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Subject: Building a sustainable Europe by 2030 – Progress thus far and next steps
- Council conclusions (10 December 2019)

Delegations will find in the annex the Council conclusions on building a sustainable Europe by 2030 – Progress thus far and next steps, as adopted by the Council at its 3739th meeting held on 10 December 2019.

Building a sustainable Europe by 2030 – Progress thus far and next steps

Council conclusions

1. The Council stresses that the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is essential for ending poverty and for ensuring a peaceful, healthy and secure life for current and future generations while respecting the limits of our planet, by upholding democracy, human rights and gender equality, protecting our climate and the environment, building modern, dynamic, and inclusive economies, improving living standards, promoting health and well-being and decent work for all and narrowing inequalities, so that no one is left behind.
2. The Council stresses the need to accelerate action both within the EU and in other parts of the world, by all actors, in order to fulfil the vision and goals of the 2030 Agenda. It stresses the contribution of the European Union and its Member States in supporting partner countries to accelerate the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, as underlined in the 2017 European Consensus on Development¹, in particular by focusing on systemic drivers for transformative change. This needs to be done in synergy with the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, the Addis Ababa Action Agenda on Financing for Development and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction. The EU and its Member States will continue to play a leading role in implementing the SDGs and will continue to support and promote effective multilateralism and a rules-based international order to that end, in line with the Council conclusions on EU action to strengthen rules-based multilateralism².

¹ 10108/17

² 10341/19

3. The Council recalls its conclusions from June 2017³, underlining that good governance, the rule of law, democracy, and effective and accountable institutions are prerequisites for peaceful and inclusive societies and, as such, are intrinsically linked to sustainability. The Council further recalls its conclusions from October 2019 on the Charter of Fundamental Rights⁴ and emphasises that the realisation of fundamental rights, including ensuring compliance with the Charter, is a precondition for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals and for the fulfilment of the commitment to leave no-one behind.
4. The Council reaffirms the support of the EU and its Member States for the Decade of Delivery and Action for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and welcomes the Political Declaration of the Sustainable Development Goals Summit 2019⁵ as a significant step in pushing for reinforced and accelerated implementation of the SDGs. The Council welcomes the EU review of progress on the internal and external implementation of the 2030 Agenda at the United Nations High-level Political Forum (HLPF) in July 2019 and the adoption of the Joint EU-ACP Declaration⁶ on the 2030 Agenda and the SDG implementation on the occasion of the SDG Summit in September 2019. The Council furthermore takes note of the UN Sustainable Development Goals Report 2019⁷.

Our Progress Towards the SDGs

5. The Council underlines that responsible, transparent and accountable policy-making should be based on reliable and high quality data, statistics and scientific evidence. High-quality data should be disaggregated as much as possible and consist of statistical as well as administrative data.

³ 10370/17

⁴ 13217/19

⁵ <https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/74/4>

⁶ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/fr/press/press-releases/2019/09/24/joint-declaration-by-the-african-caribbean-and-pacific-group-of-states-and-the-european-union-on-the-2030-agenda-and-the-sustainable-development-goals-implementation/>

⁷ <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2019/The-Sustainable-Development-Goals-Report-2019.pdf>

6. The Council welcomes the 2019 edition of Eurostat's 'Monitoring report on progress towards the SDGs in an EU context'⁸ as a key document for measuring the EU's progress towards the achievement of the SDGs. The Council also acknowledges reports and data published by other Commission services and agencies, like the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights and the European Environment Agency. Based on these reports and data, the Council notes the following:
- a) The EU as a whole has made good overall progress in improving the living and working conditions of its citizens over the past five years. Actual and perceived health has improved, poverty and social exclusion have been reduced in certain dimensions, and the quality of life in cities and communities has improved. Despite the good progress on aggregate level, there are still considerable disparities between Member States, regions and population groups. While the number of people at risk of poverty and severely materially deprived people has decreased, the EU remains far from its 2020 poverty and social exclusion target, and poverty remains high in some Member States. Income inequality has been rising since the 2008 financial crisis. Indicators on gender equality show progress in some areas, but disparities still exist.
 - b) Steady growth in the EU's GDP has been accompanied by continuous increases in investment and employment, as well as declining unemployment. However, gross domestic expenditure on R&D has been growing very slowly and the number of patent applications has been on a downward trend since 2013. The EU has met its benchmarks for tertiary education and early childhood education and care and is close to meeting the goals on early leavers from education and training.

