

ESDN Policy Note

Building Transformative Policies for SDG Implementation

Introduction

The need for transformations to achieve sustainable development is a fundamental part of the UN's 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Having passed the halfway point of implementing the 2030 Agenda, **progress towards achieving the SDGs is still too slow and transformations have not been fully realized in practice.** The recent polycrisis (e.g. climate change, armed conflicts, energy crisis, high living costs, etc.) has slowed progress in SDG implementation even further, frequently leading towards stagnation or even regression. The Europe Sustainable Development Report 2023/24 estimates that “the EU has achieved or is on track to achieve a little over two-thirds of the SDG target” and detects that “SDG progress in Europe has stalled since 2020”. Therefore, the Report concludes that “overall progress is too slow to achieve all of the SDGs by 2030”.

The **annual Conference of the [European Sustainable Development Network \(ESDN\)](#), held in Brussels on 5-6 June 2024**, brought together 150 participants from all over Europe to reflect upon the transformative policies needed to more effectively reach the SDGs, and learn from good practice cases at the policy and stakeholder level. Transformative policies should enable a change of dominant systems, tackle root causes of current shortcomings, and create new values.



The event was organized by the ESDN in cooperation with the [Belgian Federal Institute for Sustainable Development](#) and the [European Economic and Social Committee \(EESC\)](#). The Conference was also an official event of Belgium's EU Council Presidency in the first half of 2024.

The **following 8 recommendations** are based on the presentations, discussions, and interactive exchanges of the conference participants. Taking actions in all of them will enable actual transformations:

- 1) Coordinate better to develop integrated strategies and more policy coherence at the EU and national level
- 2) Involve the sub-national level and their actions more effectively
- 3) Increase capacity-building measures for public administrators
- 4) Enhance civil society and stakeholder involvement
- 5) Foster stronger partnerships between policymakers and societal stakeholders
- 6) Tackle socio-economic challenges and foster a new economic model
- 7) Include sustainable development in education
- 8) Curb negative international spillover effects

“A middle of the road pathway will not take us to achieving the SDGs by 2030, or even by 2050.”

Åsa Persson, Stockholm Environment Institute & Member of the Independent Group of Scientists for the Global Sustainable Development Report 2023

Recommendations for Building Transformative Policies for SDG Implementation

1) Coordinate better to develop integrated strategies and more policy coherence at the EU and national level

The successful and effective coordination of different sectoral policy objectives with the SDGs is arguably one of the most vital aspects of achieving transformation in government policy practice.

- Develop effective inter-governmental mechanisms for better coordination of sectoral policies to streamline efforts for SDG implementation. For instance, by creating teams or working groups across government ministries to bridge the usual silos in policymaking.
- Establish comprehensive policy coherence programs (e.g. PCSD) for policy and strategy design. This should include mechanisms to enable the assessment of likely impacts of strategies and policies on reaching the SDGs.
- Engage ministers in efforts towards coordination and policy coherence, including through reporting (e.g. Voluntary National Reviews). This will foster integrative thinking and political commitment for SDG implementation.
- Draft Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) regularly with the involvement of all government ministries as a stock-taking of SDG implementation and assess how successful coordination and policy coherence have been achieved.
- Align national budgets with the SDGs and their related targets to provide guidance for budget spending on reaching 2030 Agenda targets.
- Promote a comprehensive SDG strategy and enhance governance and PCSD also at the EU level.

Transformation Teams in Germany

Germany established Transformation Teams at the national level to strengthen inter-governmental cooperation and systemic approaches, accelerate transformation, and streamline the coordination processes for the German SD Strategy.

Transformation teams were set up in the form of time-limited, cross-departmental project groups with specific competencies and tasks. Major learnings were that transparency and exchange between ministries and departments increased which led to more effective policy management, and that personal ties between the responsible persons in the different ministries were established or strengthened.

2) Involve the sub-national level and their actions more effectively

The sub-national level is a key policy level for reaching the SDGs. Not only are sub-national entities responsible for implementing many SDGs and related targets, but it is also the level closest to the lives of citizens and stakeholders.

- Develop a stronger coordination between the national and sub-national level in SDG implementation (“vertical integration”) next to the coordination between ministries at specific policy level (“horizontal integration”).
- Achieve multi-level coherence by localizing the SDGs in the form of SD strategies and action plans at the sub-national level: Governance mechanisms should promote collaboration, joint solutions, and raise awareness.
- Connect the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs to local policies that already exist and make these links and achievements more visible. This should avoid that SDG implementation is only regarded as extra workload at the sub-national level.
- Prepare Voluntary Sub-National Reviews (VSRs) or Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) as a way to review how strong local policy

planning is aligned with the 2030 Agenda and which achievements have been made at the local level.

