



# HOW FAR IS EUROPE FROM ACHIEVING THE SDGs?

2023

CIVIL SOCIETY SPOTLIGHT REPORT



# PROJECT SUMMARY

REAL DEAL will stimulate a pan-European debate to reshape citizens' and stakeholders' active participation through deliberative processes around the European Green Deal (EGD). It brings together researchers and practitioners of deliberative democracy from a wide range of disciplines including environmental rights and the law of public participation, ethics and responsible innovation, gender studies and ecofeminism, psychology, geography, urban planning, and sustainability studies. It includes the EU's largest civil society networks advocating on the environment, climate, sustainable development, local democracy, and the European movement. It teams up with youth climate, social justice and women's organisations, SMEs, universities and research institutes, mobilising networks with thousands of CSOs, uniting millions of citizens and activating contacts to thousands of policymakers. In a large co-creation exercise, REAL DEAL will develop, test, and validate innovative tools and formats to propel deliberative democracy to the next level. It will test its innovations at citizens assemblies for the transition in at least 13 countries. We will scrutinise pan-European formats ranging from digital deliberation through our online platform [www.realdeal.eu](http://www.realdeal.eu) to in-person processes such as an Assembly for a Gender-Just Green Deal and a pan-European Youth Climate Assembly. REAL DEAL will co-create a comprehensive protocol for meaningful citizens' participation and deliberation to work towards the objectives of the EGD. It will validate recommendations on how to design such processes and how they can be applied by European institutions, Member States, and civil society alike. Gender equality will be embedded into the project's DNA. It pays specific attention to the leave-no-one-behind principle, fostering the engagement of disenfranchised groups that are disproportionately burdened by environmental damage. REAL DEAL will develop a new model of environmental citizenship across Europe.



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# INTRODUCTION

The European Green Deal (EGD) is currently the broadest and most ambitious policy framework of the European Union, aiming to transform the EU into the first climate-neutral region of the world by 2050 and to achieve the objectives set in the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

In times of multiple economic, political, and social crises, it is crucial that these bold transformations benefit all of society, and that the costs do not fall upon the least privileged.

Ensuring such profound change requires active engagement and meaningful participation of citizens and stakeholders to shape and take part in the design, implementation and evaluation of policies and strategies surrounding the EGD.

Civil society organisations have been fostering civil and social dialogue throughout the political life of the EGD, as crucial means to guarantee both the appropriateness and the acceptance of transformative and impactful environmental and social policy.

In this context, and against the backdrop of current developments of shrinking civic space, it is urgent to provide a space for collective action where civil society organisations can gather to assess the participatory dimension of the EGD, to be able to build on their synergies to influence policies and share good practices and concerns.

Only then will it be possible to reshape and rethink civil dialogue to strengthen citizens' and stakeholders' active participation and deliberation in the green and just transition for all.

# THE CIVIL SOCIETY FORUM FOR SUSTAINABILITY: SHAPING THE EUROPEAN GREEN DEAL

More than 50 civil society organisations, including some of Europe's largest civil society networks, have joined the Civil Society Forum for Sustainability: Shaping the European Green Deal, which was launched in June 2022.

Organised by SOLIDAR and the European Environmental Bureau (EEB) with the support of SDG Watch Europe and the European Alliance for a Just Transition, 'The Civil Society Forum for Sustainability: Shaping the European Green Deal' serves as an informal agora for discussing democratic participation in relation to the topics, policies, and processes of the European Green Deal (EGD). It gathers civil society organisations and other key stakeholders from all over Europe working in the areas of the EGD and participatory democracy.

The main objective of the Civil Society Forum is to provide a space to discuss, build synergies and deliberate on how organised stakeholders' or civil society organisations with different interests and concerns can collectively contribute to achieving the goals of the EGD at member state as well as EU level through processes of civil dialogue and in a way that benefits all of society. It meets three times a year.

Topics discussed by the Forum include the gaps and recommendations for a transformative European Green Deal, presented in this gap assessment, but also the current state of play of the European Union's democratic and participatory policy-making mechanisms, particularly on those topics linked to the EGD. The Forum, therefore, aims to contribute to overcoming silos and bringing together relevant civil society stakeholders working on citizens' participation and deliberation on the one hand, and sustainable development on the other.

# METHODOLOGY OF THE CIVIL SOCIETY SPOTLIGHT REPORT

Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) have been at the forefront of the intersectionality of fights against climate change, social justice, and more through cross-sectorial cooperation. Since 2015, CSOs have adopted the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals as a guiding framework, aligning their efforts to advancing the objectives of the goals in Europe.

As 2023 marks midpoint between the adoption and finish line of the 2030 Agenda for the SDGs, it was crucial to bring the broad range of CSO representatives together to deliberate on the current state of play, developments, and challenges in the implementation of SDGs in Europe. This inspired us to organise the third and fourth editions of the civil society forums to deliberate on the SDGs and specifically the European Voluntary Review (EU VR). The outcomes of the discussions of the forum collectively compiled into a report which will serve as a civil society spotlight report for the European Voluntary Review.

