



Position on the Comprehensive Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Europe

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Key demands

In order to implement the 2030 Agenda in Europe, the European Youth Forum calls on the European institutions and the Members States to adopt overarching strategies based on the following principles:

- A comprehensive strategy needs to **integrate the three dimensions of sustainable development (society, environment & economy) at the highest level.**
- **Alternative measures of progress in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)** should become the new yardstick for success for European decision-makers.
- Strategies should be underpinned by an **in-depth gap analysis of existing policy frameworks, processes and mechanisms.**
- An overarching strategy needs to be **universal within the competences of European governments at all level.** Strategies must **mainstream Sustainable Development into all governmental institutions.**
- **Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development (PCSD)** must be fully incorporated in strategies oriented towards the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.
- Strategies must **include specific measures for all vulnerable groups, including young people.**
- Governments need to ensure that **adequate resources are collected and channelled towards sustainable ends.**
- **There must be new and meaningful ways for young people and youth organisations to participate in the implementation and review of the 2030 Agenda** by establishing appropriate, binding and inclusive processes for participation.

1. Introduction

Nobody knows exactly what a sustainable world will look like. However, historical trends backed by scientific evidence in relation to climate change, poverty and inequality point to the fact that, in order to achieve the goals of the 2030 Agenda, we need to go beyond incremental change and focus on systemic change. It will not be sufficient to focus on technical solutions or additional financing. The 2030 Agenda acknowledges that “bold and transformative steps [...] are urgently needed to shift the world on to a sustainable and resilient path”¹. Sustainable development is a political agenda with the redistribution of power and resources at its heart. But how do we get there?

The answer to this question cannot be found in the 2030 Agenda itself. It does not make any reference to the root causes of poverty and climate change let alone the deeper structural changes necessary to tackle these. It does not include clear and effective enforcement mechanisms, let alone propose solutions to tackle structural inequalities, deep institutional lock-ins and short-termism. The Agenda is merely a tool to affect change. The big task is to collectively think through what the SDGs are meant to change and how they can best be used to do so.

Effective implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development will require a theory of change — a way to think about how we are to get Europe from ‘here’ in 2018 to ‘there’ in 2030. In this context, this position paper identifies some of the policy conditions that must be in place for the Goals to be met. It should be read as an advocacy guide for youth and civil society organisations and a call for action addressing European and national decision-makers on how to use this tool to reassess and change institutional structures and policies for alternatives to current unsustainable economic, social and political models to flourish. It will be followed by a policy paper that takes a closer look at how change can occur based on and parallel to the institutional preconditions laid out in this position paper.

2. The Role of Youth

Young people are key actors in finding solutions for sustainable development. Youth organisations can play a strong role in the achievement of the 2030 Agenda through, inter alia, raising awareness on the issues the Agenda seeks to tackle, advocating for the achievement of the Agenda and implementing parts of the Agenda through projects in areas such as providing development education, breaking down barriers between young people, engaging in dialogue at all levels and changing consumption patterns in younger generations. Youth organisations can also serve as role models in the achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development by sharing best practices, cooperating with other civil society stakeholders and contributing to the action of public authorities.

In turn, the 2030 Agenda recognises young people as “critical agents for change”² and youth rights and needs are embedded to a greater or lesser extent throughout the SDGs. In this

¹ United Nations (2015). *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. Available at: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld>.

²United Nations (2015). *Op. cit.*.

context, young people's empowerment and participation should be understood as both a means and an end if sustainable development is to be achieved.

Yet, many young people still experience limited civic and political inclusion in the policy processes seeking to implement the 2030 Agenda and face barriers in accessing their rights. Youth organisations often face legal and financial barriers to become more relevant and better equipped to sustain their role as the main vehicle for youth participation in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Further, youth is often subject to much higher rates of unemployment and poverty as well as lacking access to basic services such as health and education.

In order to meet the SDGs, governments must unlock young people's potential as agents for change by systematically investing in meaningful youth participation. Young people today, as former UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon pointed out, are "the first generation that can put an end to poverty and [...] the last generation that can put an end to climate change"³. In other words, the current generation of young people lives in a time of unprecedented opportunity, but also urgency to act. In order to harness the creativity and energy of young people, however, Europe needs the right policies and a conducive institutional environment that is created with young people and for young people with the overarching goal of sustainable development.

3. Implementing the 2030 Agenda in Europe

In order to create such an environment, the European Youth Forum makes the following recommendations to set the institutional and policy preconditions under which the SDGs can be achieved in Europe by reorienting the *goals*, *structures*, *means* and *processes* of the EU and European governments towards sustainable development.

