

EESC Contribution to the EU-level Voluntary Review (VR) of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda

Introduction

With less than eight years remaining until 2030 for the implementation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the world is moving in the wrong direction. The multiple and interlinked global crises we are facing – the COVID-19 pandemic, the climate crisis and the impacts of the conflict in Ukraine and elsewhere – are putting the very viability of achieving the SDGs by 2030 at great risk. Yet, in a context of multiple crises, **the UN Agenda 2030 and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) remain the only comprehensive and universal vision for socio-economic prosperity and environmental sustainability** adopted by all UN member states¹. Failure to implement the SDG principles of social inclusion, clean energy, responsible consumption and production, and universal access to public services will lead to even more crises and geopolitical rivalries. An **urgent rescue effort** is needed for a rapid change of course, grounded in a comprehensive response to these interlinked global crises and a renewed commitment to multilateralism and international cooperation.

Without the EU's leadership, it will be difficult to achieve global transformations. The EESC therefore **welcomes the Commission's commitment and decision to undertake the first ever EU-level Voluntary Review (VR) of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda**, to be presented at the High-Level Political Forum in 2023, and hopes that this will become a regular exercise. Now more than ever, the EU needs to invest in SDG credibility and should lead international efforts to implement the SDG Stimulus.

The EU's progress on the SDGs has stalled. Based on trend data available since 2015, the EU is still on track for achieving around two-thirds of the targets, yet a third of the targets show insufficient progress or are heading in the wrong direction, especially those related to responsible consumption, climate and biodiversity (SDG2; 12-15), generating large negative spill overs on the rest of the world². Over the past two years, the pandemic and other crises have led to reversals in progress on social and health indicators including poverty, life expectancy and unemployment in many European countries. Continued high inflation and the energy crisis risk affecting disproportionately the most vulnerable population groups with severe social impact in the coming months and years.

¹ Lafortune, G., Fuller, G., Bermont-Diaz, L., Kloke-Lesch, A., Koundouri, P., Riccaboni, A. (2022). Achieving the SDGs: Europe's Compass in a Multipolar World. Europe Sustainable Development Report 2022. SDSN and SDSN Europe. France: Paris - <https://sdgindex.org/EU>

² 2022 SDSN report

In this context, the **EU VR should be an honest and inclusive stocktaking** with respect to SDG implementation, taking into account its relationship with and its impact on the rest of the world. The EU VR should provide a clear assessment of how much remains to be done in Europe to meet our sustainability commitments under the Agenda 2030. The important role of the Voluntary Reviews is not only reviewing but also accelerating the SDGs implementation by identifying and revealing the gaps and challenges in achieving them, as well as committing to future action, and providing targets to ensure an adequate roadmap to 2030.

Civil society's involvement in the preparation of the VR is essential, as the **transformation to sustainability will only be successful if it is based on broad support and active participation by all parts of society**. Leaving no one behind also entails re-empowering as many people as possible to actively take part in the transition process.

The Commission has requested the EESC to provide the views of civil society through an "SDG by SDG" analysis, assessing the achievements and challenges of the EU policies to attain each of the goals. To prepare its contribution, the EESC has compiled the key messages from a large number of its adopted opinions across policy areas, consulted the former members of the Multi-Stakeholder Platform on the SDGs and collected views on the EU's internal and external implementation of the SDGs through an online consultation of civil society organisations.

The following main overarching messages have emerged from the consultation:

1. Need for a comprehensive strategy on the SDGs

The EU needs a **comprehensive strategy on the SDGs**, with the aim to improve coherence and synergies across policy areas and across tools (e.g. Better Regulation, European Semester, etc.). The European Green Deal and several relevant EU strategies exist and contribute to the implementation of the SDGs, but only in a partial way. Linkages between these strategies must be reinforced to break away from a siloed approach and towards working more collaboratively across sectors, with a clear focus on the social dimension and the "leaving no one behind" principle. The strategy should be accompanied by a **clear implementation plan**, including targets, timelines and roadmaps for environmental and social issues (particularly those not captured in the European Green Deal). The implementation plan should outline how the 2030 Agenda as a whole will be translated into practice, with an adequate focus on the external dimension of SDG implementation, how the issues will be linked and concretely monitored and how the EC will avoid any negative impacts on partner countries caused by domestic EU policies.

2. Need to go beyond an "SDG by SDG" approach

Achieving the sustainability transformation means carefully taking into account the **interactions between goals and targets**. The present state of imbalance across the three dimensions of sustainable development arises from not having fully appreciated the interlinkages across SDGs or having unduly prioritised the short-term. It is these same interlinkages that will lead to the desired transformative change when properly taken into account. Several groups have proposed broadly consistent sets of "Six

Transformations"³ that could provide a more operational and holistic framework for the implementation and assessment of the SDGs. The **six entry points for transformations** are: human well-being and capabilities (education, skills, decent work, innovation, digitalisation), sustainable and just economies, sustainable food systems and healthy nutrition, energy decarbonisation with universal access (sustainable energy), urban and peri-urban development (sustainable communities, mobility and housing), and global environmental commons (including spill overs).

3. Need for structured and meaningful engagement of civil society

The Agenda 2030 promotes an important paradigmatic shift towards a more participatory model of multi-stakeholder governance for sustainable development. The Multi-Stakeholder Platform set up by the Commission in 2017 (and in which the EESC took an active part) was never renewed. As repeatedly and recently called for also by the European Parliament, **a platform or a forum on the SDGs should be re-launched to foster a structured engagement with civil society, youth organisations, businesses, trade unions and scientists** in SDG-related policy development and monitoring. This process should examine best practices from other relevant multi-stakeholder forums (such as the European Circular Economy Stakeholder Platform) and incorporate this learning into the way in which an SDG platform is organised going forward. The structure should be **multi-stakeholder and multi-level, also representing the views of local communities**, as successful implementation of the SDGs ultimately relies on the local level.