The objective of the spotlight report is to:

- **Analyse the gaps that remain** towards achieving the SDGs and the United Nations 2030 Agenda.
- **Identify the Europe's shortcomings** and disconnections from other relevant processes and exchange views on how to address these issues and strengthen the SDG Implementation.

Based on the abovementioned objectives, five different working groups were formed namely, People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace and Partnership. The two forum meetings provided online space for participants to discuss the five pillars of the 2030 agenda in the working groups during a period of two half-days. Following the forum, the initial draft of the report was shared with participants and registered CSO representatives for their comments and input.

This Civil Society Spotlight report is collaborative effort among many different European civil society organisations, through “Civil Society Forum for Sustainability” meetings. Representatives from different corners of Europe have co-developed and contributed to the report, highlighting the interconnection of the 17 SDGs with the five pillars of the 2030 Agenda. These five pillars emphasize that the SDGs are an intertwined framework and progress in one pillar must support and complement progress in others, rather than being pursued in isolation. The report is therefore also built up on based on the 5 Ps as outlined in the preamble of the 2030 Agenda. The report is not intended as an exhaustive analysis across all 17 SDGs, but rather reflects the most important gaps identified by civil society for EU policymakers in the course of its development.



In the report, the co-authors of each chapter have collectively decided on their respective focus areas. Each chapter highlights positive developments, analyses the main gaps, and provides recommendations for the covered area. Additionally, overall recommendations for civil society organizations are identified, aiming to guide them in strengthening their involvement in SDG implementation. While it was not possible to cover everything, the report features selected examples that are most relevant for civil society organizations. The 5 pillars are interconnected, and a definition of each pillar is explained below.

## **People**

The SDGs declare the world's determination "to end poverty and hunger, in all their forms and dimensions, and to ensure that all human beings can fulfil their potential in dignity and equality and in a healthy environment."

## **Prosperity**

The SDGs aim to "ensure that all human beings can enjoy prosperous and fulfilling lives and that economic, social, and technological progress occurs in harmony with nature."

## **Planet**

The SDGs set a goal to protect the planet "so it can support the needs of the present and future generations." Nearly every day we are seeing just how connected – and fundamental – climate change is to global development.

## **Peace**

The SDGs rightly note that "There can be no sustainable development without peace and no peace without sustainable development." Therefore, they set out goals to foster peaceful, just, and inclusive societies.

## **Partnerships**

The SDGs call for "a spirit of strengthened global solidarity." Problems that cross geographies and sectors require collaboration that does as well.

# PEOPLE

The first P of the SDGs refers to people, who are at the heart of the SDGs. The SDGs aim to ensure that all people, regardless of their gender, age, race, disability, or socio-economic background, have access to basic needs such as food, water, health care, education, energy and decent work. This chapter focuses on the People category of the Agenda 2030, which combines: Goal 1, Goal 2, Goal 3, Goal 4, and Goal 5. The chapter presents the main achievements and current state of play at the EU level, followed by the main challenges and suggested recommendations.

Over the last few years, Europe has faced numerous interrelated crises, such as health, security, climate, and financial crises, which have been major setbacks for the SDGs and for human development. Even before the pandemic, progress towards the SDGs was slow and uneven among EU Member States. Despite such challenges, European Commission analysis concludes that some progress has been made with the introduction and implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights. Another positive development can be seen in the efforts that the EU undertook in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, by setting up the Next Generation EU fund and putting other measures in practice such as the European instrument for temporary Support to mitigate Unemployment Risks in an Emergency (SURE) to support people and workers.

## The state of play

Goal 1 of the SDGs aims to eradicate poverty in all its forms. To achieve this, the EU has put in place the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR), introduced in 2017 with an action plan adopted in 2021 that commits to reduce the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion by at least 15 million. The EPSR includes several principles that are directly related to SDG 1, such as the right to access minimum income schemes, the right to adequate housing, and the right to healthcare and access to essential services.

SDG 2 aims to end hunger, achieve food security, improve nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture. In the EU, progress has been made towards achieving SDG 2, but challenges remain. According to the SDG Index and Dashboards Report 2021, the EU has a high level of performance on SDG 2, with a score of 76.8 out of 100. This score reflects the EU's progress towards reducing hunger and improving food security, as well as its efforts to promote sustainable agriculture and support small-scale farmers. Among the top

performers are Sweden, Denmark, and Finland, while the lowest performing are Romania, Bulgaria, and Greece. One of the key initiatives that the EU has put in place to address SDG 2 is the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), which provides financial support to farmers and promotes sustainable agriculture. The latest reform of the CAP, adopted in 2021, includes measures to support small-scale farmers, promote environmental sustainability, and improve the resilience of food systems. Another initiative is the EU's Farm to Fork Strategy, which aims to promote sustainable food systems and improve the health and well-being of EU citizens. The strategy includes targets to reduce the use of pesticides and antibiotics, promote organic farming, and reduce food waste.