3.1 Goals: Overarching Strategy and Genuine Measures of Progress

At EU level, both the European Parliament Resolution from May 2016⁴ and the Council Conclusions from June 2017⁵ call on the European Commission to develop an overarching Sustainable Development Strategy for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Yet, more than two years after the adoption of the SDGs, European Commission First Vice-President Frans Timmermans who has been given horizontal responsibility on the issue, has still not responded to these requests. Instead, in the most recent Commission Work Plan⁶, the

³ Speech of UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon at UN Youth Forum in February 2015. Available at: <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=49971#.WIOTc5M-f5Y>.

⁴ European Parliament (2016). *Follow-up and state of play of the Agenda 2030 and Sustainable Development Goals*. Available at: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+TA+P8-TA-2016-0224+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN>.

⁵ Council of the European Union (2017). *A sustainable European future: The EU response to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (Council Conclusions). Available at: <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/23989/st10370-en17.pdf>.

⁶ European Commission (2017). *Commission Work Programme 2018: An agenda for a more united, stronger and more democratic Europe*. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/cwp_2018_annex_i_en.pdf.

European Commission proposed an unambitious and non-legislative Reflection Paper for follow-up to the UN Sustainable Development Goals to be published in 2018. Likewise, most European governments are themselves lacking a comprehensive implementation strategy. The European Youth Forum therefore calls on the European Commission and European governments, as a first step, to **adopt overarching strategies** covering the implementation of the 2030 Agenda **based on the following principles**:

A comprehensive strategy needs to **integrate the three dimensions of sustainable development at the highest level**. Currently, the European Semester is the main annual coordination instrument of the EU's macro-economic objectives involving both the EU and its Member States. The European Semester also monitors EU countries' efforts towards environmental and social "Europe 2020" targets⁷. An overarching strategy for Sustainable Development at EU level needs to replace the European Semester or transform the European Semester in a way in which its social and environmental objectives are strengthened. European governments need new strategies at the highest level, rather than integrating the SDGs into current growth strategies, in order to rigorously implement the 2030 Agenda. Some European countries have already taken initial steps in the right direction. In Finland, for instance, the Prime Minister's Office has assumed responsibility and established a coordination secretariat for planning, preparing, coordinating and ensuring the national implementation of Agenda 2030.⁸

In a similar vein, in order to be **transformational**, an overarching strategy needs to let go of measuring progress purely in terms of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), as all European governments currently do. Instead, **alternative measures of progress in line with the SDGs** should become the new yardstick for success for European decision-makers. In the December 2014 Council Conclusions⁹ on a transformative post-2015 agenda, Member States committed themselves to "look beyond GDP to broader measures of progress, including social, human and natural capital, to address a more comprehensive idea of sustainable livelihoods and well-being". This was reflected in SDG Target 17.19, which commits all UN Member States to "build on existing initiatives to develop measurements of progress on sustainable development that complement gross domestic product". The European Youth Forum calls on European governments to follow up on this commitment.

The EU and European governments should be prepared to **go beyond business-as-usual**. Before any adequate treatment through a strategy, governments need to make a correct diagnosis of the problems. This can only be ensured if strategies are underpinned by an **in-depth gap analysis of existing policy frameworks, processes and mechanisms**. The Council Conclusions from June 2017¹⁰ demand a gap analysis "in all relevant policy areas in order to assess what more needs to be done until 2030 in terms of EU policy, legislation,

⁷ See: The European Semester: why and how. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/economic-and-fiscal-policy-coordination/eu-economic-governance-monitoring-prevention-correction/european-semester/framework/european-semester-why-and-how_en

⁸ Prime Minister's Office Publications (2016) - implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Finland.

Available at: https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/10611Finland_VNR.pdf.

⁹Council of the European Union (2014). *Council conclusions on a transformative post-2015 agenda*. Available at: http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/foraff/146311.pdf.

¹⁰Council of the European Union (2017). *Op. cit.*

governance structure for horizontal coherence and means of implementation". This shows the general willingness of Member States to undertake such an exercise, but most still need to follow up on these good intentions.

Universality was perhaps the most ground-breaking element of the SDGs vis-à-vis its predecessor, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), that set goals merely for "developing countries". Likewise, an overarching strategy needs to be **universal within the competences of European government institutions**. In many instances, European governments treat Sustainable Development as separate from other policy areas or strategic objectives. Luxembourg, for instance, has a Ministry of Sustainable Development and Infrastructure.¹¹ While new entities and responsibilities will need to be created through an overarching strategy, such a strategy must **mainstream Sustainable Development into all governmental institutions**. All government bodies must be made accountable for the implementation and the monitoring of the sustainable development strategy.