- Create an online information and knowledge hub on sub-national SDG implementation activities and their impacts. This will raise awareness and create motivation to act at the sub-national level.

Nordic Voluntary Sub-National Review

The Nordic countries developed the Nordic Voluntary Sub-National Review (VSR) 2024 which is the first ever common, multi-country, sub-national review based on interviews and surveys in Nordic municipalities to show the status of SDG localization and integration. The VSR was launched at the HLFP in July 2024. An important element of the Nordic VSR is the interactive [Nordic Toolbox](#), an online map of Nordic municipalities showcasing transferable methods and initiatives for implementing the SDGs.

3) Increase capacity-building measures for public administrators

The inter-related nature of SDG implementation poses additional challenges which require new skills as well as an understanding of implementing complex and cross-sectoral policies by public administrators.

- Create specific in-person training courses for public administrators on the SDGs, their challenges, and how to achieve an integrated and coordinated policy approach for transformative policies.
- Explain and showcase to public administrators how to integrate sustainable development into their policy fields.
- Enable feedback of public administrators involved in SDG implementation in order to learn about their challenges, needs, and potential solutions when designing and updating training courses.
- Convince politicians of importance to create positions with sustainable

development competences in the organizational chart of each ministry to assist in the respective ministry's efforts on SDG implementation.

Up-skilling public administrators in Romania

Romania has been putting many efforts into upskilling public sector staff members to become sustainability experts and foster transformative policies. The Department for Sustainable Development, located at the center of the Romanian Government, has taken a leading role in coordinating SDG implementation and operationalizing the institutional framework for a whole-of-government approach for PCSD. This comprises the training of public administrators on SD and related policy needs.

4) Enhance civil society and stakeholder involvement

Participation and stakeholder involvement are a key component of sustainability governance and the 2030 Agenda. Of particular importance in the context of SD and its strong reference to future generations is the involvement of youth.

- Ensure stakeholder's structured engagement in the implementation of the SDGs. Advancing permanent mechanisms for is extremely relevant to strengthen partnerships and design joint policies.
- Establish supportive infrastructure, information material, and awareness raising for civil society involvement as key parts of the policy process.
- Develop mechanisms to involve youth in a structured and permanent manner in SDG-related policy processes.
- Further develop the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) to use its full potential for an active citizen and civil society involvement for the future of sustainable development.
- Ensure responsiveness by political institutions and appropriate follow-up measures of stakeholder involvement.

ESDN Youth Network

The ESDN has established an [ESDN Youth Network](#) which enables young people to play an active part in the network, share their concerns, contribute their knowledge and viewpoints, and participate in ESDN events with presentations. In addition, the ESDN organizes an annual ESDN Youth Workshop which aims to bring together youth representatives with sustainability policymakers to share experiences and discuss important sustainability and SDG related issues.

EU Youth Test

In September 2022, the EESC adopted the opinion "[The EU Youth Test](#)", a tool designed to strengthen youth participation and youth mainstreaming in policy-making based on consultation, impact assessment and mitigation measures, becoming the first EU institution committing to its implementation. In April 2024, the EESC Bureau approved a methodology drafted by the [EESC Youth Group](#) for applying the EU Youth Test at the EESC. The EU Youth Test methodology foresees youth representatives engaging with EESC members during the drafting of selected EESC opinions.

5) Foster stronger partnerships between policymakers & societal stakeholders

The collaboration by policy with societal stakeholders is a key ingredient for transformation. Pooling knowledge, expertise, and capacities is a lever for strong and effective activities to reach the SDGs, especially in areas where societal stakeholders are most affected or can contribute their practical experiences.

- Establish policy-stakeholder exchange and co-creation bodies to enable a structured

exchange, advise on future developments, and design joint policies, programs, and projects.

- Involve government and politicians in the partnership as equal partners.
- Co-create SDG implementation processes and strategies together with stakeholders by using their knowledge and experiences.
- Use good practice cases of policy-stakeholder partnerships to learn, get inspired and motivate stakeholders to actively participate.

