peace".

The vision is a concrete example of a worldview different from the current paradigm. It is accompanied by seven goals to be fulfilled by 2030, giving the vision a tangible dimension.

Each of these seven goals is accompanied by a roadmap, outlining concrete actions. These roadmaps are continuously implemented, reviewed and annually updated, not only by public authorities but by involving civil society and business in a structured way.

3) Apply Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development (PCSD)

When it comes to implementing the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, policy coherence for sustainable development still plays a vital role in helping to

ensure and safeguard progress towards achieving them by 2030. Given that no country is on track, more focus should be placed on policy coherence, so that the SDGs are targeted in the most efficient and effective way possible and make use of positive synergies between SDGs, while at the same time mitigating and reducing the negative spillover effects between the goals. Focusing on policy coherence is a way to better identify those positive and negative trade-offs. As a very positive example, Italy, which has an action plan on PCSD, showcases how PCSD can enter into the policy cycle along many points. The text box showcases this example. Learning from Italy and the discussions during the ESDN Conference show that taking PCSD into account can provide the following benefits:

- **Better knowledge on the interlinkages between SDG goals** and targets is critical. These interlinkages should be clarified and better explained, also by using examples of practical achievements and success stories to show what has been achieved.
- **Focus on interactions between Goals** that help to prioritize actions with **larger synergetic impact**. Showcasing these interactions and synergies with concrete examples will be key to foster progress.
- Create more space for **policy dialogue and learning** between different stakeholder groups to learn from each other and to inform about positive changes and progress.
- Proof for **effective investments** in areas with larger synergetic effects and impacts could trigger positive feedback loops, which ensure more investment are made in the future.

Italy – PCSD entry points along the policy cycle

Italy has developed, through a two-year participative process and with the support of the OECD and the European Commission, the National Action Plan for Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development (NAP) of 2022. The fundamental role that governance plays in the implementation of the interconnected goals of the 2030 Agenda is thoroughly explored in the Plan and operationalised through concrete actions, results, and time-bound targets. The NAP sets out an incremental path to mainstream sustainability as the standard for all decisions, systematically considering the trade-offs with other sectors, the priorities for future generations and for other countries, in particular developing ones. Two elements have characterised its formulation: (1) horizontal, vertical and multi-actor participation and (2), the identification of tools (such as the coherence matrixes, policy fiches and dashboard) to inter-operationalise existing policies and evaluation frameworks, such as the one associated to the Recovery and Resilience Fund, with the objectives of the NSDS, to facilitate policy integration and data comparability across sectors.

[1] Italy's National Action Plan for Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development. P.8.

4) Establish effective peer learning mechanisms and exchange

The ESDN has a rich history of experiences made over the last 20 years of international cooperation among government officials working on sustainable development issues. Peer Learning has always been the backbone of the ESDN and is one of the reasons it developed its Peer Learning Platforms and Visits back in 2016: this is one of the concrete ways the ESDN can continue to push for transformational change in Europe. At the halfway point, the importance of cooperation and learning from one another cannot be stressed enough and is why this was chosen as the topic of the ESDN's Side-Event at

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[1] OECD (2022), Italy's National Action Plan for Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/54226722-en.

the HLPF 2023. From the ESDN's experience, and the experience of other organizations, important ingredients were identified regarding how to establish effective peer learning mechanisms and initiatives.

- **Establish an informal atmosphere**, as this is key in building up trust between members so that honest conversations and discussions can take place. This also helps in bridging silos.
- **Provide a platform for people to exchange** is vitally important in bringing actors together. This is most prominently felt by ESDN Youth representatives, who witness oftentimes not enough such platforms for peer exchange, but peer exchange is certainly also key for all stakeholder groups.
- **Ensure** that peer learning initiatives provide participants with **context-specific examples** over many different topics that are relevant for the implementation of the SDGs.
- **Resist the urge to show off**: failures, challenges, and struggles are also important factors for successful peer learning exchanges. Sharing what works well and not so well are both valuable and foster enhanced trust. This means that providing a safe space for stakeholder exchange is crucial as is respecting sensitive information and applying Chatham House rules when appropriate.
- **Invest in a strong secretariat** behind the organization, as peer learning activities can only happen if the institutions organizing them have strong secretariats working behind the scenes to bring actors together, provide them with information and examples, and organize the physical space to exchange.