Despite these initiatives, there are still several challenges. There is increasing demand for food due to population growth and changing dietary patterns, placing pressure on food systems and the environment. The COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine have led to disruptions in food supply chains and increased food insecurity, particularly among structurally excluded groups and people living in vulnerable situations. In addition, the transition to sustainable agriculture requires significant investments in research, innovation, and infrastructure, which may be difficult for some Member States to finance due to arbitrary fiscal EU level rules.

The EU has been actively working towards achieving SDG 3 since its adoption in 2015. Some of the key initiatives taken by the EU towards achieving SDG 3 include: the European care strategy launched in 2022 to ensure quality, affordable and accessible care services across the EU and improve the situation for both care receivers and the people caring for them, professionally or informally. The strategy was accompanied by two recommendations for Member States about the revision of the Barcelona targets for early childhood education and care, and on access to affordable high-quality long-term care outside residential segregated settings. The EU has recognised the rise in mental health issues and has been taking steps to promote mental health and well-being. The EU has launched several initiatives, such as the Joint Action on Mental Health and Wellbeing, to address mental health issues without any forced treatment or isolation.

In 2020, the EU launched a new online platform called the EU Compass for Action on Mental Health and Wellbeing, providing resources and guidance for Member States to develop and implement mental health policies. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on mental health, and the EU has taken steps to address this issue. In 2019, the EU adopted a Directive on work-life balance for parents and carers, which includes provisions to support employees with mental health issues. The Directive gives employees the right to request flexible working arrangements, such as part-time work, to help manage their mental health.

While the EU is committed to achieving SDG 4, it is primarily up to the individual Member States to implement policies and programs to meet this goal. The EU funds organisations and projects on formal and informal education, awareness campaigns, and mobility projects, through the Erasmus+ program. A key development closely related to SDG 4 is via the Social Pillar, which includes a principle entitled "Education, Training and Lifelong Learning". The EPSR recognizes the importance of education and training in promoting social inclusion, reducing inequalities, and enhancing employability and social mobility. To support adult learning, the EU has adopted as a headline target that at least 60% of all adults should be participating in training every year by 2030.

At the EU level, fostering inclusive education is a main priority of the education agenda. One of the six axes of the European Education Area is dedicated to inclusive education and lifelong learning for all, starting with early childhood education and care. Related initiatives such as the Pathways to School Success initiative have a special focus on groups at risk such as pupils with disabilities and special educational needs. The European approach to micro-credentials, through flexible and modular learning pathways, can positively impact employability and the lifelong learning process of persons with disabilities.

In September 2020, the European Commission announced a plan to establish a European Education Area by 2025. The plan aims to promote excellence, inclusion, sustainability and digitalization in education and training across the EU.

In June 2020, the European Commission launched the European Skills Agenda, aimed at the skills of Europeans and ensuring that they have the skills needed for the jobs of the future. The agenda includes measures to increase investment in skills, improve the recognition of skills and qualifications, boost vocational education and training, and promote lifelong learning. The European Commission has designated 2023 as the European Year of Skills.

The EU has taken several measures to promote gender equality, including the Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025, which aims to tackle gender-based violence and promote women's rights. Yet, in the 2022 EIGE Gender Equality Index measurement, Member States on average scored 68.6 out of 100, finding that "EU has a long way to reach gender equality" (EIGE) with many of the measures lacking intersectionality. In 2020, the EU introduced a new Directive requiring publicly listed companies with more than 250 employees to have at least 40% of women on their boards by 2026. This measure aims to promote gender equality in corporate leadership positions and address the gender pay gap.

The EU has also taken steps to address and prevent violence against women, including through the Istanbul Convention, a Council of Europe treaty that aims to combat violence against women and domestic violence. However, not all EU Member States have yet ratified the treaty, including Bulgaria, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, and Slovakia. Further action is needed to ensure that the Convention is ratified and implemented by all Member States, and that its provisions are effectively enforced to protect women and girls from violence and abuse.

Gender-based violence has reached epidemic proportions and even spread to include online violence and other areas. This trend has a marked effect on women's engagement and impacts them economically, since hybrid and home working has become more prevalent post the pandemic.

Additionally, the EU's Victims' Rights Directive and the European Protection Order provide measures to protect victims of domestic violence and ensure that their rights are upheld across EU Member States. The EU has introduced measures to promote work-life balance for women and men, including through the Work-Life Balance Directive, which guarantees minimum rights to paid leave for new parents and carers. The Directive aims to promote gender equality in the labour market and encourage men to take on caregiving responsibilities.

## **Key challenges and gaps**

At the halfway point to 2030, the EU has made progress towards implementing the SDGs by promoting sustainable development and attempting to reduce poverty, but there are still significant challenges to overcome.

