Background paper for discussion under Agenda Item 7: European Commission’s Reflection Paper Towards a Sustainable Europe by 2030.

INTRODUCTION

In a United Nations (UN) summit in 2015, 193 heads of states and governments adopted Agenda 2030 with 17 Sustainable Development Goals. The countries thereby committed to implementing the goals, and their additional 169 sub-goals, by 2030. The aim, to make the world more environmentally, socially and economically sustainable. Although not a UN member, the European Union has, on behalf of the EU Member States, taken the lead in preparing and implementing the EU 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Agenda 2030).
In 2017 the European Commission initiated a process to devise a roadmap towards a more united, democratic and stronger union entitled Future of Europe\(^1\). The European Council, in its informal meeting in Sibiu on 9 May 2019, renewed the union’s commitment to work with issues of particular interest and concern to European citizens. Following the EU’s commitment to the SDGs, the roadmap builds on six reflection papers in strategic areas, including a sustainable future for Europe\(^2\). This process was open and inclusive with wide citizens’ participation.

**THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION’S PROPOSAL**

Work to implement Agenda 2030 can only benefit from the commitment and leadership of a major actor such as the European Union.

Not a signatory to Agenda 2030 in its own right, the EU only commits its member states in policy areas common to all EU Member States. Climate change mitigation and adaptation; transitioning to low emission societies; trade, growth and just competition; social security and citizens’ rights; are key common policy areas when addressing environmental, social and economic sustainability.

In the European Commission Reflection Paper Towards a Sustainable Europe by 2030, the EU acknowledges the advantage of a multi-level governance, based on the principles of subsidiarity and autonomy, as a requirement for a successful delivery of the SDGs. The EU also acknowledges that municipalities and regions can make substantial contributions to Agenda 2030.

When it comes to Agenda 2030, the European Commission promotes a holistic approach by analysing tasks from different angles. It scrutinises how all EU policy areas can contribute to SDG attainment. Furthermore, it establishes why the SDGs are of importance to Member States, to the EU and to the world and assesses the efficiency of current policies. A reflection of gaps in current policies; possible need for a shift in emphasise; and complementing action for more efficient SDG implementation, is on the other hand not included.

Sustainable Development Goal 8 on Decent Work and Economic Growth will determine how the EU will conclude future trade agreements with third countries.

EU will also need to decide which of the following strategic implementation models to pursue:

- Joint and shared EU and Member State action;
- Inclusion of SDG relevance and consequence in all EU policy without mandatory implementation in areas of national competency;
- Limit EU action to efforts supporting SDG implementation in partner countries.

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**RELEVANCE FOR THE EEA EFTA STATES**

The Sustainable Development Goals offer a three-dimensional (environment, society and economy) framework for any policy area. In its Reflection Paper, the European Commission links all its policies to the 17 SDGs offering comprehensive causality between policy areas, thus demonstrating interconnectivity between them.

Because of the EEA Agreement, EU policy impacts the agenda setting and the decisions made at local and regional level in the EFTA States. What and how the EU chooses will predetermine local and regional governments’ room for action. Thinking and directions suggested in the European Commission Reflection Paper will find their way into new policy, future directives and the next EU programme cycle. A clear understanding of choices and priorities opens for meaningful participation in work leading up to decision in European institutions, when enacting corresponding legislation in the EEA States and when implementing new regulations.

Many challenge preconditions for SDG attainment, such as rule based international cooperation; global trade; trust in public institutions and democracy. Local and regional political leaders can contribute to clarifying how global considerations affect local choices and how current preferences precondition the life style of future generations. The European Commission Reflection Paper helps understand how to communicate such complex issues.

**REACTION TO THE PROPOSAL**

All EEA States have committed to promote national implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. National efforts can only benefit from the commitment and leadership of a major actor like the European Union, itself not a signatory to Agenda 2030 in its own right. The EU emphasises partnership as a precondition for success and acknowledges the advantages of a multi-level governance, based on the principles of subsidiarity and autonomy, as a requirement for successful delivery of the SDGs.