The EESC stands ready to contribute further to the EU VR and overall efforts to accelerate the implementation of the SDGs as the compass and vision of the future we want.

³ These include The World in 2050 (TWI2050, 2018), Sachs et al. (2019), and the UN independent group of scientists, appointed by the Secretary-General (2019).

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The EESC acknowledges the contributions of the following organisations in the workshop and on-line consultation to provide the views of civil society into the EU voluntary review on the implementation of the SDGS

(in alphabetical order)

- [ATD Fourth World](#) – All Together in Dignity
- [CCRE-CEMR](#) – Council of European Municipalities and Regions
- [PLATFORMA](#)
- [COFACE](#) – Compagnie Française d'Assurance pour le Commerce Extérieur
- [CONCORD Europe](#)
- [COPA-COGECA](#) – Committee of Professional Agricultural Organisations-General Confederation of Agricultural Cooperatives
- [CSEE-ETUCE](#) – European Trade Union Committee for Education
- [EEAC Network](#) – European Environment and Sustainable Development Advisory Councils Network
- [EEB](#) – European Environmental Bureau
- [ESDN](#) – European Sustainable Development Network
- [ETUC](#) – European Trade Union Confederation
- [EUA](#) – European university Association
- [EUROCITIES](#)
- [EAEA](#) – European Association for the Education of Adults
- [EYF](#) – European Youth Forum
- [Fingo](#)
- [Humanity & Inclusion](#)
- [ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability, European Secretariat](#)
- [Lifelong Learning Platform](#)
- [Nyt Europa](#)
- [PROFOH](#) – Professionals For Humanity
- [SDG Watch Europe](#)
- [SDSN Europe](#) – Sustainable Development Solutions Network Europe
- [AlterContacts](#)
- [WAPCEH](#) – West African Postgraduate College of Environmental Health
- [WWF Europe Policy Office](#)

SDG 1: No Poverty: Access to basic human needs of health, education, sanitation



Main achievements:

Compared to previous crises, the European Commission responded quickly to the situation caused by COVID-19, proposing an unprecedented range of actions to cushion distress and mitigate the social and labour impacts. Two support packages– the Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative (CRII and CRII+), instruments such as SURE and REACT-EU, the new Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), the Next Generation EU (NGEU) and the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RFF) helped to support peoples' livelihoods in the Member States. The activation of the general escape clause of the Stability and Growth Pact has been an important measure in protecting the citizens, guaranteeing access to human needs and mitigating the very negative socio-economic consequences of the pandemic.

The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan is a very relevant instrument that sets ambitious social targets for every person living in the EU and for alleviating poverty. The outcome of the Porto Social Summit, in particular, is that the revised Social Scoreboard is a crucial decision to help to monitor progress towards its implementation. The legislative and non-legislative deliverables of the European Pillar of Social Rights are very relevant, such as the Directive on Adequate Minimum Wages, the Work-life Balance Directive, the Posting of Workers Directive and the Transparent and Predictable Working Conditions Directive, and it is critical to speed up adoption of the pending ones and ensure they are implemented adequately. The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the European Child Guarantee, the EU Disability Rights Strategy and the Communication on Decent Work Worldwide are pertinent initiatives to mention.

Challenging areas where further action is required:

- Despite the measures adopted, the pandemic hit those who were already at higher social risk before the crisis disproportionately hard, amplifying pre-existing inequalities and leading to an increase in relative poverty rates. There is a need to address disparities in social welfare and protection systems, promote targeted actions for the most vulnerable groups and a European strategy for eradicating poverty, integrating the homeless, and upward social convergence to halve the proportion of children and adults at risk of poverty and social exclusion, which is currently 20%.
- Boost investment in social infrastructure in crucial areas such as access to and quality of services, health systems and social and long-term care, education and life-long learning and affordable housing to address the asymmetric impact of the crisis and divergences on the green and digital transitions between population groups, sectors and regions.
- Adopt an intersectional approach (gender, disability, age, migratory status, race) to poverty and the policy responses. Address the hidden dimensions of poverty such as insufficient and insecure income or material and social deprivation.
- Reform the fiscal framework so that it puts social goals, including gender justice, at the heart of the EU's economic governance, and reform the European Semester to create an annual sustainability cycle that fully integrates the European Green Deal and the SDGs.

SDG 2: End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture



Main achievements:

The release of the European Green Deal Farm to Fork Strategy is a welcome step forward as it represents a crucial opportunity to move towards achieving SDG 2. The development of a comprehensive food policy in the EU is indeed essential. It should aim at providing healthy diets from sustainable food systems, linking agriculture to nutrition and ecosystem services and ensuring supply chains that protect public health for the whole of European society. Food businesses across the supply chain (including European farmers and fishers, cooperatives, agri-food companies, retailers, wholesalers and other types of companies) are already working to make progress on sustainability and to offer consumers healthy and sustainable products in line with the European Green Deal.