⁸ <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/3217494/9940483/KS-02-19-165-EN-N.pdf/1965d8f5-4532-49f9-98ca-5334b0652820>

- c) Several unfavourable developments have taken place with regard to the use of natural resources, causing negative environmental impacts. The consumption of materials and energy, as well as the generation of non-mineral waste have continued to increase, despite the increases in circular material use and recycling. Biodiversity continues to decline and the EU is likely to miss 23 of the 30 environmental targets contained in the 7th Environment Action Programme, including those related to global Aichi targets. A significant proportion of negative environmental impacts materialise outside the EU through spillover effects linked with our consumption patterns.
- d) The EU's greenhouse gas emissions have decreased by 23 %⁹ compared with 1990 levels and the energy and resource intensity of GDP has steadily improved, putting Europe on track to achieve its 2020 targets. Despite this progress, the achievement of the current 2030 climate targets, especially on energy efficiency, is uncertain at this stage. Greenhouse gas emissions from transport have been increasing, and the EU's objective to reduce the environmental impact of the transport sector is therefore unlikely to be met by 2020. A shift towards more sustainable transport and freight modes is not yet visible.

⁹ https://ec.europa.eu/clima/sites/clima/files/strategies/progress/docs/com_2019_559_en.pdf

- e) The EU has made progress in supporting developing countries in implementing the SDGs through bilateral and multilateral aid as well as through financial flows and trade, as emphasised in the Joint Synthesis Report on the Implementation of the European Consensus¹⁰, the annual reports on financing EU external action¹¹ and the Budget Support reports¹², which have been structured on the basis of the SDGs. Furthermore, the 2019 EU report on Policy Coherence for Development¹³ illustrates that the EU has also made some progress in reducing negative spill-over effects of EU internal and external policies on developing countries, and in promoting synergies between different policies and actions in support of the SDGs. The EU and its Member States are collectively the world's leading donor, and the Council underlines the importance of EU development cooperation in accelerating the integrated implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the Addis Ababa Action Agenda worldwide.
7. The Council commits to take stock of the EU's progress in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda on a regular basis, on the basis of the Eurostat report and other relevant reports.
8. The Council invites the Commission to prepare a report for the HLPF on the EU's internal and external implementation of the 2030 Agenda during the next HLPF cycle, preferably in 2021. An open, transparent and multilevel participatory process should be established for the preparation of the report, with close involvement of the Council, and consultation of key stakeholders and the European Parliament.

¹⁰ 9199/19 + ADD 1

¹¹ COM(2019) 604

¹² https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/budget-support-trends-and-results_en

¹³ 5806/19

Strengthening the whole of society approach on implementation

9. The Council reaffirms that national Governments have a key responsibility for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and its 17 SDGs and acknowledges the work done at all levels in Member States in that regard. The Council encourages Member States to lift the level of ambition of their national responses to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, and to proactively mainstream the 2030 agenda into national planning instruments, policies, strategies and financial frameworks.
10. The Council recalls that implementing the 2030 Agenda represents a shared responsibility and requires the continuous and strong involvement of all stakeholders. To that end, the Council:
 - a) Underlines the critical role of regional and local authorities and cities in implementing and achieving the SDGs. The Council acknowledges the active role of the Committee of Regions and welcomes its opinion on the SDGs. The Council invites the Commission and the Member States to support regional and local authorities and cities in pursuing the 2030 Agenda, inter alia by means of the Urban Agenda for the EU and cohesion policy.
 - b) The Council highlights the important role of the private sector in achieving the SDGs and encourages its continued constructive involvement, through market-based partnerships, social dialogue, investments and business models in line with principles of Responsible Business Conduct and Corporate Social Responsibility. In this context, the Council invites Member States and the Commission to further develop a robust policy framework and action plan that shapes an international level playing field and allows for an ambitious and coherent implementation of the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises¹⁴, the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights¹⁵ and the ILO Tripartite Declaration on Multinational Enterprises¹⁶.

