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Moving Towards a Sustainable Europe

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Moving Towards a Sustainable Europe

Citizens worldwide are facing immense challenges to sustainable development. Rising poverty and inequalities, increasingly frequent natural disasters, climate change, loss of biodiversity, depletion of natural resources and a growing population, to name only a few of the most pressing issues, require us to act fast and to share the burden on various levels. The European Union, as a driver of peace and prosperity, can create a society, where the benefits of economic activity are equally distributed among its citizens and reconcilable with planetary boundaries, without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

The Global Framework

Back in 2015, the EU agreed to adopt the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a collection of 17 global goals set by the United Nations General Assembly, covering social, economic and environmental issues. The following year, the European Commission put forward an approach towards the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, including the SDGs, up to 2020, but deferred consideration of the period from 2020 to 2030. Sustainability is a global challenge which requires all countries to do their

part. Europe must be a front-runner and global leader when it comes to the implementation of the SDGs.

A European Perspective

The EU has yet to put forward an overarching Sustainable Development Strategy for implementing the 2030 agenda, including a concrete and measurable SDG implementation strategy that covers all the overarching goals and their respective targets. Anchored deeply in the EU treaties as well as in the Charter of Fundamental Rights, sustainability should be at the core of EU policy-making. Coordination at EU level is crucial, as individual actions taken only at Member State level would have limited prospects of success.


EU policy-makers and legislators should be prepared to harness interconnections, synergies and trade-offs so that the SDGs provide a solid policy framework for a sustainable EU. For instance, the Better Regulation programme should adapt its instruments to the SDGs. Member States' contributions and progress towards the SDGs need to be monitored regularly, through annual surveys that pay attention to the social, environmental and economic dimensions of sustainable development.

The implementation of the SDGs should be the subject of a lively and transparent debate that engages citizens and stakeholders from all backgrounds and achievement of the goals requires contributions at all levels. Their implementation must involve all relevant actors in society such as NGOs, social partners, local governments, businesses and civil society.

Social Sustainability

Promoting the protection and well-being of citizens should be at the core of a sustainable future. Europe needs to change the narrative that sees a social model as an obstacle to competitiveness and economic growth. Following the economic crisis, new imbalances and inequalities have widened between the EU's different countries and regions, between genders, social classes and generations. Those now need to be overcome through bolder and more innovative policies.

The European Pillar of Social Rights can be a vital instrument to achieve social justice and equality in the EU and is key to attaining the SDGs. While the Pillar is above all a political commitment, the EU should promote mainstreaming the social priorities in EU compe-



tencies, using the Pillar as basis for new common legislation and with the European Semester as a principal vehicle for doing so. Public services, collaborative work, social economy and social entrepreneurship could be promoted both as models for tackling unemployment and as models for greater social inclusion and cohesion. Sound public services should ensure access to services that are fundamental and of general interest.

On gender equality, every parent should each be entitled to an adequate fixed period of parental leave. More effort should be made to reach Europe-wide equal pay, independently of gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity and social and religious background. Social protection systems should be adapted to the changing societies and ageing population. At the same time migrants and ethnic minorities are part of the group that suffers the most from structural discriminations in the labour market of their host country. The EU and its member states should ensure better protection and labour market integration of third-country nationals. As part of its efforts to eradicate poverty and social exclu-


sion, the Europe 2020 Strategy with its target to lift at least 20 million people out of the risk of poverty must deliver progress soon, and with particular attention to the most affected groups in society, i.e. women, children, young people, people with disabilities, the unemployed, single-parent households, people with a lower education level and those living in rural areas.

Economic Sustainability

A sustainable and competitive industry is the foundation for smart, innovative growth in Europe providing jobs and welfare for EU citizens. An impactful EU industrial strategy should support entrepreneurship including start-ups and SMEs and facilitate digital transformation. Any policy on sustainability should be based on a strong Skills Agenda for Europe, ensuring that people develop a broad set of skills, especially digital skills, from early on in life. The European Commission should support Member States to learn from each other with regard to national skills policies, taking into account the change of professional profiles and the demands for new skills in the industrial sectors as a result of digitalisation.

The Investment Plan for Europe can contribute to this strategy and should continue to mobilise additional private funding for sustainable projects across Europe, while discouraging investment in unsustainable projects. At the same time, the Juncker Plan should spread investments more evenly across member states. More coordination and communication between the EU institutions, the member states and actors from the private sector can unlock its full potential.

The EU should adjust its economic policy mind-set to allow an increase in national investment towards education and training, and youth employment as well as social services and health care. The Youth Guarantee should be fully implemented for all people under 30 and the Youth Employment Initiative should be strengthened. The implementation of the SDGs implies a deep transformation of production patterns and organisation of work. The social dialogue can play a key role in helping to anticipate change and manage labour tran-



sitions. Good practices already exist but collective bargaining and employee participation are two industrial relation patterns that need to be used for companies and employees to thrive in a sustainable economy.