Several Member States and the EU in general have failed to implement the SDG principles of social inclusion, access to clean energy, universal access to public services and responsible consumption up to now. If these concerning developments are left unresolved, it will merely exacerbate the ongoing crises. Under the People's pillar, some of the major challenges identified by civil society are increased poverty, rising inequalities, lack of comprehensive and disaggregated data, insufficient public investment in education and training, and insufficient focus on promoting health and wellbeing.

Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the existing gaps and challenges in SDG implementation. The pandemic has led to an increase in poverty rates, especially for people in vulnerable situations. The economic impact of the pandemic has also resulted in increased inequality, job losses, and reduced access to essential and social services. These have

disproportionately affected the people living in the most vulnerable situations and exacerbated already existing inequalities. In addition, lockdowns and confinement measures during the COVID-19 pandemic added urgency to develop further measures to make remote learning more inclusive and accessible.

## Increased poverty

The EU has made significant progress towards implementing Goal 1 over the last years, yet challenges remain. The increase in poverty was identified as a challenge under the "People" pillar of the SDGs. In 2021, there were an estimated 95.4 million people in the EU at risk of poverty or social exclusion—equivalent to over one in 5 people. In certain areas, the EU has promoted soft measures to facilitate Goal 1 implementation with the Council adopting a recommendation on adequate minimum income ensuring active inclusion in 2023.

Poverty is a multifaceted issue that can affect numerous aspects of people's lives, including their access to education, healthcare, housing, and other basic needs. Poverty can also be closely linked to other challenges under the "People" pillar of the SDGs, such as inequality, discrimination, and social exclusion. Organised civil society has a crucial role in raising awareness of social and environmental issues, advocating for policy changes, and holding governments accountable for their commitments.

Since the adoption of SDGs in 2015, most European Member States (particularly Nordic countries) made progress towards meeting the Leave No One Behind Index (LNOB), measuring inequalities in the EU. However, the same progress is not present when it comes to EU candidate countries. EU candidate countries, especially those in the Western Balkans such as North Macedonia, Kosovo, face many challenges in catching up with Europe in terms of the Leave No One Behind (LNOB) index, primarily due to their much higher rates of material deprivation and poverty. Another major challenge is the increasing poverty rates, especially when paired with the energy crisis and the cost-of-living crisis. While the EU has put in place policies and initiatives to address poverty, there is still work to be done to ensure that everyone, including marginalised groups and people living in vulnerable situations, have access to basic needs such as food, water, healthcare, education, and decent work.

In recent years, the widening income gap has been a growing concern regarding the increase in poverty in many parts of the EU, due to a range of factors including economic crises, conflict and displacement, and the impact of climate change. Furthermore, children and young people are particularly affected by income poverty. In 2020, 19.5% of children aged 0 to 17 were living in households affected by income poverty after social transfers,

8.3% were living in households troubled by severe material and social deprivation, and 7.2% were living in (quasi-)jobless households. The phenomenon of eradicating poverty is interlinked with the quality of various policies' implementation, so it is important to stress the need to put in place measures that effectively address the implementation of all SDGs and their interlinkages.

## **Rising inequalities**

In the last three years, progress towards inequalities and gender equality in Europe has been mixed, with some positive developments in some areas but ongoing challenges in others. Specifically, challenges related to gender equality persist in Europe.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities and put people in vulnerable situations, including marginalised communities and women, at greater risk. For example, persons with disabilities also belonging to other disadvantaged groups were further marginalised during the crisis. According to the European Disability Forum report, persons with intellectual or psychosocial disabilities, were more likely to be excluded from services or be forced to live in institutions. In the early stages of the pandemic, younger people were also affected by the pandemic in terms of access to education, loss of work, income, and employment. The impact of the pandemic on loss of work was more than twice as damaging for young people in marginalised situations than other young people. Furthermore, older people faced an increased risk of violence, abuse, and neglect by family members and caregivers during the pandemic.

Gender-based violence also remains a significant challenge in Europe, with reports of increased domestic violence during lockdowns and restrictions related to the pandemic. In addition, there continue to be gaps in access to support services for victims of gender-based violence in some countries.

Women's political representation is another area where progress has been slow. While some countries have made gains in recent years, women remain underrepresented in political leadership positions in many European countries. According to the European Institute for Gender Equality, women hold only a 33.4% share of ministry positions in the EU, 33% of the Members of the Parliament and 29.4% of members of regional assemblies. This lack of gender diversity in leadership positions can contribute to the persistence of gender inequalities in the workplace and beyond.

Furthermore, there has also been a marked increase in women in political positions facing threats and violence, resulting in fewer women taking offices and often being forced to leave.

