

Not fit for purpose: SDG monitoring report fails to illustrate how far the EU is from a sustainable future

Five questions commentary on Eurostat report “Sustainable Development in the European Union – Monitoring report on progress towards the SDGs in an EU context”

20 November 2017

1. Summary

SDG Watch Europe criticises today’s [Eurostat Report on Sustainable Development in the EU](#) for failing to adequately illustrate progress and failure in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) across the Union. The report does not address the Agenda 2030’s comprehensive, transformative and universal nature and paints a misleading picture of the EU’s performance on the SDGs:

- The report falls short of addressing all dimensions of sustainable development and focuses on measuring existing solutions rather than capturing what is needed to make the 2030 agenda a reality.
- Key societal, environmental, economic and technological trends are subordinated to the Commission’s current priorities through the choice of indicator and the report paints a skewed picture of the EU’s performance. A striking example: SDG 12 on sustainable consumption and production (SCP) receives one of the highest levels of progress while assessments from the [Sustainable Development Solutions Network \(SDSN\)](#) and the [European Environmental Agency \(EEA\)](#) clearly show that SCP is where high-income countries, including the EU, fail.
- The methodology does not allow to show how far and how fast we need to move in order for the EU to reach the SDGs by 2030: the report does not take into account the *level* of achievement. Moreover, 1% of change per year already earns a misleading sun symbol even if such slow progress means that the EU will fail to reach the targets by 2030.
- The report does not measure the EU’s impact on sustainable development globally: it is neither able to illustrate whether European efforts in development cooperation are able to reduce poverty and inequality, nor whether the EU is able to reduce its negative impact on the rest of the world due to over-consumption, resource depletion, a large ecological footprint as well as negligence of human rights and exploitation of cheap labour – one of the biggest SDG challenges of the EU.
- The report misses critical data to address the 2030 Agenda principle of leave no one left behind and is weak in measuring how inequalities within the EU are reduced.

SDG Watch Europe demands that:

- the indicator set is revised based on an appropriate and inclusive procedure with adequate civil society contribution;
- the Commission elaborates outlook reports beyond mere monitoring with a broader and qualitative assessment including the participation of civil society and researchers;
- the Commission needs to develop a comprehensive monitoring and assessment system including all dimensions of sustainable development with both the domestic and external dimension;
- the comprehensive assessment should form the base of EU decision making and a real transformation of EU policies and practices.

2. Introduction

Today, 20 November 2017, Eurostat has published its first EU SDG monitoring report [“Sustainable Development in the European Union - Monitoring report on progress towards the SDGs in an EU context”](#). The report is based on a set of indicators adopted in May 2017¹.

The report responds to the European Commission Communication [‘Next steps for a sustainable European future’](#)² commitment to “carry out more detailed regular monitoring of the Sustainable Development Goals in an EU context”, and the [Council of the European Union Conclusions](#)³ demand to “carry out detailed regular monitoring of the SDGs at EU level, including where relevant in the context of the European Semester, and to develop a reference indicator framework for this purpose drawing on **existing indicators** and data provided by the Member States, institutions and international organisations, and accompanied by a **qualitative assessment** of the progress made; and [...] to use this indicator framework to assess progress and trends and to inform evidence-based decision-making; to develop a reference indicator framework, and the need to cover the different dimensions of sustainable development (social, economic, environmental and governance)”.

[SDG Watch Europe](#) welcomes the publication of the report but considers that it falls short **both in terms of what it is measured and of how targets are being measured. Some indicators are even obsolete and are not adapted to current social realities. Relying on existing data only, as the Council Conclusions suggest, is not enough: new challenges and new policies require new data collection.** These shortcomings are also the result of the indicators’ selection process which was rushed and kept in the technical realm with limited participation of CSOs and policy-makers in general. Therefore, **SDG Watch Europe is pleased that the indicator set is open to “regular reviews” as the report states.**

With this commentary, SDG Watch Europe asks if and how the report:

- reflects the comprehensive nature of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (SD);
- assesses where we stand and which areas we need to do more;
- responds to the 2030 Agenda for SD transformative ambition;
- is in line with the universal nature of the 2030 Agenda for SD;
- contributes to the leave no-one behind principle.

3. Five questions commentary

- **Does the Eurostat report reflect the COMPREHENSIVE nature of the 2030 Agenda for SD?**

Building on the European Commission’s Communication [“Next Steps for a sustainable European future”](#), the current report is characterised by a lack of ambition in addressing all the dimensions of sustainable

¹ The Commission Communication 'Next steps for a sustainable European future: European action for sustainability' announced a detailed regular monitoring of the SDGs in an EU context from 2017 onwards, and the development of a reference indicator framework for this purpose. This EU SDG indicator set has been developed in the course of 2016 and 2017 and it has been used to produce this first EU SDG monitoring report. The list of indicators is available [here](#).

² COM(2016) 739 final

³ Council conclusions (20 June 2017)

development. It represents the continuation of the business-as-usual scenario, building the evaluation on the EU's past progress, without pointing to what is needed to make the 2030 Agenda a reality in Europe and beyond.

