

**Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions — Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): a basis for a long-term EU strategy for a sustainable Europe by 2030**

(2019/C 404/04)

<b>Rapporteur:</b>	Arnoldas ABRAMAVIČIUS (LT/EPP) Member of Zarasai District Municipal Council
<b>Reference document:</b>	Communication from the Commission – Reflection Paper – Towards a Sustainable Europe by 2030  COM(2019) 22 final

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

### THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

1. welcomes the EU reflection paper Towards a Sustainable Europe by 2030, and calls on the European Commission and the European Council to acknowledge the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a priority for their political agenda, and an overarching objective of the next EU strategic plan 2019-2024 and beyond. Also counts on the new European Commission to pave the way for action in the form of an EU-wide Sustainable Development Strategy and an Implementation Plan as already called for by the European Council conclusions of 18 October 2018;
2. agrees with the comprehensive definition of the SDGs as a framework for political action to face our multiple challenges – economic, social, environmental, governance, external – and insists that all actors need a common understanding of sustainable development and of the SDGs to fully implement them for the well-being of people and future generations. The first intention is to alleviate poverty and reduce inequalities – leaving no one behind, having a peaceful world, creating and sharing prosperity, within the limits of our planet;
3. insists that the 17 SDGs are universal and indivisible, and that policy coherence between actions undertaken to implement them is a core element for progress;

### From reflection to action

4. considers that out of the three scenarios put forward by the European Commission to stimulate the debate on the EU's next steps to implement the 2030 Agenda, Scenario 1 is the only option addressing both the EU's internal and external action and encompassing all policy fields;
5. contends that, given the complex nature of the SDGs and the results of the CoR-OECD survey on local and regional action on SDGs <sup>(1)</sup>, there is an urgent need for an EU overarching strategy coordinating implementation between all levels of government with time-bound targets and concrete deliverables for 2030, together with monitoring and review mechanisms, favouring scenario 1;
6. stresses that SDG implementation targets and related policy strategies should be set in a mixed bottom-up and top-down approach, involving all levels of government and relevant stakeholders and generating a set of country-level and regionally differentiated targets. This strategy for a Sustainable Europe 2030 should succeed the current Europe 2020 strategy;
7. insists that the EU institutions and Member States should accelerate their actions immediately on the SDGs and mainstream all policies as listed in scenario 2;

<sup>(1)</sup> This survey received more than 400 replies. Results and more information can be consulted at [https://cor.europa.eu/en/news/Pages/SDGs\\_survey.aspx](https://cor.europa.eu/en/news/Pages/SDGs_survey.aspx)

8. highlights that the external action as presented in scenario 3 is needed. However, a focus on external action only would not only harm the credibility of the EU at international level, but would also fail to recognise that the EU and its Member States are far from achieving all SDGs and would also prevent progress in achieving them in the EU;

9. stresses that the ambition needs to be higher at all levels to implement the SDGs, namely at European, national, regional and local level;

### **The engagement of regions and cities**

10. highlights that the objective of leaving no one behind requires that all levels of government ensure cross-scale integration and the design of mutually supportive and cohesive (territorial) policies. Calls for the establishment of a mechanism to review progress and to identify the key challenges of implementation of SDGs on the ground and to ensure that resources will be used effectively;

11. points out that 65 % of the 169 targets of the 17 SDGs require the firm engagement of regions and cities in implementing and monitoring the SDGs in order to be achieved <sup>(2)</sup>. Cities and regions localise the SDGs on the ground, not as mere implementers but as policy-makers closest to their citizens, business and local communities. The CoR-OECD survey results further confirm the mobilisation of cities and regions, with 59 % of respondents being in the process of implementing the SDGs. Many European regions and cities have been pioneers <sup>(3)</sup> in this SDG localisation process and have demonstrated that regions and cities are essential for implementing the SDGs effectively and rapidly;

