



The Various Interests Group



European Economic and Social Committee

**Conference of the Various Interests Group of the European Economic and Social Committee,
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***The UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development:
a new frontier of rights and progress for the EU***

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

"We are determined to take the bold and transformative steps which are urgently needed to shift the world onto a sustainable and resilient path."(quotation from the 2030 Agenda).

Preamble

To make the UN 2030 Agenda a reality, we must have the courage to **imagine a new world**. We must have the ambition to put **opportunities** and **goals** before problems. We must have the creativity and determination to **transform a vision** into a **positive European narrative** for a **flourishing sustainable development Union**. We must have the foresight and discipline to protect what is beautiful and fragile in our world and prepare for the future.

For thirty years after the definition of the concept of sustainable development ¹, our common future is very much under threat. At precisely the time when others turn away from their commitments, it is imperative that the **EU maintains the momentum**, accelerating, investing in and **embracing change**. Now is the time for long-time engagement, to make the transition to an inclusive, equitable, resilient, low-carbon, circular and collaborative economy. Now is the time for **political leadership**, to rethink our growth models and improve well-being. To balance economic prosperity with innovation, social inclusion, **democratic participation** and environmental sustainability, all within our planetary boundaries. We must have the conviction and boldness to defend the universal, indivisible and mutually reinforcing dimensions of the UN Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development.

Hence, it is crucial for us to **build on our European values** and safeguard the exercise of human, economic, social and cultural rights. However, we can only design and **deliver this new world**, by working transparently in partnership with a maximum number of social and economic actors from a wide spectrum of civil society organisations (CSOs). It is **civil society** which will **drive change**, with **bottom-up initiatives** which respect the opinions and rights of local people. Moreover, we can only embark on this new world by making sustainable development financially accessible to all citizens, by transforming perceptions, attitudes, developing a new attractive narrative and ultimately, by creating a sustainable culture among Europeans. This will be the basis for **re-installing hope** and **trust** in our democratic systems. The UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development will become our **European Social Contract of the 21st Century**.

¹ October 1987 release of the Brundtland report 'Our Common Future'

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- 1) **The EU must assume its responsibilities and deliver the UN 2030 Agenda**
- 2) **It is imperative for the Agenda to become the strategic framework for the future of the EU: it is time to take our destiny into our own hands**
- 3) **Moving beyond GDP: the necessity to embrace a new definition of development and human progress**
- 4) **Ensuring that no person, territory nor periphery are excluded from long-term change and innovation**
- 5) **Culture should be recognised as a key dimension of sustainable development**
- 6) **Achieving the Agenda through trust and active partnership: all countries, regions, civil society and stakeholders must be committed to a world-wide strategy**
- 7) **Enabling youth to take the lead in the UN 2030 Agenda for Change**

The UN 2030 Agenda and Societal Change: from dreams to reality

"This Agenda is a plan of action for people, planet and prosperity."(ibid.)

The EU must assume its responsibilities

1. The debates surrounding the sustainable development of the EU are not only academic. They constitute a **profoundly political debate** which must take centre-stage of our current and future political reflections;
2. To date, the EU has not demonstrated that it has assimilated and embraced the **opportunities for a paradigm shift** provided by the UN 2030 Agenda. The latter is quite absent from the five scenarios in the EC White Paper on the Future of Europe, whilst both the Rome Declaration and the 2016 EC Communication² provide only partial and half-hearted commitments. This constitutes an immense **missed opportunity** and also contradicts the **EU's commitments** to the **UN Climate Change Paris Agreement**;
3. Within this context, it is imperative for the EU to take the political decision to render the UN 2030 Agenda a **central pillar to the future direction and identity of the EU**. Thus, building on its existing regional governance structures, taking a leading global role and aligning with the EU's longer-term 2050 sustainable development strategy. Ultimately, the EU should make sustainable development a **horizontal European priority** and strengthen the governance of the Sustainable development goals (SDGs);
4. To be credible, **the EU must deliver the UN 2030 Agenda** and lead by example, establishing and implementing an **ambitious overarching European Strategy** for sustainable development. This strategy should abandon silos and embrace a holistic, coordinated and systematic approach, mainstreaming sustainable development across all EU programmes, policies, actions and financial instruments. Bringing together the 17 Sustainable development goals (SDGs) with the 10 work priorities of the European Commission and even setting more ambitious targets for specific SDGs. Within this context, the EC is called upon to present a **new scenario on the Future of Europe** which would put centre stage a **sustainable democratic Union**;
5. As a precondition to this overarching strategy, an **inter-institutional agreement** on sustainable development must be established between the European Commission, the Council and the