Challenging areas where further action is required:

- Promote healthy and sustainable diets (namely to address the prevalence of obesity); invest in education on sustainable diets from an early age to help young people appreciate the value of food; introduce transparent food labelling practices to empower the consumer to opt for the more sustainable choice.
- Foster a fair food supply chain with fair prices (reflecting the true cost of production for the environment and society); ban unfair trading practices.
- Support farmers in making the transition to resilient, diverse, agroecological, organic agriculture. Challenges remain regarding closing the yield gap, gross nitrogen balance on agricultural land as well as ammonia emissions from agriculture.
- Align food business practices with the SDGs; support business operators with adequate tools and a "grammar for sustainability".
- Strengthen the external dimension of the F2F Strategy; ensure true reciprocity of standards in preferential trade agreements; address the spill-over effects of exports of EU-banned pesticides.
- Tackle food speculation and address the financialisation of the food sector. The current commodity market is not delivering for sustainable development, climate ambition and just transition. On the contrary, it undermines the efforts to solve hunger and foster fair revenues and prices.
- Address the financialisation of the food sector as massive money-making off the backs of people, eg by introducing windfall taxation on excess profits before dividends of corporations and a food speculation tax to curb high frequency trading and breaking oligopolies at all levels of the chain and financial interests.
- Improve governance of food systems to overcome governance fragmentation, and ensure structured involvement and participation of civil society; set up a multi-stakeholder, multi-level European Food Policy Council.
- Uphold the ambition and commitments of the Farm to Fork Strategy for a transition to sustainable and healthy food systems and reject attempts to undermine this agenda based on misleading food security arguments.

SDG 3: Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages



achievements:

Some targets of SDG 3 have been achieved for indicators including life expectancy at birth, gap in life expectancy at birth among regions, population with good or very good perceived health, etc. Moreover, the EU launched several initiatives in response to the COVID-19 crisis to support partner countries in addressing both the short-term and long-term effects of the pandemic. The role of research, science and innovation and the quick mobilisation of vaccines during covid was certainly a major achievement for the EU. The setting up of the Health Emergency Preparedness and Response (HERA) is a welcome step forward, as is the reinforced role of the European Medicines Agency (EMA) and the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC). The Europe's Beating Cancer Plan is also a milestone to ensure the availability of high-quality, accessible healthcare infrastructure and effective support systems for patients' physical and mental well-being. The adoption of the new EU Global Health Strategy is very timely and will help provide guidelines for the coming years in a complex environment and reaffirm the EU's leading role in global health.

Challenging areas where further action is required:

The COVID-19 pandemic had a huge impact on health and care systems all over the EU. Health systems were not ready to face the pandemic and have not been reinforced or reformed after the covid crisis. Overall, the progress on SDG 3 is too slow and there are still challenges to reducing inequalities within the EU in health and access to healthcare. Action is required to:

- Address the intellectual property rights for vaccines and other treatments by introducing a temporary TRIPS waiver to be able to ensure that access to the vaccination remains a public good and that developing countries also have access to them.
- Address issues with privatisation in health systems (including health data space) and lack of access to affordable healthcare.
- Promote decent working conditions for the care and health workforce, including informal carers; update the Action Plan for the Health and Care Workforce in the European Union to guarantee integrated health workforce planning and forecasting.
- Address health inequalities, which have become even more evident with the pandemic. While the "leave no one behind" principle should guide action, the pandemic has shown that unbalanced power dynamics and economic interests prevail over global solidarity.
- Give a larger role to the European Parliament, regional authorities and CSOs in the Health Emergency Preparedness and Response (HERA), and strengthen the participation of civil society and social partners in the European Medicines Agency (EMA) and the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC).

SDG 4: Quality education



Main achievements:

The European Education Area (EEA) contributes to the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights to ensure the right of equal access to quality and inclusive general and vocational education. There has been improvement towards key targets such as early childhood education and care, educational attainment levels, early leavers from education and training and tertiary education attainment. The Erasmus+ programme for 2021-2027 is a further good step to equip European citizens with the knowledge, skills and competences needed to better respond to the new challenges. It is positive that education has been mentioned in recent EU documents such as its Youth Action Plan on External Action, its Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020-2024, its third Disability Strategy for 2021-2030, and the Global Gateway. The EU has consistently been among the largest OECD DAC donors to education. Finally, quality transformative education is key to achieving the whole Agenda 2030 (Target 4.7). Therefore, the Council Recommendation on learning for the green transition and sustainable development and DG EAC's work in this area is of utmost importance.

Challenging areas where further action is required:

Long-term distance learning, in place during the COVID-19 crisis, has had a negative impact on the mental and physical well-being of students and teachers, as well as on pupils' learning outcomes. Action is required to:

- Foster research, particularly from the perspective of educational disadvantage and for primary and early secondary schools, to include a blended learning concept in education (i.e. blending school site and distance learning).
- Make the European Education Area (EEA) inclusive towards all. Governments need to take steps to achieve real inclusivity in formal and non-formal learning and promote informal learning.
- Improve the linkage for EU funding and provide guidance and visibility on how they can be used in education. Currently there is insufficient public funding from the Member States.
- More attention should be paid to sub-target 4.7 which has been insufficiently mainstreamed in EU and Member States' policy. Provide a holistic plan for education for sustainable development and how to coordinate or enforce the internal and external policies.
- Promote continuous upskilling and reskilling in view of the green transition and digitalisation. Support all adults, irrespective of their qualifications and socio-economic background, to access quality and inclusive lifelong learning.
- Close the gaps in access to early childhood education and care for children from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, in particular minority groups, migrants, children with disabilities and children living in rural areas and disadvantaged regions in Europe.

SDG 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls



Main achievements:

Over the last few years, there have been EU policy developments aiming to reduce the imbalance between women and men in providing care and the pay gap. The work-life balance directive introduced flexible working time arrangements and non-transferable rights to paid paternity and parental leave. The 2020–2025 EU Gender Equality Strategy acknowledges that thriving at work while managing care responsibilities at home is a challenge, especially for women. The European Care Strategy, accompanied by the two recommendations on early childhood education and care and access to affordable, high-quality long-term care, aims at ensuring quality, affordable and accessible care services across the European Union and improving the situation for both care receivers and the people caring for them. The directive on gender balance on corporate boards also needs to be mentioned.