Mainstreaming SDGs, however, will not be enough. In addition, it is critical that **Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development (PCSD) is fully incorporated** into any strategy as one of the key enabling factors for realising the 2030 Agenda. PCSD is anchored in SDG Target 17.14 and refers to an approach that seeks to integrate all dimensions of sustainable development at all stages of domestic and international policy making. In practice, PCSD should ensure that a government's action or policy in one particular area has, at the very least, no negative effect in other areas and does not conflict with other countries' ability to realise their people's human rights.

Sustainable development is by its nature a topic that requires long-term thinking and planning. Strategies should reflect this fact by **establishing timeframes with a long-term vision** to 2030 and intermediate goals to ensure progress is on track. Such long-term planning can ensure a coherent strategy, irrespective of changing leadership in a country.

Finally, in the spirit of the 2030 Agenda's principle of "leaving no one behind", overarching strategies must **include specific measures for all vulnerable groups, including young people**. Such measures for young people might range from supporting citizenship education, in both formal and non-formal settings, to easing transition of young people from education to an ever-changing labour market, or supporting youth organisations in implementing the 2030 Agenda. In addition, **disaggregated data is needed** to ensure that marginalised groups are adequately addressed through social inclusion and a prioritisation of the most vulnerable.

3.2 Structures: Recognising Inter-linkages between Goals

The inter-linkages between all SDGs and dimensions of Sustainable Development necessitate the **creation of new and different structures and ways of working between and within different government institutions and with other stakeholders**. In order to ensure PCSD as well as effectiveness and ownership in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, **actions need to be taken in the following areas:**

¹¹ See: <http://www.developpement-durable-infrastructures.public.lu/fr/index.php>.

Implementing the SDGs can only be achieved through strong involvement of all stakeholders. Therefore, **multi-stakeholder platforms are needed** to draw on expertise from all sectors of society. The European Commission has recently set up a high level multi-stakeholder platform on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals¹² that could serve as an example for European countries to follow. However, the role, structure and working methods of the platform need to be strengthened to have a real impact on policy and representation of all sectors of society needs to be ensured.

Further, there is a need to **create institutional roles for long-term planning** with a specific aim to defend the needs of future generations and the natural systems on which they will depend. Wales, for instance, has introduced a Future Generations Commissioner in order to help public bodies and those who make policy to think about the long-term impact their decisions have.¹³

Within existing governmental structures, all ministries or Directorates-General must improve their ways of working to ensure a comprehensive approach to implementation and the management of conflicting objectives, so-called **cross-sectoral integration**. At the EU level, First Vice-President Timmermans and the European Commission Secretariat General have been charged with this role and introduced the Better Regulation Package¹⁴, but mechanisms for cross-sectoral integration are still insufficient and **roles and responsibilities need to be clearly defined**. The same holds true for **multi-level integration**, i.e. the alignment of actions at the regional, national, sub-national and local level. The Committee of the Regions should take on a key-coordinating role to ensure actions at different levels are pulling in the same direction and partnerships with non-EU countries need to be fostered.

Finally, **democratic oversight** of the implementation process must be strengthened. National Parliaments must create bodies that have the capacity to actively monitor and review SDG implementation. At EU level, this could take the form of the creation of a new standing committee or intergroup in the European Parliament charged with this.

3.3 Means: SDG-Proof Finances

Implementing the SDGs in Europe will require adequate financial resources. The 2015 Addis Ababa Action Agenda¹⁵ spells out the need for “cohesive nationally owned sustainable development strategies, supported by integrated national financing frameworks”. Astronomic sums in the trillions of euros are often put forward as needed to finance the SDGs. However, the quality of financing is at least as important as the quantity. Achieving the SDGs will

¹² European Commission (2017) - Commission decision of 22.5.2017 on setting up the multi-stakeholder platform on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals in the EU Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/commission-decision-22_may-on-sdg-stakeholder-platform_en.pdf.

¹³ See: <https://futuregenerations.wales/>.

¹⁴ See: European Commission (2015). Better Regulation Agenda: Enhancing transparency and scrutiny for better EU law-making. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/law-making-process/planning-and-proposing-law/better-regulation-why-and-how_en

¹⁵ United Nations (2015). *Addis Ababa Action Agenda of the Third International Conference on Financing for Development*. Available at: http://www.un.org/esa/ffd/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/AAAA_Outcome.pdf.

require a new financing paradigm that addresses the highly unequal distribution of resources. Governments need to ensure that **adequate resources are collected and channelled towards sustainable ends by the following means:**

Regional, national, subnational and local **budgets will need to be revised and aligned with 2030 Agenda**. At EU level, the EU's next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) provides an important occasion to ensure such alignment with the 2030 Agenda from 2020 onwards. The European Youth Forum will publish a detailed position in its upcoming *Policy Paper on the Post-2020 MFF*. At all levels, the financing needs must be assessed on the basis of a comprehensive, correct and disaggregated costing of the entire overarching implementation strategies.

