

# ESDN Policy Note

## The Integrative and Framing Power of the SDGs – Keeping Sustainable Development Relevant in Europe

### Introduction

Peer Learning Platforms are a special event format that the [European Sustainable Development Network \(ESDN\)](#) has created to enable sustainable development policymakers and other expert stakeholders to exchange in-depth on current developments, activities and challenges within sustainability policymaking in an informal setting that is based on the Chatham House rules.

The **10<sup>th</sup> ESDN Peer Learning Platform** was held in Brussels on 23 April 2025. It was organized by the ESDN in close cooperation with the [Kingdom of the Netherlands](#) and the [Austrian Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, Climate and Environmental Protection, Regions and Water Management](#). More than **50 participants from 18 European countries as well as European and international institutions** discussed and elaborated on the topic of the event, “**Integrative and Framing Power of the SDGs – Keeping Sustainable Development Relevant in Europe**”. With only 5 years remaining to implement the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the ESDN aims to support **keeping the SDGs high on the policy agenda and to continue pushing for sustainable development in Europe**.



To achieve this, the following **recommendations** were made by the Peer Learning Platform participants, based on the keynote presentations, interactive exchange formats, and discussions:

- 1) **Develop integrated governance and policy approaches for SDG implementation**
- 2) **Establish an active role of the sub-national level**
- 3) **Increase stakeholder engagement and communication**
- 4) **Engage in post-2030 Agenda framing early and proactively**

### Current developments and their impact on SDG implementation in Europe

We are currently in a **time of far-reaching changes that also impact sustainable development and the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs in Europe**. These changes range from increased geopolitical challenges, the amendment of long-standing economic policy frameworks by the Trump administration in the US (bringing with it trade fragmentation, rising tariffs, and policy uncertainty), and the new strategic framework of the European Commission (EC) for its mandate until 2029, the “[Competitiveness Compass for the EU](#)”, which includes a stronger focus on competitiveness, innovation, security, and decarbonization.

For the EC, sustainability and the main objectives included in the [European Green Deal](#), especially for Europe to become the first climate-neutral continent worldwide by 2050, remain intact. In this context, **efforts to further increase policy coherence** (i.e. mainstreaming sustainable development and the SDGs into sectoral policies and regulations), establishing a **stronger link between competitiveness and sustainability** (“sustainable competitiveness”), and **continuing to monitor SDG indicators to check on implementation success** are key elements. In a [recently published report](#) from early 2025, the EC's Joint Research Center (JRC) scanned 127 policy documents related to the Green Deal and identified a strong connection between the Green Deal's priorities and most

of the SDGs. At the Peer Learning Platform, a representative of the JRC argued that the **Green Deal has become a catalyst for achieving the SDGs**, and that the **SDGs have become a key tool to deliver the EU's green transition objectives at the national and sub-national level**. The sub-national level is particularly important for the Green Deal and SDG implementation success, as approx. 70% of targets are to be implemented at the sub-national level. However, **trade-offs between sustainability goals need to be acknowledged and properly managed**.

Stakeholder representatives not only referred to **the importance of the 2030 Agenda but also depicted several challenges that need to be addressed more thoroughly and effectively**. The overall importance of the 2030 Agenda and SDGs lies in their basic thrust of an overarching policy framework and need for integrative policymaking, the interconnectedness of policy goals, and the requirement of long-term policy planning. The reality of policymaking, however, falls short of delivering on these aspects in their entirety: Especially the **challenge to address short-term policy challenges whilst holding up to long-term strategic policy goals** proves difficult and is currently unbalanced. This imbalance also **impacts delivering clear guidelines and long-term planning horizons for stakeholders**, possibly jeopardizing their trust in policymaking.



Taking on an international perspective, the UN's [Sustainable Development Goals Report 2024](#) shows the **overall unsatisfactory implementation of the 2030 Agenda**: only 17% of SDG targets are on track, 48% showing minimal/moderate progress, and 35% are stalling or even regressing. The OECD countries are doing slightly better by having achieved or are close to achieving 34% of the 114 SDG targets that can be measured, as shown by the

[OECD Hub on Sustainable Development Goals](#). And even though the Top 20 of the [SDG Index 2025](#) is nearly entirely made up of European countries, the **achievements are uneven across Europe and many dimensions of sustainable development have not shown significant progress** since 2015, and even more so since 2020.

Ultimately, it is **very unlikely to deliver all 2030 Agenda objectives** within the remaining time. This is particularly frustrating for the younger generation, as has been pointed out by members of the ESDN Youth Network. They demand being included in co-creating the future. Overall, **setting up a well-defined path for developing the post-2030 Agenda period will be crucial**.