The ERRF acknowledges that investment in a robust care infrastructure is essential for gender equality and women's economic empowerment. The EU's new Action Plan on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in External Action 2021–2025 (GAP III) is an essential policy framework for promoting gender equality as a priority of all external policies and actions.

Challenging areas where further action is required:

- Nurture a lifelong gender equality culture and integrate the gender perspective in all decisions, in each phase of the policy-making process, by all the actors involved.
- Include violence against women in the list of EU crimes, ensure comparable data on gender-based violence in all of the 27 EU Member States, cover all forms of violence affecting women and girls in the directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence, and promote the ratification of the ILO's Violence and Harassment (No 190) and the Istanbul Conventions.
- Eliminate gender stereotypes and promote gender balance in traditionally "female" or "male" fields, such as in STEM and ICT studies.
- Make progress towards an equal share of caring responsibilities to address the gender care gap and strengthen the role of the social partners and collective bargaining to progress on the gender pay gap, for example, on the proposal for a directive on binding pay transparency measures.
- Promote sexual and reproductive health services and ensure that awareness campaigns against female genital mutilation avoid stigmatising women in the concerned communities.
- Enhance policy coherence and make effective gender mainstreaming in all areas of EU external action. Regrettably, many EU policies such as trade and migration policies still have negative external impacts on women and girls in third countries, undermining the EU's commitments in terms of gender equality abroad, as aimed at in the GAP III.
- Address gender gaps in the European Green Deal framework, prioritising a care economy.

SDG 6: Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all



Main achievements:

Some targets of SDG 6 have been achieved in terms of population connected to at least secondary wastewater treatment, freshwater abstraction, the share of population using safely managed water services as well as population using safely managed sanitation services. The Commission's Zero Pollution Action Plan is a step forward to address the various types of pollution in a holistic way and to comply with the commitments of the Paris Agreement and SDGs. As pollution has no borders, and cooperation between different civil society actors is needed to tackle water pollution, the Zero Pollution Stakeholder Platform is welcomed. In addition, the EU Biodiversity Strategy 2030 aims to strengthen the protection and restoration of marine and freshwater ecosystems. Following the successful Right2Water European Citizens' Initiative, the revised Drinking Water Directive will improve or maintain access to safe drinking water for all, with a focus on vulnerable and marginalised groups. From a social perspective, principle 20 of the European Pillar of Social Rights reaffirms that everyone has the right to access essential services of good quality, including water and sanitation and that access to such services shall be available for those in need.

Challenging areas where further action is required:

Protecting Europe's shared water and sanitation management, resources and ecosystems from pollution and fostering structural changes to make water and sanitation a fundamental right for EU citizens will need coordinated action at EU level. Action is required to:

- Foster increased investments in the management of aquatic environments and sanitation facilities to ensure access to, and sustainable use of, clean water and adequate sanitation for all. Despite the progress being made, challenges remain in terms of the share of the population having neither a bath, nor a shower, nor indoor flushing toilet in their household.
- Address the need for citizens' ownership of water sources vs the privatisation of water supply.
- Tackle environmental damages of a transboundary nature caused by the war in Ukraine including water contamination, as this exposes the vulnerability of sanitation and sustainable water infrastructure and threatens access to drinkable water.
- Enhance the regulatory framework to ensure the right to a healthy environment as a fundamental right. While the right to a healthy environment including clean water and sanitation is present in EU secondary law, this is not codified in EU Treaties.
- Promote behavioural change to discourage overconsumption and the use of disproportionate amounts of water and foster more responsible use. This should also apply to industrial and agricultural usage of water.

SDG 7: Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all



Main achievements:

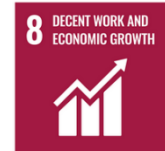
The European Green Deal and the Fit for 55 package have successfully raised the ambition on the energy transition. Renewables are not only part of the future energy mix, they are indispensable to a clean transition towards climate neutrality. The renewable energy policy is expected to deliver in three areas: climate change mitigation, energy security and economic development. It is important that the roll-out of renewable energy is paired with an increase in energy efficiency, key to achieving full decarbonisation. The REPowerEU Plan for more affordable, secure and sustainable energy is a substantial step forward. The EU action plan for digitalising the energy system and other efforts to boost the implementation of an integrated and smart energy grid in the EU is a step in the right direction. The important role of prosumers was highlighted especially in recent legislative initiatives such as the Fit for 55 package, the REPowerEU Plan and the Solar Rooftop Initiative. The EU responded with a number of initiatives to support EU countries' efforts to tackle the energy crisis and energy poverty.

Challenging areas where further actions are needed:

Overall, the progress on SDG 7 is still too slow and challenges remain in all indicators e.g., population unable to keep home adequately warm, energy consumption and carbon intensity of energy production. Facing the new geopolitical and energy market realities, the need to fast-track our clean energy transition is becoming even more urgent. Action is required to:

- Improve the quality and accessibility of information, freedom and diversity of participation, accountability, and inclusion in decision-making to ensure that the energy transition is socially acceptable.
- Diversify energy suppliers, a quick rollout of renewables, and increase in energy efficiency to guarantee the EU's strategic energy autonomy. Short-term energy market interventions and long-term improvements to the electricity market design are needed to face the unprecedented surge in energy prices. Permit-granting procedures should be improved and sped-up for a full implementation of our renewable energy system.
- Encourage and support people to become energy prosumers and to build up energy communities, including energy cooperatives, and increase interconnectivity between Member States and deployment of energy storage solutions.
- Accelerate renovations to increase energy efficiency in homes and other buildings across the EU, which account for 40% of total energy consumption.
- Improve measures designed to tackle energy poverty and inequalities, and promote a gender-sensitive and intersectional approach.