12. highlights the role of promising forerunner initiatives such as the OECD's 'Cities and Regions for the Sustainable Development Goals' and the UN's '25+5 SDG Cities Leadership Platform' in helping volunteer regions and cities localise the SDGs, 5 years before 2030 for the latter;

13. stresses, based on its study on a territorial approach to SDGs <sup>(4)</sup>, the importance of building the capacities and capabilities of regions and cities to localise the SDGs, and enhancing the visibility of current initiatives as well as promoting the use by regions and cities of the EU Structural Reform Support Service (SRSS) <sup>(5)</sup>, whose objectives should be aligned with the SDGs;

14. commits to support the 'SDGs localisation and territorialisation' process and avoid duplication of work by fostering partnerships with international <sup>(6)</sup> and European associations <sup>(7)</sup>;

15. underlines the key role of the European Commission and the Committee of the Regions, together with other European organisations, to stimulate peer review, exchange, collaboration and mutual learning between regions and cities throughout the EU;

16. calls for full recognition of the role of regions in localising the SDGs in the EU. Local and regional authorities play an important role in developing values and social relations, which is why there is a clear need to involve them in the work to build the sustainable development of the whole EU;

17. points out that the EU is highly diverse in terms of development, demographics, production structure and degree of industrialisation, which calls for a flexible and place-based approach towards less developed, remote or island regions as well as regions facing energy transition;

18. supports the establishment of a European Regions Community of Practice for the SDGs, led by nrg4SD;

19. underlines the economic, social and territorial divide globally, as well as inside and between EU Member States. While the SDGs capture the challenge of urbanisation with SDG 11, we need to ensure balanced regional development in the EU to make sure that no one and no territory is left behind;

---

<sup>(2)</sup> UN Sustainable Development Solution Network (2016), Getting Started with the SDGs in Cities. A Guide for Stakeholders, <http://unsdsn.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/9.1.8.-Cities-SDG-Guide.pdf>

<sup>(3)</sup> Such as the Basque Country, the Aland Islands, Espoo, Ghent, Utrecht and North-Rhine-Westphalia.

<sup>(4)</sup> Study commissioned by the CoR: A territorial approach for the implementation of the SDGs in the EU – The role of the European Committee of the Regions (2019).

<sup>(5)</sup> Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions on The Reform Support Programme and European Investment Stabilisation Function (2018/3764, paragraph 12, Rapporteur: Olga Zrihen (BE/PES)).

<sup>(6)</sup> Organisations such as the OECD, ICLEI, the UNDP-ART Initiative and UN-Habitat, and associations such as nrg4SD, UCLGs or Global Task Force.

<sup>(7)</sup> Such as CEMR, Eurocities, CPMR, ESDN, the EEAC Network.

20. highlights the importance of effective synergy and integration of local, regional, national and EU funds, both public and private, and public-private sector collaboration with strategic development and investments in achieving the SDG targets by 2030;
21. highlights that cohesion is the main EU investment instrument for regions and cities to implement the SDGs and ensure their economic, social and territorial development; thus requests that the next EU cohesion financing 2021-2027 remains accessible to all regions, promoting participation from all citizens, based on a legally binding European code of conduct on partnership. The next EU cohesion policy should have its objectives better aligned with the SDGs, so as to ensure better implementation and coherence of actions;
22. stresses that, while the SDGs include an urban goal, SDG 11, there is no dedicated regional goal, and regional development is only referred to indirectly under the heading on land use. A close alignment of cohesion policy with the SDGs therefore implies that the programming of new EU cohesion policy funding addresses all territory-relevant SDGs and not just SDG 11;
23. highlights the model of the European Urban Agenda to foster dialogue between all levels of government on urban sustainable development. This process could inspire the governance design of the future EU Strategic Agenda 2019-2024, so that the EU can more effectively face the challenges in achieving the SDGs;
24. stresses the potential of the CoR proposal <sup>(8)</sup> that the future cohesion policy post-2020 should support regions and cities to 'localise the SDGs' and to align the implementation of sustainable urban development strategies to their local realities;
25. highlights the importance of EU financing instruments for agriculture, research and innovation and EFSI and their synergic use together with cohesion funds to fully achieve the SDGs;