In the EU today, women still undertake most unpaid work with 79% reporting at least an hour or more of housework a day compared to only 34% of men. Additionally, women with children under 7 years of age spend on average 20 hours more per week on unpaid care work than men. Unpaid care work is

essential to the functioning of families, society, and the economy, and therefore the continued lack of recognition constitutes an ongoing social and economic injustice for all persons with caring responsibilities in the EU, in particular mothers and other caregivers. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic highlighting the importance of care, progress on this has been slow with women and girls disproportionately affected by the increased care burden. Gender roles put a disproportionate burden of unpaid work on women that hampers equality.

To address these challenges, it is critical for European governments, civil society organisations, and other stakeholders to continue working towards gender equality and women's empowerment. With policies that support women in all their roles, and that address and support the needs of specific population groups, those living in the most vulnerable situations, including by implementing and enforcing equality legislation, promoting equal access to education and employment opportunities, childcare programmes, as well as addressing gender-based violence, and challenging harmful stereotypes and cultural norms.

### **Lack of comprehensive and disaggregated data**

The lack of disaggregated data in Europe poses significant challenges to achieving the People pillars of the SDGs, as it hinders efforts to identify and address specific needs and inequalities of different groups. The lack of disaggregated and comparable data, especially on structurally excluded groups such as young people, has been a persistent challenge for EU statistical analysis and makes it difficult to design effective policies and programs to address these issues. Whilst we are making progress in collecting gender-disaggregated data at the EU level, this does not adequately capture the experience of non-normative gender identities. Similarly, in health, the lack of disaggregated data has been a significant challenge throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, there is a need for better data on the exact impact and burden of the pandemic on the paediatric population. Insufficient availability of data also includes groups such as older adults, people with disabilities, undocumented migrants, and ethnic minorities. To ensure access to public health, the EU must ensure that policy is tailored to the specific needs of these groups and to address any disparities in accessing healthcare and medical treatment.

**Biljana Stojceska, program coordinator of Youth Alliance – Krusevo, North Macedonia:**

*“In our work building the Youth Participation Index 2020 and Youth Participation Index 2021, we encountered as a key challenge the lack of youth-specific data. More specifically, for example, in the collection of data on political participation, where there is no official statistics available. Based on these challenges, we have recommended the institutions to start collecting youth-sensitive data in the field of economic, social, and political participation for the category of youth as it is legally defined.”*

Unfortunately, the lack of disaggregated data is a long-standing issue in Europe, and progress has been slow in addressing it and the requirement of looking at intersecting inequalities poses further challenges. According to the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights, only 14 EU Member States have adopted comprehensive strategies to collect and use data on fundamental rights, including data on discrimination and inequality. Furthermore, there is still a lack of standardisation and comparability in data collection across the EU, making it difficult to draw meaningful comparisons, identify good practices, or design targeted policies.

### **Insufficient public investment in education and training**

Achieving SDG4 requires adequate resources to make the process of learning a reality, both through formal and non-formal education. Its promotion is not only linked to access, but also to ensuring quality education and training so that learners can adapt to challenges such as the environmental crisis, digitalisation, and the promotion of democratic values. The annual OECD ‘Education at a glance 2021’ report highlights that where public expenditure is strong, equity, inclusiveness and the general quality of education and training are heightened. Conversely, and as the same report indicates, public underinvestment in education and training is synonymous with reduced quality, accessibility concerns and more stark discrepancies in educational outcomes according to socio-economic background.

No sufficient systematic research has been carried out so far on the conditions necessary for learners with disabilities to succeed, including learners with invisible disabilities such as autism, dyslexia, or hyperactivity.

It is widely documented that the 2007–2008 global financial crisis, associated recession and implementation of austerity policies led to a curtailment of public sector spending in all EU Member States. Throughout the period from 2008 to 2015, the impact of deflated public spending is clearly apparent in the education and training sector. The extent of these reductions in public

spending consolidated the education and training sector as one of the hardest hit public services. These pre-existing issues were then further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

If SDG 4 is to be achieved and gaps are to be closed among Member States, the nature of education and training as a public good must be protected, with adequate public funding set aside to support the first principle of the EPSR. This would institute a requirement to boost democratic oversight on the governing of education and training and of any future policy developments. It will also need a far more ambitious revision of the current fiscal framework than what the European Commission has currently proposed and a revision of rules at both the national and EU level, to ensure that funding in education and training meets learners' needs. A revision of the learning process is also required to make sure it does not only cater to close labour market gaps but also supports the achievement of all other SDGs.

### **Insufficient focus on promoting health and wellbeing**

The goal of ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being is a critical element of the people pillar of the SDGs. While progress has been made in Europe in recent years, there are still several challenges that need to be addressed. Overall, the EU has taken significant steps to address mental health issues and improve mental health policies over the past three years. However, there is still more work to be done to ensure that mental health services are accessible and effective across all Member States. The COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted the challenges of ensuring healthy lives and promoting wellbeing in Europe. The pandemic has had a significant impact on the physical and mental health of individuals, as well as on the functioning of healthcare systems. The pandemic has also exposed existing inequalities in health outcomes, with structurally excluded populations experiencing a disproportionate burden of illness and death. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has clearly proven that the healthcare systems in the EU failed to provide sufficient health support to EU residents and has put immense pressure on healthcare systems. This has led to overworked healthcare professionals, shortages of medical supplies, and delays in providing necessary care to patients during the pandemic.