SDG 8: Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all



Main achievements

The European Green Deal is the most ambitious economic strategy ever adopted to transform the EU into a resource-efficient and competitive economy, ensuring no net emissions of greenhouse gases by 2050.

The European Green Deal and the digital transition have been maintained as the lifeline out of the pandemic, which is very relevant. The wide-ranging instruments which aimed to soften the blow of the COVID-19 crisis and support the recovery have been very appropriate (see SDG 1 comments), as have opening to reforms of the European Semester Group and advancing on a multidimensional approach in the Sustainable Growth Survey. In recent years, the proposals for completing the European Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) following the financial crisis of the 2000s are also important. The Beyond GDP initiative of the European Commission needs to be highlighted to advance towards a more comprehensive approach to progress and measuring prosperity and well-being.

The legislative and non-legislative deliverables of the European Pillar of Social Rights are essential to achieve decent work, as are Council Recommendations such as the one on access to social protection for workers and the self-employed or ensuring a fair transition towards climate neutrality. Instruments such as the Youth Guarantee and the Upskilling Pathways address specific difficulties in the labour market. The Just Transition Fund is an important instrument that recognises and tackles the challenges of productive employment in the regions in the transition towards climate neutrality by 2050.

Challenging areas where further action is required:

- Undertake more ambitious steps in the context of the European Monetary Union to achieve a more integrated, more democratic and socially better-developed EU and continue the revision of the EU economic governance framework, ensuring, for instance, the democratic involvement of the parliaments, the social partners and organised civil society in the European Semester.
- Develop the Social dimension of the European Green Deal to guarantee social fairness and ensure broad social support to achieve the decarbonisation of the economy (for example, setting specific targets for all of the 20 principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights) and support the social partners in significantly increasing the collective bargaining coverage.
- Provide granular mapping and analysis of the impact of the transition on employment and skills and increase the funds available in the Just Transition Fund to match the challenges at stake.
- Adopt measures to ensure social protection and improve working conditions of vulnerable groups such as seasonal workers, EU and non-EU citizens working in agriculture, services and construction, and the challenges facing groups such as platform workers.
- Develop a specific, inclusive and forward-looking policy addressed at youth to tackle current labour market unbalances.
- Address the EU's negative spill-overs related to labour rights in other countries and on supply chains, develop requirements for an integrative green and digital transition that avoids clashes and develop an economic approach that goes beyond GDP growth to achieve a climate-neutral economy in 2050.

SDG 9: Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialisation and foster innovation



Main achievements:

The Commission's call for the co-creation of transition pathways for the green and digital future and its commitment to retaining and growing Europe's industrial and manufacturing base is a welcome step forward. Industrial alliances are proving a successful method for developing large-scale and cross-border industrial projects in strategic fields. Important Projects of Common European Interest (IPCEIs), are crucial for the recovery and the promotion of European standards and key technologies, in particular in areas where the market alone cannot deliver or is being distorted. From a sectoral perspective, the Commission's communication on Critical Raw Materials, the Chips Act for the EU and the EU Recovery Plan, which was analysed in depth from the point of view of resource and energy-intensive industries, are welcomed. Reducing the EU's strategic dependencies in critical technologies and value chains for security and defence is essential and particularly timely due to the Russian aggression against Ukraine.

Challenging areas where further action is required:

The COVID-19 crisis and the invasion of Ukraine have put Europe's economy and industrial value chains, SMEs and citizens under stress. Overall, the progress on SDG 9 is too slow and challenges remain, mainly regarding the digital divide within the EU. There are still challenges in terms of population with at least basic digital skills and the score is stagnating for this indicator. Action is required to:

- Align the measures envisaged to achieve the twin transition with the objective of social wellbeing and sustainable growth.
- Increase R&D&I spending and other related funding instruments such as the Interregional Innovation Investment Instrument, putting it at least on a par with other regions in the world, and transform R&D investments with proactive tools rather than reactive ones.
- Dedicate more resources than envisaged to achieve its ambitious goals in semiconductors.
- Develop relations with resource-rich countries, especially in Africa and South America, using all instruments (including trade agreements and strategic partnerships).
- Insert just transition into the EU recovery facility and the related National Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRP) addressing the EU's resource- and energy-intensive industries.
- Address social innovation as complementary to technological or engineering innovation.
- Also talk about social innovation and not only technological or engineering innovation.
- Make the EU's industry sector less dependent on raw materials from other regions of the world.
- Generate transformative changes towards circular, decarbonised and zero pollution industry.
- Push forward the reform of the EU international trade policy to fully align it with the EGD's objectives.

SDG 10: Reduce inequality within and among countries



Main achievements:

The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan sets ambitious social targets for equal opportunities, access to the labour market, fair working conditions and inclusion while stressing the importance of promoting collective bargaining and social dialogue at all levels. The consensus on implementing the Action Plan at the Porto Social Summit is very important (see SDG 1 & 8 comments).

Embedding the goal of economic, social and territorial cohesion in the six pillars of the Recovery and Resilience Facility and including the social impact in the assessment criteria for the National Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRPs) are relevant measures. The seventh and eighth Reports on Economic, Social and Territorial Cohesion provide essential updates on the efforts undertaken and the associated problems. Recognising the principle of quality of work, as a prerequisite for sustainable social development, in recovering from the pandemic crisis should also be emphasised.