Just Transition Process in Belgium

The Belgian [Just Transition process](#) was strengthened by the Federal Government Minister for Sustainable Development who launched the 'General Estates for a Just Transition' in 2022, comprised of four working groups, including a High Committee of 24 scientists, a Civil Society Forum, a Citizens' Agora, and the federal administrations. All four formulated opinions and recommendations on how to make the transition towards sustainability fairer and socially just. This led to the Conference for a Just Transition in Belgium in November 2023.

Catalonia 2030 Alliance

The Catalonia 2030 Alliance was established by a mandate from the Catalan Parliament to the Government to foster progress towards the SDGs. The Alliance has over 80 members representing all kinds of governmental and societal stakeholders. It is not only a space for knowledge exchange, dialogue, sharing of good practices, and the promotion of joint projects, it also creates opportunities for transformative action, making organizations leave their comfort zones and specialization areas and to improve public policies with shared solutions.

6) Tackle socio-economic challenges and foster a new economic model

Europe increasingly faces socio-economic challenges since the polycrisis, which call for addressing systemic inequalities in society more comprehensively. This would entail including the social dimension in the Green Deal.

- Foster a new economic model beyond growth and competitiveness at all costs and which is in line with the planetary boundaries.
- Build a new economic paradigm towards a “sustainable economy”, with the wellbeing of people and planet at its centre.
- Foster cooperation rather than competition, rewarding higher sustainability standards.
- Account for social and environmental risks in financial and economic decision-making.
- Design social policies which ensure poverty eradication and quality jobs for all.

EESC opinion on a European Green and Social Deal

The EESC is currently working on an own-initiative opinion called [“A Blueprint for a European Green and Social Deal, based on a wellbeing economy”](#) providing recommendations for a new framework of prosperity. This opinion will build on previous work including sustainable economy, beyond GDP measures, and further strengthening the implementation of the SDGs.

7) Include sustainable development in education

Education for sustainable development is key for the future, especially in terms of knowledge transfer, capacity-building, and systemic change.

- Adapt national skills and education strategies to mainstream learning for sustainable development. This includes linking different subjects on the topic, developing assessment methods, and creating structured and iterative processes for the mainstreaming (instead a one-off Green Weeks, Green Days, etc.).

- Increased collaboration across all sectors of learning, especially among non-formal, informal, and formal learning.
- Creating a continuum of learning (lifelong learning approach) on sustainability and SDGs within educational institutions and across different ages and environments of learning.
- Make civil society a key partner in monitoring education policy implementation. Civil society organisations represent a variety of education and training, and reach areas of society which are considered difficult for public authorities.

Lifelong Learning Platform

The [Lifelong Learning Platform](#) is an umbrella organization of more than 40 European organizations active in the field of education, training and youth. They were active contributors to the development of the [GreenComp - sustainability competence framework](#), and took part in shaping the [Education for Climate coalition](#). The Lifelong Learning Platform also collaborated with the EESC in the Opinion [“Empowering youth to achieve sustainable development through education”](#), which calls on the EU Member States to include climate action and SD as core components in the educational curriculum.

8) Curb negative international spillover effects

It is important for Europe to curb negative international spillover effects of its activities and establish new relations, especially with the Global South.

- Monitor spillover effects by collecting better data, including a strong collaboration with national statistical offices to develop relevant measurements and indicators.
- Integrate spillover effects into strategic impact assessments when evaluating

policies and use results to make better policy decisions.

- Develop systems to internalize externalities, ranging from fair prices and taxation of externalities, integrating sustainability aspects more effectively in trade agreements, to calculating spillover and transboundary effects into budgets.
- Reform the governance of the international financial architecture, including the debt restructuring and debt relief.
- Develop a more transparent and democratic relationship with the Global South, also involving the private sector of the Global South to improve the current situation.
- Build on positive spillover effects that countries can have on one another, such as through financial and technical assistance, knowledge exchange, support for capacity-building measures, etc.

Spillover effects addressed by European countries in documents and indicators

Spillover effects are increasingly embraced by European countries to acknowledge, measure and address the impacts of their activities on other countries and parts of the world. For instance, several countries included spillover effects and policy measures to address them in their Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs), e.g. Austria (2024), Belgium (2023), or their assessment of 2030 Agenda implementation reports, e.g. Finland (2023).

Switzerland measures spillover effects in the context of their sustainable development monitoring system MONET. [MONETglobo](#), a set of 14 indicators to measure spillovers, was integrated into MONET.

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.