¹⁴ <http://mneguidelines.oecd.org/>

¹⁵ https://www.ohchr.org/documents/publications/GuidingprinciplesBusinesshr_eN.pdf

¹⁶ http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/---emp_ent/---multi/documents/publication/wcms_094386.pdf

- c) The Council underlines the importance of academia and epistemic communities such as the European Sustainable Development Network (ESDN), the European Environment and Sustainable Development Advisory Councils (EEAC) and the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) in providing policy makers with evidence-based and policy-relevant findings and recommendations. The Council requests the Commission to encourage the exchange of best practices among Member States, e.g. based on existing formats of the ESDN. The Council also underlines the key role of the EU's 9th Framework Programme for Research and Innovation *Horizon Europe (2021-2027)* and welcomes its and other MFF programmes' focus on and contribution to the implementation of the SDGs. In line with its Resolution of November 2019¹⁷, the Council recalls that cultural policies and measures should be systematically employed to complement the existing measures used to achieve sustainability in order to enhance the efficiency of sustainable development strategies both nationally and across the EU.
- d) The Council stresses the critical role of civil society in implementing and achieving the SDGs, and the importance of meaningful involvement of civil society in EU strategies regarding the 2030 Agenda. The Council acknowledges the active role of the European Economic and Social Committee and welcomes its opinion on the Commission Reflection Paper¹⁸. The Council acknowledges the key role of youth in achieving the SDGs, recalls its conclusions of April 2019, and encourages the Commission and the Member States to involve youth through structured dialogue mechanisms.
- e) The Council underlines the importance of the Multi-Stakeholder Platform on the SDGs, which should play an important role in the preparation process as well as in implementing and monitoring the EU implementation strategy for the 2030 Agenda. The Council calls for the renewal of the mandate of the Platform, with inclusive and representative membership including Member States.

¹⁷ 13336/19

¹⁸ <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/our-work/opinions-information-reports/opinions/reflection-paper-towards-sustainable-europe-2030>

Next steps towards more effective governance

11. The Council welcomes the work done by Eurostat in developing its SDG monitoring report over the past two years, and underlines the importance of a rigorous and indicator-based annual follow-up that measures the EU's progress against each of the 17 SDGs. The Council notes that Eurostat bases its report and conclusions on developments over the past five years. This makes any year-on-year comparison of progress difficult, and in some cases may lead to misleading conclusions. The Council invites the Commission to include more information on the current state of affairs in the Eurostat report. The Council acknowledges that such analysis is challenging, especially for issues where no measurable, time-bound targets exist. The Council welcomes all EU processes that aim to establish measurable and time-bound targets in different policy fields, respecting the principle of subsidiarity, proportionality and the division of competences between the EU and the Member States. Such processes should contribute to and be coherent with the comprehensive implementation strategy referred to in paragraph 19 of these Conclusions.

12. The Council emphasises the need for continuous indicator development, as well as the need for continuous review and improvement of the data base, taking into account the country-specific context and data, global SDG indicators agreed at UN level, and the work carried out by other relevant international organisations and institutions. The Council invites the Commission to increase the use of qualitative and disaggregated data in the Eurostat monitoring, where appropriate, and is of the view that existing indicators used in Eurostat's report do not sufficiently address certain key phenomena, such as the change in consumption and production patterns, including the transition towards a circular economy, or perceived well-being, which are at the centre of the 2030-Agenda. In this context, the Council recalls its conclusions on the Economy of well-being¹⁹ and the references to measuring well-being therein, as well as its conclusions on the Circular Economy²⁰. The Council also notes the monitoring-related recommendations of the stakeholder-led conference in Helsinki, on 28-29 October 2019²¹, and invites the Commission and EU agencies to study and consider these as appropriate.

¹⁹ 11164/19

²⁰ 12791/19

²¹ <https://www.fingo.fi/tapahtumat/beyond-growth>

13. The Council also notes that the EU information concerning the spill-overs generated by the EU's policies around the world needs to be improved. The Council acknowledges the critical role that Eurostat can play in developing ways to measure the global footprint (negative impact) and global handprint (positive impact) of EU policies. It calls on the Commission to continue the cooperation between Eurostat, the EU's Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) and the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) to measure the impact of EU policies on inequalities in the EU and in partner countries.
14. The Council welcomes the decision by the President of the Commission (2019 to 2024) to task each Commissioner with ensuring the delivery of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals within their respective policy areas as an important step towards mainstreaming the 2030 Agenda throughout the Commission. The Council takes note of the decision by the President of the Commission to assign responsibility for the overall implementation of the SDGs at EU level to the College as a whole. The Council underlines the importance of policy coherence for sustainable development, and the risk of incoherent policy-making in the case of shared responsibility. The Council emphasises that in order to ensure coherence within the Commission and a whole-of-Commission approach, the overall responsibility for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda should be attributed to a member of the College, preferably at the highest level. At the same time, the Council stresses the importance of effective coordination among Commission services and the EEAS as a key factor for the effective implementation of the SDGs. The Council welcomes the President of the Commission's intention to ensure that Europe's external financial assistance promotes the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs within it.
15. The Council recalls the importance of policy coherence for development (PCD), which is a substantial contribution to the broader objective of Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development (PCSD). PCD should remain a key element and an important means in the overall EU efforts to implement the 2030 Agenda.