## A civil society vision for the policy

Civil society has been advocating for a shift of the European economy from measuring success not just in terms of traditional economic indicators such as GDP, but in terms of the wellbeing of its citizens, its social equity, and environmental sustainability. Our current economic system seeks continuous growth, and recurrent economic crises become a necessary structural feature, with untold suffering for millions of people. It feeds on endless profit, extraction, production, and consumption, resulting in gross overconsumption, environmental destruction, and inequalities.

While there has been some discussion and attention given to the wellbeing of the economy in the EU, it has not yet been embraced or prioritised by all Member States and the EU itself. There is still major work to be done to fully embrace the wellbeing economy and integrate it into policymaking at all levels. This requires a shift in mindset and a recognition that economic growth alone is not enough to create a sustainable and prosperous future for all citizens. It also requires a willingness to prioritise the wellbeing of citizens and the environment over short-term economic gains.

## Civil society recommendations

- Create an overarching EU strategy with targets set to reach the SDGs in the EU and MS, with a holistic approach that brings together the European pillar of Social Rights and the European Green Deal, where all policies take into consideration the social and the climate impacts, including their gendered dimension.
- Increase the cooperation and coordination among EU countries on social policies as well as meaningful participation and active engagement of civil society at European and national level.
- Put in place targeted policies and initiatives to address poverty inequalities by focusing on people in vulnerable situations, in particular women, children, and young people, investing in formal and non-formal education and healthcare, and addressing the root causes of poverty such as the inequitable distribution of unpaid care work, inequality, and discrimination.
- Collect intersectional gender disaggregated data and implement gender mainstreaming in EU policies to move away from siloed approaches.

# PROSPERITY

This chapter addresses prosperity, discussing policy frameworks and achievements, challenges, and recommendations needed to ensure that all human beings can enjoy prosperous and fulfilling lives and that economic and social progress occurs in harmony with nature.

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) outline a vision for a more equitable and sustainable future for all. Among these goals is the Prosperity SDG, which focuses on ensuring that all individuals have access to economic and social progress while also preserving the planet's natural resources. The chapter explores policy frameworks and achievements that have been made towards achieving this goal, as well as the challenges and recommendations necessary to ensure that everyone can lead fulfilling lives while maintaining a healthy and sustainable environment.

## The state of play

Within the SDG agenda, prosperity aims to “ensure that all human beings can enjoy prosperous and fulfilling lives and that economic, social and technological progress occurs in harmony with nature”. Furthermore, when diving deep into the meaning of prosperity and the three dimensions of sustainable development (environmental, social, and economic dimensions), prosperity has to do with how our economy functions. The chapter therefore investigates the economic dimensions of the SDG agenda and the current economic system.

## Key challenges and gaps

The current economic model is the driving force behind inequality, injustice, and climate change. Focusing on economic growth and profit over people and the planet erodes democratic governance and concentrates power in the hands of a few to the detriment of the many, especially the poorest and most marginalized. People worldwide are taking to the streets to demand political crisis action: for the climate, inequality, health, environment, and racism.

Europe faces serious economic, environmental and social challenges that require reforms and investment. EC is coping with multiple compounding crises, particularly the cost-of-living crisis, the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the climate crisis and biodiversity loss. At the same time, Europe must tackle additional long-term

challenges around economic, energy and digital sovereignty, decaying infrastructure, quality of work, inequality, and ageing populations. Tackling these challenges will require transformative legislative reforms which have their roots in the current economic system.

## Economic governance review

The COVID-19 crisis and the implementation of the recovery and resilient packages further confirmed that the economic system set up by the EU, which is at its roots a neoliberal project dependent on economic growth and competitiveness, is not capable to tackle the crises facing Europe. Furthermore, forcing compliance with the existing rules would bring us back to austerity. Some of the fiscal rules were therefore suspended and the general escape clause of the Stability and Growth Pact is now extended until the end of 2023.[1] Because of these changes, the European Commission is currently assessing how to reform the Stability and Growth Pact.

In November 2022, the EU Commission published its first orientation paper on economic governance review. Positive elements included the move away from the unreliable structural deficit rule and the use of debt sustainability analyses (DSA) as a basis for country-specific reference paths built around expenditure paths. CSOs also welcomed the proposed move towards national medium-term fiscal-structural plans connecting country-specific debt pathways and their duration, with commitments for reforms and investments that improve debt sustainability. There is general consensus on the need for establishing a common EU assessment framework aiming to ensure investments and reforms in national plans support debt sustainability, EU environmental, social and economic priorities and country-specific challenges.[2]

However, the reforming process at the time of writing is still underway and remains high-level, and vague, which implies that a lot of details are missing. Until the details are given, it is unsure whether the proposed changes will really make a difference. Furthermore, the Commission's proposal maintains arbitrary limits to debt-financed quality investments which make little sense in the absence of debt sustainability risks, this also must be measurable with time specific guidelines. This is particularly harmful at a time when Europe is facing serious challenges that call for an increase in quality investment and social support.