² 'Next Steps for a sustainable European future', COM (2016) 739 final

European Parliament, with the involvement of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) and the Committee of the Regions (CdR);

6. Member States must urgently develop **national SDGs frameworks and Action Plans**. The aforementioned overarching EU sustainable development strategy should serve as a common framework for coordinated action, which is currently very much absent. To this end, the European Semester should be employed to improve the **vertical and horizontal coordination** of the SDGs between Member States and the EU;

7. It is urgent to complement the existing mapping of EU policies with a **detailed gap analysis** of SDG implementation. Only a factual and reliable gap analysis will enable the EU to identify the priorities for SDG implementation;

8. The EU should develop clear Europe-wide targets and become the **first region to present a voluntary review** of its internal and external programmes and policies to the UN High Level Political Forum (HLPF). Annual reporting should be based on reliable and comparable statistics collected by Eurostat, which should translate into very **specific EU targets on SDGs**. Member States are also called upon to present 'indicative national contributions' every two years, thereby strengthening the existing process of the HLPF. Moreover, it is recommended that every two years all strategies from Member States and civil society organisations should be aggregated, so that **overall progress can be assessed**, including a gap analysis vis-à-vis agreed targets;

9. In order to ensure **policy and investment coherence**, it is necessary for the EU to carry out **sustainable development impact assessments** within the context of better regulation and to fully align its domestic sustainable development policies with its **external relations**. To this end, ambitious chapters on sustainable development should be included in all EU trade and investment agreements with third countries and their implementation enforced. The EU must also take steps to **reduce** its **global resource use** and its **global environmental and social footprint**. Furthermore, the EU should ask the WTO to examine the impact of trade on sustainable development.

Moving beyond GDP: from indicators to policy design

10. The UN 2030 Agenda necessitates a **new definition of prosperity**, way beyond the sole criterion of economic growth. The concept of **well-being** goes far beyond the prevailing paradigm of GDP growth, which has failed to address social inclusion, environmental responsibility, societal happiness, nor has it led to sustainable economic growth;

11. The assimilation of this new definition is at the heart of the concept of sustainable development and **defines the type of society that we aspire to**;

12. Within this context, the first overview by Eurostat of the SDG implementation in EU Member States is welcome, as is also its work on developing a set of indicators. However, there are **gaps in the current set of indicators**, for example, in measuring resource consumption. Moreover, the indicators must enable accurate, reliable and timely data collection, the results of which should be publicly available and used in **ex ante evaluations**. Civil society must be consulted on the selection of these indicators. Furthermore, direct links should be established between the mappings, statistics and the identification of future European political priorities, policies and communication plans on the SDGs to citizens;

13. In parallel, reliable data from longitudinal studies and 'Big Data' from tech companies could also **inform on progress** made towards the **delivery of the SDGs**;

14. It is crucial that a full **monitoring and review framework** for the implementation of the SDGs in the EU is instated as soon as possible, in which **civil society must play a central role**. To

this end, informal meetings of the European Council on progress towards implementing the UN 2030 Agenda, with the participation of civil society could be envisaged;

15. The European Parliament and national parliaments are called upon to **assess progress by EU Member States** in moving beyond GDP in their policies, programmes and funding decisions.

Enhancing accessibility and increasing support among citizens

16. Much greater investment is required into **increasing understanding of the necessity and opportunities of the SDGs** among citizens, social actors and all forms of enterprises, raising awareness of their positive impact, including that of well-being. Moreover, ensuring **consumer trust, satisfaction and empowerment** are essential for the implementation of the UN 2030 Agenda. The overall objective should be to encourage an espousal of the values and behaviour which will actively support the implementation of the Agenda;