The EU produced a broad range of policies, strategies and action plans relevant to fighting against inequalities and applying a rights-based approach to development cooperation. Several tools have also been developed, including the EU's marker on income inequality and explicit commitments to tackling inequalities in its international partnerships.

Challenging areas where further action is required:

- Advance the understanding of the multiple dimensions and drivers of the various forms of inequality (e.g. urban-rural, LGBTBI, gender, age, migration status) and integrate the inequalities dimension in all the EU policy frameworks.
- Set specific objectives and targets for all of the 20 principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights and include measures to address income inequality and promote quality employment.
- Address tax haven and financial secrecy practices which have a detrimental effect on finances and incomes within the EU and in partner countries.
- Ensure appropriate policy action to avoid new economic, social and territorial disparities appearing as a result of the green and digital transitions and reduce inequality both in terms of opportunities and in terms of outcomes within and among countries.
- Advance an interinstitutional approach to inequalities and ensure policy coherence, including the development of appropriate indicators, and ensure the involvement of the social partners and civil society organisations in shaping cohesion policy and monitoring its effects (such as addressing the unequal access to clean energy).
- Take a more ambitious approach to supporting active labour market policies while protecting workers' fundamental rights and ensuring a sustainable business environment.
- Address inequalities systematically in official development assistance policies, develop practical tools on how to reduce poverty and inequity and intersectional data and analysis for programme design and evaluation, and promote actions on decentralised cooperation.
- Drastic action is needed to reduce inequalities via strengthening universal basic services and taxes, as a food speculation tax.

SDG 11: Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable



Main achievements:

The new EU framework for urban mobility is a welcome step to strike the right balance between environmental protection and inclusiveness of urban mobility. Access to affordable, quality public transport is essential to address transport poverty as a sustainable alternative to individual modes of transport. The Commission proposal for a recast of the Energy Performance of Buildings Directive takes up the key challenges to provide tools to tackle energy poverty and remedy structural long-term under-investment in the building area, boosting renovation especially of the worst-performing buildings and setting us on a path of decarbonised heating and cooling. The launching and support of the Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy – which is the flagship initiative bringing together and supporting thousands of municipalities of all sizes in Europe, taking local action on climate and energy and therefore contributing to Europe's achievement of the SDGs with particular contribution to SDG 7, SDG 11 and SDG 13 – is very relevant to mention. The Voluntary Local Reviews handbook (VLRs) by the Joint Research Centre (JRC), the strong involvement of the local level in Horizon 2020 and the integrated local approaches supported by the New European Bauhaus are laudable initiatives.

Challenging areas where further action is required:

Even though the EU is on track to achieve SDG 11, many disparities persist across countries, and challenges remain in several dimensions of sustainable urbanisation, including access to green urban areas, exposure to air pollution, as well as the rate of housing cost overburden, which might increase due to the multiple energy and inflation crises. Action is required to:

- Reduce carbon emissions without leading to reduced mobility and transport exclusion.
- Strengthen EU action to make urban transport more inclusive.
- Create sustainable urban mobility plans (SUMPs) and sustainable urban logistics plans (SULPs) as well as spatial planning that extends beyond urban boundaries.
- Engage citizens in implementing change, i.e. changing daily behaviours and patterns of consumption, mobility, dietary etc.
- Recognise the role of local and regional governments (LRGs) as policy makers and promote the localisation of the SDGs and learning between peers at EU and international level.
- Gain acceptance in societies for legislation to accelerate the transition.
- Implement concrete measures to improve the energy efficiency of buildings to ensure decent, affordable and healthy housing for all.
- Help promote long-term investments in local and social infrastructure through the new European Bauhaus.
- Establish regular dialogue with civil society actors, not only at the very end.
- Promote the gender perspective and representation for local decisions.
- Invest in affordable energy-efficient housing for people on low incomes.
- Ensure affordable access to housing and foster repurposing of unused housing stock.

SDG 12: Responsible consumption and production



Main achievements:

The European Commission's new Circular Economy Action Plan and other initiatives such as the proposed directive to empower consumers to act in support of the green transition are positive steps forward to contribute to a circular, clean and green EU economy and enable consumers to take informed purchasing decisions and therefore contribute to more sustainable consumption. The European Circular Economy Stakeholder Platform, a joint initiative by the Commission and the EESC, fosters stakeholders' active participation and exchange of information and good practices on circular economy in the EU. The Commission proposed legislation on Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence, which would impose supply chain oversight obligations on companies operating in the EU. This can be a very meaningful step if the outcome of the ongoing legislative process addresses the gaps in the proposal.

Challenging areas where further action is required:

Overall, the EU is experiencing significant challenges in achieving SDG 12 because of unsustainable supply chains and the progress is stagnating both from the production and consumption sides. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the fragility of supply chains. Rebuilding the economy after the crisis will be an opportunity to rethink our society and develop a new model of prosperity. Action is required to:

- Foster a comprehensive EU strategy on sustainable consumption. The most sustainable choice should be the easiest choice for citizens. This requires a systemic change in the way we produce and consume. In particular, the responsibility of producers to address unsustainable consumption needs to be better acknowledged.
- Prevent SDG 12 becoming a source of stigmatisation of the low-income families for whom it is difficult to afford green consumption and behaviours. Increasing the sustainability of consumption should not come at the expense of other societal objectives.
- Introduce product norms and bans fostering sustainability and prohibit unfair trading practices.
- Improve the competition rules for collective initiatives that promote sustainability in supply chains, promote fair and green public procurement, with minimum mandatory criteria.
- Introduce tax shifts from labour to resource use.
- Improve transparency and information by introducing mandatory labelling rules on origin, sustainability, durability and the social dimension, promote education on sustainable consumption and address advertisement and marketing.
- Introduce an EU target for reducing material footprint.
- Promote the role of cities and municipalities based on an inclusive and participatory approach.
- Tackle planned obsolescence, make products repairable, ensure that responsibility for end of life falls with the producer and promote the polluter pays principle.