### **Involving all stakeholders**

26. highlights that given the transformative nature of the SDGs, all tiers of society and economy need to have ownership of the SDGs; highlights the importance of private sector and economic business cases in implementing and achieving the SDG targets by 2030;
27. recalls that people are at the centre of SDGs and that partnership, participation and empowerment are core values of sustainable development. The participation of citizens of all ages, civil society in its diversity, academia, public bodies and the private sector in multi-stakeholder dialogues is needed to identify and co-create solutions to achieve the SDGs while striking the right balances in the inevitable trade-offs;
28. emphasises the crucial role of bottom-up movements, favourable conditions and entrepreneurial spirit in cities and regions in achieving SDG targets and smart, sustainable and inclusive growth;
29. encourages multilateral outreach activities on the benefits of sustainable development in order to shape appropriate social attitudes in each age group and in the long term;

### **An EU governance for the SDGs**

30. calls for the new European Commission to take a leading role in setting up multi-level, multi-stakeholder and cross-sectoral governance, as part of scenario 1, enabling the mainstreaming of all dimensions of the SDGs in all EU policies, while ensuring policy coherence between different sectors, and engaging all levels of government and stakeholders, including citizens, at all stages of policy-making;
31. highlights the crucial importance of learning, as political leadership is of the utmost importance, and notes that both politicians and administrations need to be trained and engaged on the SDGs, and that each EU institution needs to mainstream the SDGs in their own governance;

---

<sup>(8)</sup> Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions on the future European Regional Development Fund and Cohesion Fund beyond 2020.

32. recommends that the next European Commission president appoints a dedicated team attached to her/his office to work with all Commissioners and screen all policy proposals on the SDGs. It should highlight potential conflicts and necessary trade-offs and will be in charge of mainstreaming the SDGs within all EU policies. This will entail strong coordination across directorates-general;
33. urges the next European Commission president to report on the implementation of the SDGs on an annual basis to the European Parliament during her/his State of the Union address, as well as to the Council of General Affairs;
34. urges the Council to encourage the implementation of the SDGs and foster mutual learning at national level via the discussion of voluntary national reviews (VNRs) within the Council of General Affairs, ahead of presentations scheduled during UN high-level political forums;
35. urges the European Parliament, as co-legislator, to mainstream the SDGs within all its relevant policy files and engage all committees on dealing with the implementation of the SDGs; calls for standing rapporteurs on the SDGs in its different committees;
36. commits to work in an integrated and coherent manner on the SDGs and mainstream them in all CoR commissions and opinions;
37. proposes a collaboration with the Commission and other partners on the monitoring of SDG implementation at local/regional level; welcomes the work of the SDG Multi-stakeholder Platform organised by the European Commission as open and participative governance; strongly supports its continuation in order to involve regions, cities, civil society, academia and business in an inclusive sustainability dialogue and to create ownership of the SDGs;
38. welcomes that the European Commission included the recommendations of the platform within the reflection paper;
39. envisions the platform as a permanent advisory body for consultation by EU decision-makers – the European Commission, the Council and the European Parliament – on an overarching strategy for a Sustainable Europe 2030 as well as briefing the new European Commissioners and MEPs on the SDGs;
40. calls for the regular involvement of European, national and subnational platforms in the work of the EU multi-stakeholder platform in order to reinforce its work and representativeness;
41. calls on all EU institutions to engage in a regular interinstitutional dialogue on the SDGs, including the European Commission, the Council, the European Parliament as well as the European Committee of the Regions and the European Economic and Social Committee, in order to ensure policy coherence, in the spirit of SDG 17;