In order to finance the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, national governments and the EU need to follow up on their commitments to **create additional revenues and sources of financing**. Examples include the phasing out government subsidies for fossil fuels¹⁶ and the introduction of financial transaction taxes and carbon taxes¹⁷. Fighting tax avoidance and evasion could also contribute to addressing financing gaps in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

Additional resources gathered through the means above must be invested in **new and existing initiatives that support young people to get engaged in sustainable development**. A positive example can be found in the European Commission's deliberation to dedicate €40 million to creating volunteering opportunities in the areas of environment and climate action by 2020 in the realm of the European Solidarity Corps¹⁸. Additional funding for Erasmus+ in line with the European Youth Forum's Policy Paper on the Erasmus+ successor programme¹⁹ could create additional opportunities for young people to get involved and Member States should increase co-financing for relevant initiatives at national level.

3.4 Processes: Inclusive Implementation and Review

¹⁶ See European Parliament (2014). *European Parliament resolution of 5 February 2014 on a 2030 framework for climate and energy policies*. Available at: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=TA&language=EN&reference=P7-TA-2014-0094> and EU (2017). *The new European Consensus on Development: "Our World, our Dignity, our Future"*. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/sites/devco/files/european-consensus-on-development-final-20170626_en.pdf.

¹⁷ See European Parliament (2017). *European Parliament resolution of 19 May 2015 on Financing for Development*. Available at: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+TA+P8-TA-2015-0196+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN>.

¹⁸ European Commission (2017). *EU Invests in the Planet: Ten Initiatives for a Modern and Clean Economy*. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/one-planet-summit-ten-initiatives-modern-clean-economy_en.pdf.

¹⁹ Calls for "The Erasmus+ successor programme should be developed in a global perspective and contribute to the EU strategy to promote Sustainable Development Goals among the beneficiaries of the programme"; European Youth Forum (2017). *Policy Paper on the Erasmus+ successor programme*.

Available at: http://www.youthforum.org/assets/2017/11/0119-17_PP_ErasmusPlus_Successor_Programme.pdf

With regard to civil society participation in the implementation of the Agenda, it is important to remember that States remain the primary duty-bearer for the achievement of the SDGs, but that civil society is officially involved in any partnership for their implementation. European governments must therefore **create new and meaningful ways for young people and youth organisations to participate in the implementation and review of the 2030 Agenda** by establishing appropriate, binding and inclusive processes for participation:

Civil society participation in existing mechanisms must be strengthened. Current mechanisms for follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda such as the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) aspire to adhere to principles for civil society inclusion. In practice, however, the space given to civil society to voice their opinions in VNRs is often very limited. Access, quality of consultations and processes need to be improved to generate meaningful participation. Generally, all formal consultations with civil society organisations must ensure **equal weight of all stakeholders** participating in consultation processes.

As far as contribution of young people, both organised and non-organised, is concerned, the **creation of multiple participatory review mechanisms** will be necessary to be inclusive of all people in the population, such as people with disabilities, those living in rural locations, and the ones who are the hardest to reach. Examples of such mechanisms include social audits, scorecards, surveys and online polling. European governments must also **respect civil and political rights**, including freedom of speech and assembly, freedom of the media²⁰ and full transparency and availability of information to all actors. It is the responsibility of governments to actively reach out to the general public and encourage people to get involved as well as to **communicate national and European implementation plans for the 2030 Agenda**.

Finally, **stakeholders need to be fully engaged in target- and indicator setting** to ensure the highest level of ambition towards SDGs. At the EU level, the Eurostat reporting should be transformed into a framework in which civil society can participate through regular stocktaking sessions. These sessions should result in annual political and statistical progress reports on SDG implementation in line with an overarching strategy as outlined above and include disaggregated data for different groups in society such as young people.

4. Conclusion

Youth is already playing and must continue to play a central role in working towards sustainable development. Young people hold the keys to the future, with innovative minds and energy to make the changes necessary for future generations to meet their needs. However, youth cannot bring about widespread change without the support of governments as duty bearers in the process.

European governments and institutions urgently need the courage and political will to take a great leap towards a sustainable future in line with the recommendations of the European

²⁰ See for instance – Statement by RADA (National Youth Council of Belarus) – July 2017 http://www.youthforum.org/assets/2017/07/10.07.2017-ENG_Statement-of-the-Belarusian-National-Youth-Council---RADA--4.pdf

Youth Forum outlined in this position paper. By adopting an ambitious overarching strategy for sustainable development that guides European policies towards transformation; adjusting governance structures to account for the inter-linkages between SDGs; advancing a new and sustainable financing paradigm for SDG implementation; and ensuring the inclusion of all stakeholders in the process, European governments and institutions can lead by example and make a real difference for current and future generations and for the planet.