### **Recommendations to foster sustainable development and SDG implementation in turbulent times**

The Peer Learning Platform participants made the following **four recommendations** to address current developments and challenges in the context of sustainable development and SDG implementation outlined above:

#### **1) Develop integrated governance and policy approaches for SDG implementation**

- **Enhance integrated governance approaches to accelerate SDG implementation progress.** This will require a wide array of integrated policy measures, regulatory tools, and public finance instruments to accelerate SDG progress, curb climate emissions, etc.
- **Develop more comprehensive and effective mechanisms for policy coherence.** The collaboration and exchange among government line ministries needs to be extended with policy coherence for sustainable development as a major governance approach. Policy responses to current and future policy challenges (e.g. demographic and migration, cost of living problem, safety and security issues) will require increased convergence and coherence to be effective and successful.

### OECD: Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development (PCSD)

For several years, the OECD supports policy coherence for sustainable development in various ways. The focus is primarily on four pillars: (1) Institutional capacity and skills; (2) country practices and support; (3) analysis and data; and (4) partnerships and peer learning. The OECD's approach is characterized by the following aspect: For sustainable development to be achieved, governments must enhance their capacity to design, implement, and monitor coherent and integrated policies. More information, reports, and best practices can be found on a the [OECD website dedicated to PCSD](#).

- **Establish strong institutional frameworks and arrangements** that foster exchange, coordination, consensus-building, and monitoring of sustainable development and SDG implementation. They should ensure focus and dedication on important sustainability issues in turbulent and uncertain times. Regular reporting mechanisms keep the momentum and ensure being held accountable to the parliament and citizens.

### Finland – Institutionalizing SDGs within government

Finland has developed a “whole-of-government” approach for the SDGs. The Finnish 2030 Agenda implementation process is coordinated by the Prime Minister's Office in close cooperation with all government line ministries. As part of this process, the Finnish Government regularly reports to Parliament on its 2030 Agenda implementation. When it comes to legislation, line ministries are responsible for the preparation, including impact assessments. Efforts to coordinate these processes are important, but need to address pressures related to time and resources.

- **Find a good balance between addressing short-term needs and long-term strategic objectives.** Long-term planning is key for sustainable development and many SDG implementation processes. However, addressing short-term needs will not only be necessary, but will show the positive effects of sustainable development measures and that sustainability does make a difference in practice.
- **Increase efforts for capacity-building for public administrators to deal with complex policy challenges in turbulent and uncertain times.** Addressing these challenges will require new and more comprehensive administrative capacities. Therefore, the demand for skilled public administrators, who can handle complexities, will increase.
- **Create sustainable investment mechanisms and effective sustainable development budgeting approaches.** Investing in the sustainable and green transition will require significant budget provisions and financial efforts. However, long-term and sustainable investment decisions will prevent future cost shocks and improve overall resilience. Therefore, prioritizing investments with high impacts and multiplier effects on sustainable development will be critical in the future. In this context, SDG budgeting will require long-term budget planning by moving away from silo budgeting of individual ministries to using SDGs as guideline for effective and efficient use of public finances. This should include clearly defined budget cycles and SDG tagging for budget items or programs.

### 2) Establish an active role of the sub-national level

- **Increase the role of the sub-national level in SDG implementation.** Many SDGs are implemented at the sub-national level, which means that this policy level is crucial for the success of the 2030 Agenda. This should be acknowledged, and coordination mechanisms between the national and sub-national levels should be fostered.
- **Provide support and knowledge platforms for the sub-national level for their SDG implementation efforts.** It will be key to

further support the sub-national level in various forms, especially in terms of knowledge exchange and best practice learning. This could comprise issues like SDG budgeting, the development of Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs), local and municipal best practice exchange tools for joint learning, etc.

#### Switzerland – 2030 Agenda Toolbox for Cantons & Communes

The 2030 Agenda Toolbox was designed by the Swiss Government in cooperation with experts from the sub-national level and aims to support the 2030 Agenda implementation process. The Toolbox includes numerous measures and practical good examples of what has been already implemented. In addition, proven management tools to strengthen sustainability at the sub-national level are presented. The [Toolbox](#) is currently available in German, French and Italian.

#### Association of Netherlands Municipalities (VNG) – Municipalities4GlobalGoals

This initiative aims to support the sub-national level in their SDG implementation efforts. One major objective is to support the inclusion of the SDGs in local policy and budget planning. The VNG [website](#) offers guidelines, tools, and best practice examples. Regarding SDG budget planning, the following key benefits have been identified: (a) It aligns spending with national and global priorities; (b) it offers better resource management; (c) it creates stronger accountability and transparency; and (d) it enables access to international funding.

- **Increase civil preparedness and resilient at the sub-nation level for issues related to the SDGs and security/safety.** The current policy landscape of risks and insecurity requires increased preparedness of citizens and the sub-national level to

meet these challenges. This comprises crisis management to balance competing priorities and conflicting interests, secure access to essential needs, and strong coordination mechanisms.