The Sustainable Development Goals offers a three-dimensional (environment, society and economy) framework for any policy area. The European Commission, in its Reflection Paper, offers comprehensible causality between policy areas thus demonstrating interconnectivity between them. It helps understand how to communicate such complex issues.

A reflection of gaps in current policies; possible need for a shift in emphasis; and complementing action for more efficient SDG implementation, is not included in the Reflection Paper which is limited to assessing SDG relevance and achievement of policy implemented by the current European Commission.

Achievements are assessed according to level of government (international; EU wide; Member States; regions and municipalities) and interaction with stakeholders from business
and civil society. Few EEA States demonstrate the importance of multi-level governance when assessing progress and reporting on SDG implementation. In its Reflection Paper the European Commission highlights the role and task of local and regional governments in implementing Agenda 2030.

The European Political Strategy Centre, in its publication “Europe’s Sustainability Puzzle”\(^3\), suggests moving the debate from “business as usual” to “opportunities ahead”. The report identifies seven major areas where the EU may use the SDGs as a tool for profound economic and social transformation:

- Decouple growth from fossil fuel dependency, carbon emission, growing inequality and unsustainable use of resources;
- Transition towards a climate-compatible sustainable economy considering associated socio-economic cost;
- Reinventing the social contract to accommodate new and often precarious work forms;
- Reforming pensions to reduce the burden of a greying European population with safeguarding income through transforming tax systems from tax on labour to tax on capital;
- Curbing outsourcing of unsustainable practice to poor countries with a shift to consumer-based accounting of pollution;
- Creating acceptable incitements for sustainable personal consumption choices; and
- Preventing innovation from drive obsolescence acceleration.

For each area, the report explores policy responses needed from the local level to the national and EU level and beyond. It argues the need for consistent leadership and oversight at the EU level for the desired transformation to happen.

The European Committee of the Regions has opened a consultation in order to outline recommendations on how to integrate the SDGs into the future work of the EU transition:

- From linear to circular economy;
- Sustainability from farm to fork;
- Future-proof energy, building and mobility;
- Ensuring a socially fair transition.

\(^3\) https://ec.europa.eu/epsc/publications/other-publications/europes-sustainability-puzzle_en
DISCUSSIONS ON THE SDGS IN ICELAND, NORWAY AND SWITZERLAND

**Iceland**

Iceland is committed to the implementation of the SDGs. In June 2018 the Icelandic government published its SDG implementation plan, which prioritises 65 of the 169 sub-goals.

Implementation of the Icelandic SDG plan is the responsibility of an inter-ministerial working group led by the Prime Minister’s Office. The working group includes representatives from all ministries, as well as Statistics Iceland and the Icelandic Association of Local Authorities. Representatives from the Icelandic Youth Council and the Icelandic UN Association participate as observers.

The main task of the working group is to analyse the work on the SDGs in Iceland and prepare progress reports to the government with recommendations on the prioritisation of targets and future procedures to implement the SDGs goals. The working group also supervises the promotion of the SDGs in Iceland.

Iceland has no SDG implementation plan specifically directed towards municipalities, but several municipalities are taking steps towards including the SDGs in their work programmes. In February 2019 the Icelandic Association of Local Authorities organised a workshop on the SDGs and the role of municipalities when it comes to their implementation. Following that, several municipalities are now mapping which SDGs are a priority for them and looking into how to implement them, how to set up SDG targets and how to measure progress. The Icelandic Association of Local Authorities is now establishing a working group where interested municipalities can work together on the preparation and implementation of the SDGs at a local level. The first meeting of the working group takes place in June 2019.

**Norway**

Norway is committed to implementing the SDGs. There is no national implementation plan. Implementation, however, links to the annual budget cycle with yearly reporting to parliament. The Government has opted for line ministries coordinating attainment of individual goals of relevance to own sector with no central coordination body.

Norwegian local and regional authorities must in conformity with the Local Government Act and the Building and Planning Act promote sustainability. The Government, moreover, expects the 17 SDGs to be central to all regional and local planning thus encouraging local and regional governments to take part in national SDG implementation.