[1] The Stability and Growth Pact (SGP) lays out the macroeconomic governance rules for EU Member States, among which are the fiscal rules that require government deficits to remain below 3% of GDP and public debt levels below 60% of GDP. Member States with a debt level above 60% are supposed to lower their debt levels to 60% of GDP within 20 years.

[2] Investing in our Future: Seven EU economic governance reforms for a stronger, greener and more resilient Europe, Joint Policy Brief, February 2023.

## Wellbeing Economy

One of the key elements in our economic system is the overly narrow focus on Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth as an indicator to determine our society's success. This must be abandoned in favour of a more inclusive measurement of our societies' prosperity and well-being. Alternative measures are needed to make up for the failings of GDP, and for the EU to recover with the interest of people and the planet at heart. A 'Wellbeing Economy' starts from the idea that public interests should determine economics, and not the other way around. It means 'combining the idea of prosperity with the possibility of social progress within planetary boundaries' with the SDGs as the foundation.

The European Commission has in recent years started the conversation on the pitfalls of our current economic system. One of the key elements is that the "Economy of Well Being" has been endorsed by the Council of the EU in October 2019 and by the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) in January 2020, adding to the growing chorus of voices calling for a different way of evaluating the wellbeing of European citizens and the health of European economies[3]. The European Commission has committed in its 2020 Work Programme to "put the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals at the heart of our policymaking", by: (a) refocusing part of its economic governance framework by integrating the SDGs in the EU Semester and (b) presenting an approach to the overall governance and implementation of the goals.[4]

Although positive developments can be observed, the idea of system change and therefore economic change is still not in the minds of the main actors when talking about the wellbeing economy. There is a lot of momentum, and a lot of ambition, but the important thing lacking is the implementation of the ideas. Still, many institutional actors, such as global finance and industrial corporations, are keen to keep the economy within a growth paradigm, or simply tweak the existing model, although others are fighting for fundamental changes. Many academics and researchers working on the wellbeing have made excellent policy proposals or ideas that can really make the needed transformation, but these are yet to be recognised by EU policymakers.

[3] WWF, Towards an EU Wellbeing Economy: A Fairer, More Sustainable Europe After Covid-19, September 2020.

[4] Ibidem.

## Inequalities

When looking at the economic policies, it is clear that it creates structural inequalities by its nature, both within Europe and in relation to the rest of the world. Inequalities are therefore evident not only within countries, but also between them and are showing in the field of migration as well.

The income gap between the rich and the poor in the EU remains large, with inequality affecting children's long-term opportunities. The urban-rural gap for the risk of poverty has narrowed in recent years, but the north-west and west-east divide in economic disparities between EU Member States remains. The social inclusion of non-EU citizens persists in being a challenge as well.[5] The pandemic was a factor which exposed the deep-seated inequalities and significant gaps in social protection coverage, comprehensiveness, and adequacy across all countries. The low- and middle-income countries struggled to provide proportionate social protection, leading to a stimulus gap.[6]

An important factor adding to the inequalities in recent years is also energy poverty. More than 50 million households in the EU are experiencing it, unable to keep their homes at a reasonable temperature,[7] facing substantial barriers to accessing financing, implementing energy efficiency measures, and shifting to renewable energy.[8] The problem is not only in low-income households experiencing energy poverty, but also in middle-class households who see their disposable income eroded and face the risk of energy precarity. [9]

Regarding the policy framework addressing inequalities in the EU, it is important to mention the European Pillar of Social Rights and related initiatives, including the Commission's proposal for a Directive on adequate minimum wages, approved by the European Parliament on 14 September 2022 and formally adopted by the Council on 4 October 2022, as well as the proposed Council Recommendation on adequate minimum income, adopted by the Parliament on 15 March 2023, calling on national governments to ensure the adequacy of their minimum income schemes. The proposal for a Council Recommendation on ensuring a fair transition towards climate neutrality has the potential to contribute to an affordable, just, and sustainable energy transition for all in Europe.[10]

[5] EUROSTAT, Sustainable Development in the EU: Monitoring Report on Progress Towards the SDGs in an EU Context, 2022 edition.

[6] International Labour Office, Flagship Report, World Social Protection Report 2020–22: Social Protection at the Crossroads – in Pursuit of a Better Future, ILO, Geneva 2021.

[7] EAPN Statement, Energy Poor Must Not Bear the Costs of Soaring Energy Prices, Brussels, November 2021.

