



Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Securing Our Planet: A Call for Policy Coherence for Global Sustainability

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The SDGs are a milestone in policy advancement for sustainability. They are the result of a continuous improvement process from the Millennium Development Goals, striving for a broader perspective on the needs of, and the ways to achieve, sustainable development. Their implementation is, at the same time, an opportunity for further improvement, highlighting knowledge gaps and most effective policy actions that will feed into post-2030 Agenda initiatives. With this aim, The European Environment Agency is working in consultation with Eurostat for perfecting the EU indicators for monitoring progress towards the SDGs (Eurostat, 2019), in particular by providing indicators for the SDGs with a core environmental dimension such as SDG 13 on climate action, and SDGs 14 and 15 on life below water and life on land. In considering multiple dimensions of development as equally important for sustainability, the SDGs highlight how the choice of ‘the environment versus the economy’ is indeed a false choice, as nature is a major contributor to human wellbeing and the real economy, and preserving nature is essential for sustainable development, also from an economic perspective (Costanza et al., 2014).

In this context, the 2019 Sustainable Development Transformation Forum “From Incremental Progress to Transformation: Achieving the SDGs and Securing Our Planet” (SDTF), aligns with envisioning a transformation for Sustainable Development where environmental, social and economic goals are achieved in synergy, fading out possible trade-offs. In fact, synergies and trade-offs exist among the SDGs, as progresses towards some goals might reinforce, or impair, the achievement of others. At the same time, the achievement of targets and goals locally could come at the expense of hampering sustainable development abroad, a particularly relevant aspect in the global production and consumption scenario.

In this briefing, we highlight two key points emerging from recent research on the SDGs, in particular the need of coherence across the SDGs, and the need of coherence across actions for achieving the SDGs at the local as well as the global scale.

KEY POINT 1

There is a need for stronger policy coherence across the SDGs and policymaking, including business and civil society.

Policy coherence for sustainable development is mostly discussed regarding the implementation and improvement of national policies. However, the role of global business and civil society groups are not sufficiently recognized, while they indeed play a role in the production of sustainability policies across national borders (Mortensen and Petersen, 2017). The UN 2030 Agenda tends to overlook innovative policies in the transnational corporate and civilian spheres, highlighting a lack of understanding from decision makers on how a broader range of stakeholders in business and civil society are crucial for policy coherence for sustainable development. Instead, the role of new business models and civil society groups is central in other policy frameworks that could align with the Agenda 2030.

This is the case, for example, of the New Circular Economy Action Plan announced by the EU Commission (Von der Leyen, 2019). Innovative business models, including models based on prosumerisms, collaborative consumption and re-use and recycling, are giving rise to a burgeoning “sharing economy”, whose effects must be accounted for as effective means for progressing towards many of the SDGs (Fioramonti, et al., 2019).

Policy coherence in a broader range of stakeholders is crucial for addressing trade-offs and strengthening synergies across the SDGs, as numerous examples of positive and negative interactions among the goals are being pointed-out by research (e.g. Scherer et al., 2018; Pradhan et al., 2017; Lu et al., 2015; Le Blanc, 2015; Costanza et al., 2016). For example, progresses towards SDG 7 on improve energy access, could undermine the achievement of SDG 13 on climate action, if fossil fuels are used (Nilsson et al., 2016). Innovative business models promoting smart renewable energy grids in prosumer communities have the potential to solve this and similar trade-offs if enabled and supported by national and local policies. On the other hand, positive interactions between goals will reinforce the effect of specific policy actions, as synergies hold, for example, on reducing inequality, including gender inequality, and SDGs on education, poverty eradication and health promotion (Niessen et al., 2018).

The need for policy coherence from multiple areas emerges from this picture, as achieving the SDGs demands a coherent narrative both within and across the goals (Mortensen and Petersen, 2017), and an alignment of the goals with other policy initiatives for sustainability and emerging new business models.



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KEY POINT 2

There is a need for recognising and accounting for the impacts of consumption in producers' countries, as this is affecting the achievement of SDGs.

Climate change and the loss of biodiversity are developmental issues, as much as environmental, economic, security, social and moral issues (IPBES, 2019). At the same time, they are global issues, as they have to do with processes functioning at the global scale and with recognizing the existence of planetary boundaries.

By pointing at aspects such as 'the global environmental commons', 'building sustainable and just economies', 'universal access to energy', and 'building coalitions and new governance modes', discussions at the 2019 Sustainable Development Transformation Forum will much probably challenge the SDGs on their lack of consideration of transboundary issues and the impacts of our actions as consumers in the global market, particularly relevant for the Asia-Europe context.

Local consumption patterns and behaviours affect the ability to achieve SDGs in other countries of the world through purchasing goods with high embodied environmental

and social impacts in their production and/or disposal phases. Different approaches for accounting and allocating responsibilities based on consumption are available but not fully acknowledged and implemented by policy and decision makers (Davis and Caldeira, 2010; Caro et al., 2017). Transnational investments on land often result in unsustainable agricultural practices, environmental impacts, worsening welfare of local communities, and the violation of human rights (i.e. so-called "land-grabbing"; Rulli et al., 2013; Coscieme et al., 2016). A lamentable shortcoming of the SDGs is that they fail to address these issues (Koff and Maganda, 2016). Future post 2030 Agenda initiatives will largely benefit from focusing on transnational impacts to assess the effects of local policies on global challenges for sustainability. This opens opportunities for fully delivering the transformation we need in governance and people's preferences, behaviour, and values.



Climate change and the loss of biodiversity are developmental issues, as much as environmental, economic, security, social and moral issues

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