17. Central to this process is addressing the issues of **choice and affordability of services**. Unless public funding ceases to support unsustainable models which drive societal behaviour, it will be very difficult to ensure the necessary paradigm shift among citizens. With sustainable goods and services financially accessible only to the more advantaged sectors of society, it is crucial that EU and national policies, legislation and subsidies **facilitate access for all citizens**. Within this context, increased efforts must be made to reach out to and to give an active role to more disadvantaged sections of society, who may consider themselves economically and socially alienated from the UN 2030 Agenda;

18. In parallel, the importance of organising **awareness-raising campaigns** together with civil society and local authorities, with a view to encouraging **ownership of the UN 2030 Agenda**, cannot be underestimated. There is a necessity to raise awareness and to increase understanding about the SDGs among politicians at all levels in EU Member States. Within this context, the decision of the European Commission to invest in such campaigns in Member States is welcome. Moreover, not only civil society, but also the European Parliament and national parliaments should reach out to their constituencies;

19. Eurobarometer should conduct regular surveys in order to **ascertain information gaps** among citizens and to **channel funding** towards SDG-related projects and programmes.

Transiting towards long-term change and new development models

20. **Innovation** is the **crucial link** between the three dimensions of sustainable development. It is only through investment in technological innovation and by integrating societal and environmental goals in economic policy, that **new consumption patterns** and **models of behaviour** will prevail, thus leading to a **culture favourable to change**. The objective must be to make **sustainability a European brand**;

21. However, although a sustainable society must be innovative, it is crucial that this innovation is qualitative, positive for the future and for People. Progress towards **digitalisation** and **robotisation** should be assessed in this perspective;

22. The **new development model** has to prioritise education, skills upgrading, the transition to digitalised, low carbon, circular and collaborative economy, sustainable food production and consumption;

23. This will necessitate **investing in renewables** and in innovative, decentralised and democratic models of development, which will create jobs and immense opportunities for **modernising the European economy**;

24. Central to this process is **investment** in sustainable infrastructure, businesses, risk sharing, social impact assessments and social innovations, all of which should be incentivised. The latter have a pivotal role in providing **social equity** and in the **sustainability of our welfare systems**, with the **social economy** and **social economy enterprises** playing a leading role.

Investing in a socially inclusive society and new economy

25. If development is to be truly sustainable and inclusive, it must **benefit all citizens**, particularly the poorest, the most marginalised and vulnerable. It is in this context that direct linkages are made between the UN 2030 Agenda and the **exercise of human, economic, social and cultural rights**;

26. The UN 2030 Agenda asserts that **poverty eradication** is an "*indispensable requirement for sustainable development*". Indeed, the implementation of the SDGs is inextricably linked to goals on poverty eradication and a failure to ensure sustainable development will also be a failure to combat the **increasing levels of poverty, inequalities and socio-economic divisions**;

27. Within this context, the EU should establish a strong and enforceable social rights pillar. Key social objectives such as decent employment, the reduction of inequalities and social investment, must be systematically addressed through the European Semester process, on an equal footing as macroeconomic considerations. This should include mandatory social impact assessments of all reform agendas proposed by the National Reform Programmes (NRPs) and the Country Specific Recommendations (CPRs). In effect, the implementation of the **SDGs** should be **fully integrated into the European Semester**;

28. To mobilise the necessary **financial resources** for the new development model, a holistic approach is required between EU funding, programming and initiatives. Fully mainstreaming the UN 2030 Agenda into EU programmes in future Multi-Annual Financial Frameworks (MFFs) and the EU's Regional Policy should be prioritised and funds should be significantly increased in relevant horizontal programmes such as Horizon 2020. The EU must also use the conditionality approach of the European Structural and Investment Fund, thus introducing **SDG conditionalities** in all **EU policies and programmes**;

29. **Long term and reliable funding** into the sustainable development model is crucial. The EU and Member States are urged to increase R & D to 3% of the EU GDP and to invest in and support **research** and **academia**. Moreover, **harmful subsidies should be eliminated**, ecological tax reforms introduced and progress made on the internalisation of external costs. Targeted public procurement could also be used to actively support sustainable development;

30. **Business** clearly has a **pivotal role** to play in the leadership, innovation and investment in change, working in partnership with public authorities and civil society. Without the active engagement of business, the global community will not be able to deliver the UN 2030 Agenda;

31. Hence, it is imperative that the UN 2030 Agenda is recognised by the private sector as a **business opportunity** and for sustainable development to be put at the **centre of business models**. Incentives for social, environmental and financial goals must be aligned using a flexible mix of financial and non-financial forms of cooperation, self and co-regulation.