#### Nordregio – Civil preparedness in the Nordic Region

Nordregio conducted an [analysis](#) of how regional policy can contribute to enhance civil preparedness. It focuses on maintaining a functioning society and ensuring access to essential needs for regional sustainability and competitiveness. Important elements to consider are: (1) Structured collaboration between national authorities, regions, municipalities, businesses, and civil society; (2) strengthen national-level support by clear guidelines and expectations; (3) integrate civil preparedness into regional development issues, e.g. decentralized renewable energy systems, climate adaptation and risk scenarios. A [story map](#) shows good practice examples.

### 3) Increase stakeholder engagement and communication

- **Collaborate with different stakeholders and include them in the sustainable development and SDG implementation process.** This can take various forms, e.g. in institutionalized settings like national sustainable development commissions with strong stakeholder participation. It is key to utilizing the expertise, knowledge and commitment of societal stakeholders. On the other side, policy needs to provide clear guidelines and long-term planning horizons for stakeholders.



### Finland – National Commission for Sustainable Development

The [Finnish National Commission for Sustainable Development](#) brings together national ministries with actors from municipalities and regions, business and the economy, different societal organizations, research and innovation, culture and media, and religious communities. The Commission promotes cooperation to achieve the SDGs and strives to integrate the strategic objectives of sustainable development into national policies, the administration, and social practices. In addition, a dedicated 2030 Agenda youth group has been working with the Commission since 2017, and since 2024, a youth representative acts as a vice-chair of the Commission.

### The Netherlands – Annual SDG Report with stakeholder contribution

Since the adoption of the SDGs in 2015, the Netherlands publishes a yearly report on the national progress and implementation of the 2030 Agenda. It is crucial for the Dutch Government that efforts towards SDG implementation are shared by different societal actors. For this reason, each chapter of the Annual SDG Report is written by a different stakeholder representative and specifies best practices, challenges or even bottlenecks for the SDGs in their respective field. The Report is then presented to the Parliament.

- **Offer support tools for stakeholders which showcase the benefits and practical experiences** with sustainable development and SDG implementation efforts and successes.

### Switzerland – 2030 Agenda Toolbox for Businesses

Like the 2030 Agenda Toolbox for cantons and communes, the Toolbox for businesses is a support tool for SDG related issues and practical examples. It offers motivation, support, and guidance for companies on their path to more sustainability. The Toolbox presents industry-specific sustainability goals and appropriate measures for achieving them. It also includes practical examples from companies that have already embarked on a path to greater sustainability. In addition, an overview of the most important tools, standards, and support and funding opportunities is provided. The [Toolbox](#) is currently available in German, French and Italian.

- **Include youth representatives in SD policymaking and SDG implementation more comprehensively.** The voice of young citizens should be proactively included, their energy is needed, and their perspectives are important for addressing future policy objectives and challenges.

### ESDN Youth Network

For several years, the [ESDN Youth Network](#) offers the opportunity for young people from all across Europe to network, gain access to practitioners and decision-makers from the ESDN member countries, be active participants in the ESDN events, and participate in workshops and lectures on relevant topics.

- **Increase communication and connect SDGs more actively to citizens.** It is key to reach out with positive stories, create a sustainable development and SDGs narrative that is linked to citizens' lives and experiences, and showcase good practice examples. Important aspects for successful communication and narrative-building for the SDGs are: (i) proximity, i.e. physical and

timewise, also showing short-term goals and successes; (ii) personalization, i.e. concrete examples and stories as well as personal experiences; and (iii) positivity, i.e. good practices and opportunities to showcase what is possible.

#### 4) Engage in post-2030 Agenda framing early and proactively

- **Start discussing and framing the post-2030 Agenda by reflecting on the lessons learned.** The SDG Summit in 2027 will focus on the post-2030 world, and Europe should play a leading and proactive role.
- **Foster the cooperation of all UN member countries to jointly work on solving challenges and achieve positive change.** This collaboration should surpass any disagreements and individual interests on certain SDGs.
- **Encourage more Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) by sub-national entities.** [VLRs](#) are a process in which sub-national governments review their progress in implementing the 2030 Agenda and SDGs. Since 2015, about 250 VLRs have been drafted worldwide. The VLR process provides multiple benefits to the sub-national entities (e.g. performance baselines, guidance for strategic planning). VLRs can also help to reinforce vertical coherence and complement Voluntary National Review (VNRs).

### Conclusion

The current times of rapidly changing policy conditions and complex global challenges require a **strong and integrated sustainability framework** which can **adapt to new circumstances** and include **measures for increased policy coherence**. The 2030 Agenda and SDGs provide a clear and long-term basis, but **implementation will require additional efforts**, coupled with a **proactive discussion on the post-2030 Agenda**. Within the European Union, the European Commission's new

strategic framework, "Competitiveness Compass", puts sustainable development in a closer context with economic competitiveness, innovation, and security issues for which **positive measures are needed that contribute to sustainability goals in the short- and long-term**. Overall, the **objective of the EU to reach climate neutrality by 2050** remains an important guideline for active policymaking. For all implementation efforts at the government level, **close cooperation and inclusion of the sub-national level and with stakeholders is a crucial precondition for success**.

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.