SDG 13: Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts



Main achievements:

The EU is committed to becoming the first climate-neutral continent by 2050. The European Green Deal and the Fit for 55 package set a clear pathway for decarbonising the energy system and the economy, intending to cut GHG emissions by 55% by 2030 and achieve net-zero emissions by 2050.

The REPowerEU Plan constitutes an essential step in the right direction to advance decarbonisation and make the EU independent from the Russian gas and oil supply. The EU Strategy on Adaptation to Climate Change addresses the urgent and long-lasting need for adaptation.

Establishing a Social Climate Fund demonstrates the Commission's willingness to combat energy and mobility poverty. The Just Transition Fund is a vital instrument to tackle the challenges of the regions in transition.

The Commission's EUR 100 million contribution to the Adaptation Fund is very relevant. The EU's agreement on the Loss and Damage Fund at COP27 showed its leadership and commitment to the UNFCCC process.

Challenging areas where further action is required:

- Strengthen the European Green Deal and ensure that exceptional derogations to agreed targets as a result of the Russian invasion of Ukraine are granted only for a limited time.
- Ensure climate policies address the social impacts of the transition, provide adequate funding to responsibly face the socio-economic effects of carbon pricing and establish proper links with the National Recovery and Resilience plans.
- Update the nationally determined contribution to be consistent with the 1.5°C temperature limit following the Glasgow Climate Pact.
- Pursue an immediate halt to fossil fuel subsidies, promote a radical shift to supporting the transition to renewables, ensure that the emergency measures of the REPowerEU Plan do not lead to new dependencies, and support the pivotal role that local communities, self-sufficient energy consumers, cooperatives and organisations on the ground can play in the transition to renewable energies.
- Align the EU taxonomy with a holistic approach, including environmental and social sustainability, and boost effective sectoral action to achieve climate neutrality (sustainable food systems, circular economy, sustainable mobility, etc.).
- Increase the total climate finance contributions by developed countries, with equal emphasis on financing mitigation and adaptation and incorporating the GHG emissions associated with imported products to the EU's GHG inventory.
- Intensify EU diplomacy efforts on promoting the adoption of European Green Deal-like policy frameworks by the international community.
- Ensure that the involvement of organised civil society and strong youth engagement in the decision-making processes, implementation, monitoring and follow-up will best take on board the intergenerational dimension of these shifts.

SDG 14: Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development



Main achievements

In May 2021 the Commission presented the *New approach for a sustainable blue economy in the EU* to fully embed the blue economy into the European Green Deal and the Recovery Plan for Europe and support the transition to a climate-neutral, resource-efficient and competitive economy.

Building on the 2016 International Ocean Governance Agenda, the EU wants to conclude an ambitious UN High Seas Treaty (Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction) as soon as possible and a legally binding Global Plastic Agreement by 2024, as well as to achieve a Global Biodiversity Framework with 30% of marine areas protected by 2030. Some targets of SDG 14 have been achieved in terms of bathing sites with excellent water quality.

Challenging areas where further action is required:

Overall, the EU is experiencing major challenges in achieving SDG 14, and while progress is stagnating on average, negative spill-overs generated by the EU on biodiversity in other countries are intensifying. There are major challenges in terms of fish caught from overexploited or collapsed stocks and fish caught by bottom trawling or dredging. There are also significant challenges in terms of fish caught that are then discarded. Challenges remain for marine biodiversity threats embodied in imports as well as protection of marine sites that are important for biodiversity. Action is required to:

- Develop careful spatial planning, including integrative management and assessment of cumulative impacts to address the problem of ever-growing competition for marine space and resources.
- Address overfishing, eutrophication and ocean warming, which are among the worst threats to the planet's largest ecosystem.
- Tackle acidification, as 25% of CO₂ emissions are absorbed by the oceans, which is increasingly endangering marine life.
- Halt the over 17 million metric tonnes of plastic litter that get into the oceans every year.
- Urgently support the 48% of EU fishers that work in small-scale fisheries.
- Develop a specific and targeted approach to address the different priorities in different countries regarding marine protection.
- Enhance the collection of data on all fish populations so that the Total Allowable Catches (TACs) for each species can be set according to the best scientific advice and develop a long-term strategy.
- Push for the adoption of an ambitious Global Ocean Treaty to protect marine biodiversity in areas beyond national jurisdiction.
- Facilitate the decarbonisation of shipping by agreeing on a carbon intensity fuel standard (EUFuel Maritime) and scaling renewable fuel infrastructure in ports through the Alternative Fuels Infrastructure Regulation.

SDG 15: Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss



Main achievements

The Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 is a path towards the global biodiversity framework proposed by the Convention on Biological Diversity. This strategy has brought greater awareness of the problem at the EU level, including through the various proposals of the European Commission related to biodiversity that followed, such as the CEAP, the CSS, the New EU Forest Strategy for 2030, the regulation towards minimising the risk of deforestation and forest degradation associated with products placed on the EU market, the communication *Restoring sustainable carbon cycles*, the Action Plan on organic production, the Zero Pollution Action Plan for air, water and soil, the European Soil Strategy for 2030 and the two recent pioneering proposals to restore Europe's nature by 2050 and halve pesticide use by 2030. The EU also contributed significantly to the achievement of the Loss and Damage Fund at the CBD COP15. Some targets of SDG 15 have been achieved in terms of nitrate levels in groundwater and there have also been achievements in the development and the implementation of nature-based solutions.