### **Mainstreaming the SDGs within EU policies**

42. encourages the European Commission to use the Better Regulation guidelines as a tool to help design legislation taking into account all dimensions of the SDGs. These guidelines should show clearly all the variables to consider if one wants to adopt a sustainable approach;
43. contends that trade-offs will be inevitable between the different dimensions of the SDGs and calls for systematic *ex-ante* impact assessments to identify possible synergies and conflicts, as well as to assess trade-offs transparently, taking into account immediate and long-term impact. Territorial impact assessment as well as participatory debates with citizens and stakeholders at local and regional level will be instrumental in securing acceptance of decisions and ensuring good policy-making;
44. acting as an example to other institutions and organisations, the Committee of the Regions commits to holding annual conferences during which local and regional experiences and good practices will be presented;

45. calls on all the EU institutions and Member States to align the European semester to the SDGs and a subsequent EU strategy for a Sustainable Europe 2030. Multi-annual guidance should ensure that the European semester enforces the EU strategy and becomes a coordination and enforcement tool for the SDGs and that the Annual Growth Survey therefore becomes the 'Annual Sustainable Development Survey';

46. calls for a multi-annual EU Sustainable Development Survey which will launch a multi-annual national cycle of reviewing and reporting of recommendations. This survey should take stock of the implementation of the EU strategy and the Member States' Sustainable Development Action Plans. This would provide the basis for EU countries' VNRs in the UN context;

47. requests that the governance of the Sustainable European Semester within the Commission involves all relevant Commission services and avoids 'silo initiatives';

48. reiterates its request that the governance of the European semester be based on the principles of partnership and multilevel governance, taking EU regions and cities on board as full partners since the beginning of the annual cycle, based on a code of conduct <sup>(9)</sup> <sup>(10)</sup>;

49. calls on the EU institutions to use the EU budget to mainstream the SDGs in all policies, notably halting subsidies for fossil fuels and reinforcing sustainability criteria in public procurement;

50. reaffirms the need to monitor the implementation of the SDGs and calls for disaggregating data, at least at NUTS2 level, and where necessary at local level, to enable better policy-making where the national average is misleading;

51. reiterates <sup>(11)</sup> the need to go beyond GDP and use additional indicators which are not purely economic in nature but capture the transformative nature of the SDGs, and which should be measured at NUTS2 level at least through disaggregated data relevant to the achievement of the SDGs;

52. points out that pioneering regions and cities do elaborate their own indicators and collect their data in partnership with local actors including the private sector. The development of local indicators represents a good opportunity to foster participation and ownership. However, 40 % of the respondents of the CoR-OECD survey do not use any indicators. EU indicators may not be used because of the lack of data available at NUTS2 level to use them locally;

53. proposes that the EU Joint Research Centre set up an urban SDG data platform to make a European handbook of voluntary cities implementing the SDGs; further notes the work of the World Council City Data which set up ISO standards for indicators for smart and resilient cities, as well as the work of the OECD elaborating a visualisation tool, combining official indicators with modelled ones at regional and local level to take into account regional disparities;

54. calls on Eurostat to include this work and the progress measured in its annual monitoring report, leaving space for qualitative data as well. The CoR is ready to collaborate and foster cooperation with these partners to monitor SDG implementation at local/regional level;

55. reiterates that many regions and cities are stepping forward and becoming forerunners in this transition, with successful bottom-up initiatives, such as the Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy and the CoR Ambassadors operating on that. These bottom-up movements can gain a new momentum and a strong step forward in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals;

### **The external dimension of the SDGs**

56. insists that the EU takes into account the external dimension of the SDGs when implementing them, including the external impact of its domestic policies, for example for the CAP or trade. Internal and external dimensions are not separate worlds and the pursuit of policy coherence for sustainable development is essential;

---

<sup>(9)</sup> Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions on Improving the governance of the European Semester: a Code of Conduct for the involvement of local and regional authorities (COR 2016/5386).

<sup>(10)</sup> Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions on The European Semester and Cohesion Policy: aligning structural reforms with long-term investments (2018/5504).