An Asplan Viak report (KS FoU Prosjekt 1840111) on goals in mandatory municipal and county council planning requirements indicates that documents adopted after 2015 tend to promote the SDGs: as a basis of planning; as important focus areas; or indicate where plans address individual SDG.
The Norwegian Institute of Urban and Regional Research (NIBR), moreover, documents (NIBR 2015:19) that approximately half of agenda items in municipal or county council meetings are directly determined by Norway’s attachment to the EU via the EEA Agreement. Agenda 2030 is thus important both in national policy and in interaction between Norway and the EU. The EU, moreover, underlines relevance and importance of local and regional action for SDG attainment. Surveys show a large number of Norwegian municipalities and county councils are responding to the SDG and find them helpful in devising future action. KS is exploring how best to sign off members’ requirement for support and tools in order to fully take part in implementation of SDGs of high local relevance.

Of particular interest is the space given to sustainable development in the updated and restructured programme offering training to all local and regional councillors following 9 September 2019 local elections. Local and regional political leaders can contribute to clarifying how global considerations impact on local choices and how current preferences precondition the life style of future generations thus upholding trust and a vibrant democracy.

**Switzerland**

Switzerland has been a driving force behind the 2030 Agenda and its 17 SDGs from the outset. Immediately after its adoption in 2015, the Federal Government commissioned a comprehensive baseline assessment and gap analysis of the implementation status at federal level. The analysis concerned all 169 targets and covered both Switzerland’s domestic and international contributions.

The national-level system of monitoring existing since 1997 was expanded for the 2030 Agenda. The gap analysis indicates that, among the chosen 85 indicators, 39 show a positive trend, 12 show no significant evolution, 14 show a negative trend, while for 20 no assessment was possible.

However, the baseline assessment identifies areas where efforts at national and international level beyond existing policies are needed in order to achieve the SDGs. Consumption of natural resources (SDG 12), for example, is increasing overall. Use of resources from within Switzerland for consumption by its population is decreasing but use of resources from abroad is increasing in an unsustainable way.

The analysis provides a good starting point for tackling the challenges in a targeted and focused manner. They will mainly be addressed within the framework of existing sectoral policies which exploit synergies where possible, observing the principles of effectiveness and efficiency, both nationally and internationally.

The 2030 Agenda is implemented at federal, cantonal and communal levels. Many cantons and municipalities have defined their own strategies for sustainable development. The Canton of Jura, for example, is aiming in the long term towards independence of energy supply. To achieve this goal, the Government is targeting a policy based on the phasing out of nuclear power and a maximal energy autonomy. This policy is based on a Cantonal Planning for
Energy. Its objectives are a supply autonomy of 65 % for electricity as well as 65 % for heat energy by 2035. This implies a reduction of roughly 30 % of present consumption. Energy savings should be realized mainly through improving performance of buildings and efficiency in the industrial sector. Local production of energy will be improved by exploiting wind and solar resources, cogeneration from renewable sources, extraction from shallow and deep ground geothermal energy and harvesting of the forest resource.

Switzerland’s private sector, NGOs and scientific community have also been committed to sustainable development for a long time. An advisory group composed of interested non-state actors has identified what it considers to be the country’s priority challenges. It provides a platform for further dialogue with the Federal Government and for partnerships for implementing the 2030 Agenda.

Switzerland continues to support the follow-up and review process of the 2030 Agenda, which has become an important element of its strategic cycle on sustainable development. To effectively address the challenges and opportunities, the Federal Government has set up a 2030 Agenda steering committee in December 2018. Its tasks include monitoring the SDGs, preparing the national report to the UN, setting priorities and national targets, coordinating appropriate measures and cooperating with the cantons, municipalities and non-state actors. Two delegates have been nominated this spring to coordinate the operational aspects of the efforts. They must report annually on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Their first report is due in January 2020.

At national level, the 2030 Agenda will in future be implemented primarily through Switzerland's Sustainable Development Strategy (SDS). This will be realigned to cover the period 2020–2030 to ensure longer-term planning security and continuity. The SDS Action Plan will continue to be updated along with the new legislative programme every four years.