Challenging areas where further action is required:

Overall, the progress on SDG 15 is too slow and major challenges related to biodiversity threats by the EU along international supply chains remain. There are major challenges in terms of the Red List Index of species survival as well as terrestrial and freshwater biodiversity threats embodied in imports. There are also significant challenges in terms of protection of terrestrial and freshwater sites that are important for biodiversity. Despite some progress, challenges remain for water quality in rivers. Action is required to:

- Increase the efforts to protect remaining natural resources and the size of protected areas, restore habitats and combat species decline.
- Keep competition in land use under control to avoid significantly affecting farming and food systems, biodiversity and other ecosystem functions and services.
- Ensure that the cost of protecting biodiversity is not just placed on farmers and forest owners, and promote approaches where it can be a useful source of income for them, for example on carbon storage in soils or economic compensation for non-commercial forest ecosystem services.
- Promote the incorporation of climate and biodiversity aspects into the national strategic plans.
- Develop a European legal framework, for example a European Soil Directive to address soil degradation, support restoration and fix the road map towards good soil health.
- Ensure policy coherence between the CAP and the biodiversity strategy and address the spill-over effects of the EU's consumption and production.
- Assess and further support the possibilities of job creation related to protection and restoration and ensure skilling programs and labour opportunities for the most vulnerable workers.
- Ensure the EU and its Member States contribute in a fair and proportionate manner to the overarching objective on restoration measures by 2030.

SDG 16: Peace, justice and strong institutions



Main achievements

Some targets of SDG 16 have been achieved in terms of death rate due to homicide, access to justice, constraints on government power, Corruption Perceptions Index, unsentenced detainees and Press Freedom Index. The launch of the EU Global Gateway initiative was welcomed, as the investments and cooperation projects of EU and non-state actors in the EU need to be better known and promoted around the world. The new European Consensus on Development is a step forward in understanding the interdependence between security, peace and sustainable development.

Regarding the Eastern Partnership, the effective implementation of association agreements and therefore the progress in strengthening the rule of law, the implementation of judicial reforms and the fight against corruption are welcomed.

Challenging areas where further actions are needed:

The unilateral aggression of Russia against Ukraine is a major threat for the Sustainable Development Goals and puts at risk the survival and wellbeing of societies in the region. This is the worst refugee crisis in Europe since the Second World War and its ramifications are global. The impacts of the war should not come at the detriment of climate action and sustainability, as provided for in the UN Agenda 2030 on sustainable development which is, first and foremost, an agenda of peace, security and poverty reduction.

Progress on SDG 16 is stagnating and action is required to:

- Strengthen the application of rule of law.
- Develop better rules in the field of migration and asylum and prevent any instrumentalisation of migrants.
- Develop a new global peace-building strategy with three strands: conflict prevention, civil society and coherence; Information, Communication, Education (ICE); European path of peace.
- Structure civic and social dialogues in various fields which move from one-off consultations to genuine, empowering and inclusive participatory processes including representation of groups in the most marginalised and underprivileged communities.
- Involve organised civil society in the EU external relations mechanism for the democratic implementation of Agenda 2030.
- Better involve youth in decision-making processes and adequate budget for institutional development.
- Ensure accountability and tracing of European arms sales.

SDG 17: Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalise the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development



Main achievements:

The European Green Deal plays a central role in strengthening EU and global partnership for the implementation of the SDGs.

Internally, the EU adopted the Climate Pact and the Rural Pact, shifting towards a more participatory model of engaging with civil society, stakeholders and local communities. The Recovery Plan, NextGenerationEU and the long-term EU budget 2021-2027 have been designed to finance the implementation of the Green Deal in a holistic and inclusive way. Externally, the Green Deal and in particular the Farm to Fork and Biodiversity Strategies can play a central role in future trade deals if they become the new global standards on sustainability. In this context, the WTO should better take into account the SDGs and the fight against climate change.

Challenging areas where further actions are needed:

Overall, the progress on SDG 17 is too slow and significant challenges remain regarding the EU's spill-overs related to economic and financial flows. The EU VR should conduct a critical assessment of policy coherence for sustainable development, using the methodology developed by UNEP to report on SDG Indicator 17.14.1. "number of countries with mechanisms in place to enhance policy coherence of sustainable development". Action is required to:

- Promote the active participation of all parts of society and social partners – enterprises, workers, researchers, consumers, communities and citizens and their organisations – in the green and just transition to ensure that no one is left behind; in particular, foster more structured engagement of young people.
- Ensure meaningful integration of the SDGs in the Better Regulation toolbox. Although the revised Better Regulation package contains a new tool on SDG integration (Tool #19), and integrates the SDGs in impact assessments and evaluation, it still relies on retrofitting SDG contributions to policy proposal, leading to SDG cherry-picking.
- Guarantee that the implementation of trade deals will contribute to sustainable development in the EU and in partner countries; adequately implement the recent Communication from the European Commission entitled *The power of trade partnerships: together for green and just economic growth*, including on reinforcing the role of civil society and the social partners (e.g. via the Domestic Advisory Groups); continue promoting more ambitious and enforceable trade and sustainable development chapters in international trade agreements with strong civil society monitoring; and have a leading position on transformative WTO.
- Promote policy coherence through an overarching strategy and a governance structure to enhance the implementation of Agenda 2030 (see introduction).
- Foster more structured engagement of civil society, e.g. via a forum or a platform; ensure a more inclusive approach to partnerships including representation of the most deprived communities.

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