<sup>(11)</sup> Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions on Indicators for territorial development – GDP and beyond - adopted on 11 February 2016.

57. requests a partnership between the EU, national, regional and local level to help implement the SDGs through development cooperation;

58. requests that the role of global supply chains be better monitored to make sure the rule of law and human rights are respected, and that circular economy practices are implemented and overuse of resources is avoided;

59. insists on the key role of decentralised cooperation and CoR initiatives such as the EC-CoR Forum 'Cities and Regions for Development Cooperation', which in February 2019 focused on sustainable urban partnerships, brought together over 500 participants from more than 80 countries and elaborated concrete policy recommendations on promoting sustainable development through regional and local partnerships, or the Nicosia Initiative of support to Libyan municipalities. These CoR initiatives showcase that EU support should not focus exclusively on large-scale partnership projects between big cities, but equally be accessible to decentralised cooperation initiatives of different sizes and involving different types of territories;

60. regrets that the European Commission proposal for the new Neighbourhood Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) does not include a thematic funding line dedicated to supporting local authorities;

61. calls on the European Commission to support the economic and social integration of young people, women and uprooted populations in developing countries. The partnership logic of decentralised cooperation can help transform the perception of migration as a threat into migration as an opportunity, especially given the key role regions and cities play in integrating migrants into their host societies;

## EU policies

62. agrees with the reflection paper's diagnosis and proposal to work further on four policy clusters and four horizontal enablers as a matter of priority, having, however, the following additional observations:

63. insists that beyond the proposed increase of the climate change mainstreaming target to 25 %, the new MFF should allocate relevant financial resources for sustainable development and also ensure that no funding undermines the implementation of the SDGs;

64. underlines the urgency of adopting the strategies and defining actions towards a resource-efficient circular economy by implementing the Paris Agreement with no further delay;

65. highlights that the CoR further explores in a separate opinion<sup>(12)</sup> the links between UN Sustainable Development Goals, ecological transition and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. This opinion will set out the strategic view of the EU cities and regions for achieving the transition to a resource-efficient, low-carbon and climate-neutral, bio-diverse economy;

66. insists that sustainable consumption and production also imply a reduction of the use of non-renewable resources in absolute terms to move towards resource sufficiency and not only resource efficiency;

67. emphasises the particular potential of bioeconomy in terms of fostering independence from fossil fuels and counteracting climate change by means of carbon neutrality. The greatest possible use of bio-based products in as wide a range of sectors as possible also helps to secure and create jobs in new, sustainable markets – notably including previously less-industrialised regions;

68. contends that regions can help achieve the objective of significantly increasing the share of innovative bio-based industries as part of gross domestic product in the next decade;

69. calls for a follow-up to the Commission's 'Action Plan on Financing Sustainable Growth' as finance needs to be used to leverage the change that gives returns for sustainability and not only financial returns<sup>(13)</sup>;

---

<sup>(12)</sup> Sustainable Europe by 2030: Follow-up to the UN Sustainable Development Goals, ecological transition and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change (ENVE-VI/039) Rapporteur: Ms Sirpa Hertell (FI/EPP).

<sup>(13)</sup> Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions on Financing Sustainable Growth (2182/2018) adopted on 6 December 2018.

70. calls for the engagement of European business and industry sectors on sustainability as an integral part of the European Industry Strategy 2030 in order to help businesses and industry sectors to accelerate towards more sustainable practices. Such a proposal already listed in the recommendations of the EU multi-stakeholder platform on SDGs should be further discussed by the 'Industry 2030' high-level industrial roundtable and include bioeconomy integrated with the SDGs for discussion;

71. points out that, in order to keep with the Union's policy coherence for development (PCD), the CAP should promote the development of sustainable agriculture in developing countries, which helps maintain rural populations and ensures the security of their food supplies. To this end, EU agricultural and food products should not be exported at a price lower than European production costs;

72. regrets that on mobility the reflection paper does not include the importance of public transport availability for the building of sustainable urban and regional transport systems, and the crucial role of LRAs in this regard;