Through the subordination to the current Commission priorities, **the report fails to consider key societal, environmental, economic and technological trends**, which is not only reflected in the choice of indicators, but also paints a skewed picture of EU's performance in the respective areas. To take just one striking example, SDG 12 on sustainable consumption and production patterns receives one of the highest levels of progress in the overall ranking in the report. However, assessments from the [Sustainable Development Solutions Network \(SDSN\)](#) and the [European Environmental Agency \(EEA\)](#) show that this is one of the worst performing areas in high-income countries, including most EU countries.

- **Does the Eurostat report assess well where we stand and in which areas we need to do more or faster?**

The Eurostat report does not take into account the *level* of achievement, i.e. it does not assess where we stand or how good or bad things are. It only assess "distance-to-target" where EU quantified targets are available, and not in other cases even if the nature of the targets would allow for that. It does not even systematically refer to the SDG targets. Differences between existing EU targets and quantitative SDG targets have at least to be addressed (for example on SDG 1 poverty reduction). It is therefore impossible to derive solid conclusions from the current evaluation by Eurostat as it is only an assessment of trends based on the past 15 years. This does not provide adequate information on whether the EU can actually meet SDG targets by 2030. The weather symbols are therefore misleading: "sunshine" says that we (maybe) move in the right direction, but says nothing on how far and fast we would need to move.

It takes 10 to 30 years for statisticians to take a topic into account and produce statistics. For this reason, official statistics have a structural problem when addressing new societal challenges and complex issues such as sustainable development. While it is welcomed that 30% of the indicators used are from other data sources than official statistics, this portion needs to be expanded in the future. Civil society and research stand ready to provide data and to support in interpretation.

- **Does the Eurostat report reflect the 2030 Agenda for SD TRANSFORMATIVE ambition?**

The way of assessing progress is another defect of the report: it is a one size fits all approach that does not take into account the degree of change that would be needed to move fast enough towards the goals and targets. In absence of EU quantified targets, the method used for evaluating progress is not appropriate: 1% change in the right direction already earns a 'sun' symbol - suggesting (and misleading) that all is fine. However, this is not true in many cases: a change of just 1% per year would deliver roughly a 15% change in total by 2030. This is far from enough for the necessary transformative path.

- **Does the Eurostat report reflect the 2030 Agenda for SD UNIVERSAL nature?**

While the Eurostat report provides a first snapshot of how the EU has progressed – between 2005 and 2015 - towards the Sustainable Development Goals internally, it fails to acknowledge the important role the EU plays globally. Despite the recently adopted European Consensus on Development and the EU's Treaty obligation to take into account the objectives of development cooperation in all its policies likely to affect developing countries, the Eurostat report limits itself to assessing - surprisingly in an optimistic manner - the amount of Official Development Assistance that has been disbursed. It does not assess to

what extent its development efforts, in the areas of gender equality, food security or education for example, were able to reduce poverty and inequality, and make a positive contribution to sustainable development of partner countries. Moreover, reducing its negative impact on the rest of the world, due to over-consumption, resource depletion, a large ecological footprint in general as well as negligence of human rights and exploitation of cheap labour remains one of the biggest challenges for the EU in implementing the 2030 Agenda. Yet the monitoring report remains fully silent about the impact of EU policies worldwide.

- **Does the Eurostat report reflect the leave no-one behind principle?**

The 2030 Agenda seeks to benefit all people and commits to leave no one behind by reaching out to all people in need and deprivation. This requires local and disaggregated data to monitoring systemic drivers of inequality and exclusion in Europe and its international cooperation work, to analyse outcomes and track progress. Nevertheless, in this first report, Eurostat missed the inclusion of critical data to address the 2030 Agenda principle of leave no one left behind. An example of this is the fact that there is no data included on persons with disabilities when it comes to SDG 4 (quality education) and SDG 8 (decent work for all), while discrimination in these areas perpetuate the precarious situation persons with disabilities can be facing. Similarly, the EU-SDGs indicators for SDG 1 (end poverty) based on relative poverty and severe material deprivation, leave out many realities of extreme poverty, such as homelessness.

Eurostat should align its indicators to the global set of targets and indicators (while going beyond them with broader assessments). Moreover, it also needs to collect new disaggregated data based on agreed human rights instruments such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and relevant non-binding instruments such as the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers Recommendation on Young People's Access to Rights.

4. Looking forward

For future monitoring, SDG Watch Europe calls on the European Commission and Eurostat to

- **Revise the indicators** set with an appropriate and inclusive procedure, benefitting from broader input through adequate participation of researchers and CSOs.
- Beyond mere monitoring reports, **elaborate outlook reports** for proper projections, broader and qualitative assessments – as agreed in the [Council of the European Union Conclusions](#) - with additional data and knowledge taken into account. This could be done, for example, every four years alongside with the HLPF meeting at Head of States level, in a collaborative effort with agencies, researchers and civil society.
- **Develop a comprehensive monitoring and assessment system** that should include all the sustainable development dimensions (social, economic, environmental and governance), as well as the domestic and external dimensions, and the connection between the two.
- Finally, such a **comprehensive assessment should be used to inform EU decision making** and encourage a real transformation of EU policies and practices. In its present form, the report is not fit to the purpose.



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SDG Watch Europe is an EU-level, cross-sectoral CSO alliance of NGOs from development, environment, social, human rights and other sectors. Its goal is to hold governments to account for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (SDGs). www.sdgwatcheurope.org



This document was produced with the financial assistance of the European Union. Under no circumstances can the contents of this publication be taken as reflecting the position of the European Union.