16. The Council takes note of the European Court of Auditors' review on reporting on sustainability by EU institutions and Agencies²² showing that the Commission does not systematically report on the contribution of the EU budget, programmes or EU policy to achieving the SDGs in areas other than that of external action. To enable coherent and more transparent monitoring, the Council invites the Commission to include sustainability reporting in the annual activity reports of all the Directorates-General. The Council invites the European Court of Auditors to liaise with national courts of auditors with a view to improving knowledge and exchanging experiences.
17. The Council stresses the need to assess how the new Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) can support the implementation of the 2030 Agenda internally and externally, and invites the Commission to ensure that the MFF contributes to achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.
18. The Council welcomes the intention of the President of the Commission to use existing mechanisms and instruments more efficiently. In this spirit, the Council notes the President of the Commission's intention to refocus the European Semester into an instrument that integrates the SDGs, and seeks more information from the Commission. The Council underlines the importance of the European Semester as a coordination tool for the economic, fiscal and employment policies in Member States.

Next steps in accelerating action on key policy areas

19. The Council reiterates its conclusions of June 2017²³ and urges the Commission to elaborate without further delay a comprehensive implementation strategy outlining timelines, objectives and concrete measures to reflect the 2030 Agenda and mainstream the SDGs in all relevant EU internal and external policies, based on what more needs to be done by 2030, in terms of EU policy, legislation, governance structures for horizontal coherence and means of implementation. The Council also recalls the European Council conclusions of October 2018, which called for such a comprehensive strategy.

²²

https://www.eca.europa.eu/Lists/ECADocuments/RCR_Reporting_on_sustainability/RCR_Reporting_on_sustainability_EN.pdf

²³ 10370/17

20. The Council also reiterates its April 2019 conclusions²⁴ and the main policy foundations for a sustainable future identified therein, as well as the priorities of the EU's Strategic Agenda for 2019-2024. The main policy foundations for a sustainable future include a decisive transition towards a circular economy, including non-toxic material cycles; striving for climate neutrality and tackling climate change in line with the Paris Agreement; protecting and restoring biodiversity and ecosystems; the sustainability of the agriculture and food systems; as well as safe and sustainable low carbon energy, buildings and mobility sectors; whilst fostering European cohesion. The Council reiterates the need to strengthen the social dimension to promote inclusion; equality in all its forms, notably gender equality; high-quality and inclusive education; and a socially fair transition, in line with the European Pillar of Social Rights, while ensuring that the EU's common values, including democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights are safeguarded. The Council urges the Commission to step up its efforts on the issues identified as main policy foundations for a sustainable future.
21. The Council takes note of the President of the Commission's *Political Guidelines for the next European Commission 2019-2024*²⁵ and the six headline ambitions for Europe identified therein. The Council invites the Commission to pursue the six headline ambitions in a manner that contributes actively to the Commission's commitment to implement the SDGs, while respecting the principle of subsidiarity, proportionality and the division of competences between the EU and the Member States.

²⁴ 8286/19

²⁵ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/political-guidelines-next-commission_en.pdf

22. The Council recalls the six entry points identified in the Global Sustainable Development Report (GSDR)²⁶ – Human well-being and capabilities; Sustainable and just economies; Food systems and nutrition patterns; Energy decarbonisation and universal access; Urban and peri-urban development; and Global environmental commons – and the four levers of change – Governance; Economy and finance; Individual and collective action; and Science and technology – as being critical for achieving the SDGs and addressing the trade-offs and interlinkages between the SDGs, and welcomes the calls to action presented in the GSDR report. The Council also recalls the ten points of commitments in the Political Declaration of the 2019 Sustainable Development Goals Summit. The Council invites the Commission to make use of the entry points and levers of the GSDR and the ten points of the Political Declaration in its work on the implementation strategy.

²⁶ https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/24797GSDR_report_2019.pdf