Environmental Sustainability

A sustainable society and thriving economy rely on a healthy environment. According to the 2018 Eurobarometer, most Europeans want the EU to be more active in the policy area of environmental protection. Faced with a climate crisis as well as a severe loss of biodiversity, polluted air and threats from hazardous chemicals, the EU must urgently make environmental protection and climate action its top priorities and must deliver an ambitious 8th Environmental Action Programme.

The Climate Challenge, Circular Economy, Clean air and water
At UNFCCC COP 21 in December 2015, the global community came together in the Paris Agreement and committed to pursue efforts to limit global warming to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels. The EU must increase its 2030 greenhouse gas emission reduction target and set out the pathway for Europe to a net zero society as soon as possible in the long-term strategy for a low carbon society which covers all sectors. In the energy sector, full decarbonisation can only be achieved if the

EU accelerates the transition to a circular economy, increases energy efficiency and ends the use of coal, oil and gas, while promoting the use of renewable energies.

The air we breathe, the water we drink and the food we eat all ultimately rely on biodiversity and ecosystem services which underpin our economy and well-being. Human-induced changes to ecosystems have however resulted in continuous decline in biodiversity and loss of many natural ecosystems. Our current production and consumption patterns must change, notably in respect of agriculture which is the biggest single driver of biodiversity loss in the EU, to protect the very nature we need to survive.

Europe can only tackle its waste challenge by making resource efficiency and circularity overarching principles. Promoting a circular economy is also an essential part of an effective strategy to prevent climate change. The European Commission's Circular Economy legislation is an important tool to help European businesses and consumers make the transition to a stronger and more circular economy where resources are used in a more sustainable way. Clean air in our cities is important to deliver a safe and healthy environment where Europeans live and work. Member

States and municipalities need to create effective measures to tackle poor air quality, which is responsible for over 430 000 premature deaths in the EU every year.

Over half of Europe's rivers and lakes have an ecological status that is classified as less than good. While governments need to make implementing EU water protection rules a priority, the EU should further support innovative approaches to sustainable water management through measures to promote the safe reuse of waste water in agriculture and in the industrial and municipal sectors.

A strong European voice

The EU should act with a strong voice in social, economic and environmental issues and work towards strengthening the role of youth participation in policymaking and addressing the issue of intergenerational justice. The role of private actors in ensuring the achievement of the SDGs cannot be understated, and it is crucial that the necessary frameworks exist for the private sector to fulfil its full potential in the social and environmental area. Europe should facilitate the development of market solutions, new technology, social investments and green private investment, which are crucial if we are to reach our common goals.



Sustainable Finance

Europe needs financial systems in which both public and private resources support sustainable development. Investors must recognise that investing in sustainable businesses means lower risks to lose capital and higher possibilities to yield fair returns on their investments. Corporate governance mechanisms must ensure reporting and transparency toward the market and toward stakeholders concerning sustainability of business decisions.

Sustainability in the EU Budget
While supporting a stronger cohesion, the post-2020 Multi-annual Financial Framework (MFF) must enhance a vision of the economy that respects social and environmental sustainability boundaries. With the objective of advancing towards the 2030 Agenda, the MFF should thus foster innovation that makes European companies thrive, invest in education and skills of our people, protect those who are involved in labour transitions. Unsustainable technologies and practices should be phased out, making way for sustainable solutions based on

fair working conditions.

The EU budget should support the rapid implementation of the Paris Agreement, supporting the transition towards sustainable renewable energy, decarbonisation and the circular economy. The MFF must also be a boost for the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights. At the same time, the EU can increase its financial impact with new 'own resources', that need to be equitable and fair and that may come from EU taxes such as a carbon tax or other environment-related taxes.

The SDGs should also guide the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) post 2020 which currently accounts for some 40% of the EU budget. In this context, the Commission should indicate which of the 169 SDG targets are relevant to European agriculture and food and adapt them to the European context with quantified goals for 2030.

Conclusion

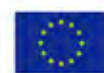
Realising the SDGs is a shared effort and requires a true mul-

ti-level governance approach with an active and broad-based civil society engagement. In order to implement and advance the 2030 Agenda, there need to be appropriate, binding and inclusive processes for participation for different interest groups. An engaged and active public is needed when holding governments and businesses to account and to promote sustainability.

Civil dialogue at all levels is crucial to prepare regional and local communities to implement sustainable development. NGOs, trade unions, progressive business and civil society can cooperate with regional and local authorities to develop their territories in sustainable ways and make them accountable to the SDG targets. While strategies should be underpinned by an in-depth analysis of existing policy frameworks and tools, an ambitious EU Sustainability agenda certainly can unite large parts of civil society, local governments, trade unions and businesses to develop a way for a Sustainable Europe 2030 to become the compass for all European policies.



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