73. suggests that a new impetus of the EU's sustainable agenda at international level should encompass initiatives to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions at the level of the IMO (maritime transport) and of the ICAO (air transport), in particular through the EU calling for a global tax on kerosene and, if no agreement is reached to levy such a tax at ICAO level, the EU may consider undertaking unilateral action such as abolishing the tax exemption on aviation fuel for internal EU flights, or imposing a fuel charge on air freight;

74. notes that the European mobility industry needs to increase its competitiveness through innovation. The roll-out plan on alternative fuels and digital road infrastructure needs to be taken up by local and regional authorities in cooperation with the private sector and supported by the EU budget;

75. against the background of huge social inequalities outlined in the Reflection Paper such as more than 22 % of EU citizens being at risk of poverty, reiterates its call to fully implement the European Pillar of Social Rights and to devote the same attention to social sustainability factors as to environmental sustainability in order to prove that the EU aims at leaving no one and no territory behind. Indeed, evidence shows that socially fragile territories are also often the most exposed to the negative impact of a lack of sustainable development;

76. requests a more regionalised monitoring of the European Pillar of Social Rights. The CoR is currently developing a regional social scoreboard, which could be used to this end;

77. notes that special attention needs to be devoted to the promotion of active and healthy ageing among Europeans, making a shift from an institutional approach to a community-based approach;

78. reiterates its call for the implementation of a European Agenda for Housing<sup>(14)</sup>, which following up from the EU Urban Agenda's Partnership for Housing, would significantly contribute to the implementation of the SDGs 11 (sustainable cities and communities), but also 1 (no poverty), 7 (affordable energy) and 10 (reduced inequalities);

79. highlights that with the contribution of EU regions and cities, the development of digital technologies can transform demographic change into a triple-win for Europe: to improve the quality of life of our ageing population, to move towards more sustainable health and care systems and to create sustainable economic growth and jobs in the silver economy;

80. emphasises that local and regional authorities have a crucial role to play with regard to gender balance, but recognises that women are significantly underrepresented across the EU with only 15 % of elected mayors, 32 % of members of municipal councils and 33 % of members of regional parliaments or assemblies<sup>(15)</sup> being women;

81. supports the recognition and publicising of non-formal and informal learning in youth work. Youth and sports organisations that provide non-formal and informal educational programmes for active citizenship outside school are especially important for improving young peoples' skills and competences;

<sup>(14)</sup> Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions on Towards a European Agenda for Housing (CDR 1529/2017) adopted on 1 December 2017.

<sup>(15)</sup> European Institute for Gender Equality, Gender statistics database, 2017.

82. emphasises the potential of the EU smart specialisation methodology to be an essential part of Sustainable Europe 2030 policy. The JRC Smart Specialisation Platform helps regions use structural funds in integrating their regional innovation strategies with the SDGs, including via the 'Science meets regions' events organised by the CoR and the JRC. Complementarity between smart specialisation and the implementation of the SDGs at regional level brings essential added value for sustainable growth;

83. stresses that the Emissions Trading Scheme should be among the essential next steps in implementing the reflection paper;

84. regrets that on trade, no reference to the 'comprehensive continent-to-continent free trade agreement between the EU and Africa' was announced during the last State of the Union address. This agreement should be guided by the SDGs and the huge role that trade can play in helping to achieve them;

85. calls for renewed social dialogue in corporate governance to promote the SDGs and new business models to strengthen economic democracy for sustainable growth;

86. insists on the positive role of the social economy in tackling unemployment and promoting inclusive and sustained growth. This is particularly important in regions marked by emigration, a rapidly ageing population, lack of economic dynamism and a low level of entrepreneurship. In such regions, social economy organisations represent one of the ways in which good intentions will promote entrepreneurship and attract the best use of local resources;

Brussels, 26 June 2019.

*The President*  
*of the European Committee of the Regions*  
Karl-Heinz LAMBERTZ

---