Recognising culture as a key dimension of sustainable development

32. **Culture** is of key importance in pursuing the principal objectives of the European Union, to "*promote peace, its values and the well-being of its peoples*" (Article 3 TEU). It is a significant **instrument for sustainable growth, development and employment in Europe** and a crucial tool for territorial cohesion, social inclusion and innovation;

33. Moreover, culture shapes our understanding of development and determines how individuals think and act, thus facilitating or impeding the achievement of development goals. It has a key role to play as a **unifying and mobilising force**, able to create a **powerful new European narrative**, to restore confidence and to reconnect Europe with its citizens;

34. Within this context, culture should be officially recognised as a **pillar of sustainable development** and placed at the centre of European policy-making. Culture should be valued as the link which gives sense to the other pillars, providing a long-term perspective, identity, direction and bringing all pillars into a circular and inter-dependent relationship.

Building our Future in Partnership

"All countries and all stakeholders, acting in collaborative partnership, will implement this plan"(ibid.)

35. Governments alone are incapable of carrying out the required transformational change for the UN 2030 Agenda. A **new governance model is required**, without which it will be impossible to implement the three pillars of sustainable development. The EU should take the lead in shaping the governance of the UN 2030 Agenda;

36. However, the **new global vision** should be defined and driven by a **bottom-up governance** model of local and regional authorities, CSOs (including businesses and trade unions) and citizens at large. Where possible, greater use could be made of referenda, public petitions and citizen consultations in promoting the Agenda. **Young persons** in particular must be made **partners in change**;

37. Within this context, **inter-generational justice** is a key dimension of the success of the UN 2030 Agenda. The EU should consider creating a new role as **Guardian of Future Generations**. The 2015 proposal to the UN for a **Declaration of the Rights of Humanity**, with its strong emphasis on inter-generational solidarity, could also be revisited;

38. To deliver the UN 2030 Agenda, it is important to **build trust, decentralise governance** to local actors, **empower citizens** to create their own sustainable solutions and transmit to stakeholders an ownership of change;

39. Member States are called upon to include the principles of sustainability and resource efficiency in **Professional regulations**. This would lead to a multiplication of the number of actors engaged in sustainability and to greater efficiency in implementing the UN 2030 Agenda;

40. In order to be able to fully participate in the UN 2030 Agenda, civil society must ensure its representativity, transparency and accountability. The European Commission should facilitate its involvement and **mainstream civil society capacity-building** into EU funding and external programmes;

41. European civil society alone is incapable of implementing the UN 2030 Agenda. Outreach, **capacity-building, networking and exchange of good practices** with civil society from other parts of the world is of paramount importance;

42. Particular attention should be paid to the **role of prosumers** in the transition to a low-carbon economy, as this blending of consumers and producers in renewable energy epitomises the ownership

of sustainable development by citizens. To facilitate progress, European and national authorities must establish the most conducive administrative, legislative, financial and fiscal environment;

43. At the national level, more dialogue, exchange of best practices and **peer learning** among EU Member States is required. In parallel, a system of **sharing best practices** among civil society organisations is strongly recommended. This could be complemented by a **voluntary system for monitoring** the commitments made by civil society, following the model of the Lima-Paris Action Agenda on climate change, launched December 2014;

44. At the global level, civil society should be directly involved in preparing the national voluntary reports for the UN High Level Political Forum. The EESC could support national civil society in this process and become a permanent space for **structured dialogue**, thus facilitating the widest possible **societal ownership**;

45. At the European level, an ambitious multi-stakeholder platform on the UN 2030 Agenda is an absolute necessity. In addition to the exchange of best practices, the civil society members should be involved in the **full cycle of SDG implementation** in the EU, including designing implementation policies, participation in governance frameworks, monitoring and review. The recommendations of the platform should be presented to EU political authorities. The EESC reiterates that it is ready to support the creation of this forum and to facilitate outreach to civil society;

46. The possibility of the EESC **organising national debates** in the EU Member States to monitor progress on implementing the UN 2030 Agenda could also be considered.

Brussels, 31 May 2017