[8] EAPN, EPSU; Carlos, J., Sanchez, B.: Right to affordable, clean energy for all Europeans! January 2022.

[9] Ibidem.

[10] EAPN Statement, Energy Poor Must Not Bear the Costs of Soaring Energy Prices, Brussels, November 2021.

The revised European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) and the European Regional Development Fund will also help to reduce inequalities. Furthermore, the 2021–2027 EU Cohesion Policy aims to ensure all EU regions participate in green and digital transitions in a fair and territorially balanced way. The New Pact on Migration and Asylum, the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD), Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion (2021–2027) and the EU Skills Profile Tool for Third Country National all address the social inclusion of migrants.[11]

One of the biggest dangers which threaten to increase inequalities is the post-pandemic austerity shock, with governments scaling back public spending and considering or already implementing a long list of austerity measures.[12] The IMF forecasts warn of a divergent recovery, with richer countries managing a swift economic rebound while lower-income nations would suffer a reversal of their recent development gains, which would mean an increase in inequalities. To prevent that, governments should invest in a robust socio-economic recovery to bring prosperity to all citizens and people living in Europe and implement the ‘Golden rule’ for public finances to secure social protection and investment in social infrastructure, which is not yet adequate. Enhanced social protection spending continues to be crucial for a successful human-centred recovery.[13]

Regarding the gaps connected to the inequalities stemming from energy poverty, it needs to be underlined that if the free-market rules remain the dominant paradigm, it is unlikely that Europe’s poorest consumers will be protected in the long term and they will not be able to benefit from green energies.[14] Therefore, a robust reform of the energy market is required above and beyond short-term profit considerations.[15]

## EU prosperity in action

An important example of how the wellbeing economy at the European level can be implemented is the case of Wales. In 2015 the Welsh Government identified a wellbeing framework, which is organised into seven key wellbeing goals: prosperous, more equal, globally responsible, resilient, healthier, cohesive communities, vibrant culture and a thriving Welsh language. As a step towards the achievement of these goals, the Government launched the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act, which is embedded in the Welsh Constitution.[16]

[11] EUROSTAT, Sustainable Development in the EU, 2022 edition.

[12] Ortiz, I.; Cummins, M.: End Austerity: A Global Report on Budget Cuts and Harmful Social Reforms in 2022–25, September 2022.

[13] International Labour Office, Flagship Report, World Social Protection Report 2020–22, ILO, Geneva 2021.

[14] EAPN Statement, Energy Poor Must Not Bear the Costs of Soaring Energy Prices, Brussels, November 2021.

[15] EAPN, EPSU; Carlos, J., Sanchez, B.: Right to affordable, clean energy for all Europeans! January 2022.

[16] Wellbeing Economy Alliance, Case Studies: Wales – Coordination & Alignment of Implementation Towards Wellbeing Goals, URL: <https://weall.org/resource/wales-coordination-alignment-of-implementation-towards-wellbeing-goals>.

“Public bodies are mandated to consider the long-term impact of their policy decisions and work with communities and with each other, to ensure their actions are complementary, and the people and communities involved are reflecting the diversity of the population that the particular bodies serve.”[17] To achieve the wellbeing goals, public bodies must design and publish wellbeing objectives, publish statements about them and report annually on their progress in a Wellbeing Report. 46 national indicators have been set to measure progress against these goals.

To prevent the wellbeing of future generations from being compromised by decisions that aim only to meet current needs, a Sustainable Development Principle has been defined and the position of a Future Generations Commissioner has been introduced.[18]

The effects of the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act are clear: to protect the rights of future generations, the Welsh Government abandoned plans to build a motorway extension around Newport and announced a complete stop on all road building. The money was instead directed towards sustainable transport. [19] This is a great example of how public interests should determine economics, which is an important idea of a wellbeing economy. Future generations’ legislation would lead to better decision-making with a longer-term mindset over short-time growth-oriented decision-making.

## Testimonies

Adopting austerity measures would threaten to increase inequalities. The effects of those measures on people’s lives are described in the testimonies of young people about how the austerity policies taken in the early 2010s affected multiple areas of their life. Here are some testimonies at the European level:

Berta: “I used to rent my flat out to people so I could pay. It’s a small, 30 m2 studio flat with no bedroom. I’d go to a friend’s house and rent it to people who came to spend the weekend in Madrid. With the little bit of money you get, you can keep going, on the brink of precarity, of “how am I going to eat?”. You’ve got money, yeah, but with the anxiety of “I’m paying for all of this out of my savings”. Of course, I couldn’t pay for university.”[20]

[17] Ibidem.

[18] Read more: Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, URL: <https://www.futuregenerations.wales/about-us/future-generations-act/>; Consultation: How Do You Measure a Nation’s Progress? URL: <https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/consultations/2018-02/151022-fg-act-consultation-document-en.pdf>.

[19] Acting Today for a Better Tomorrow URL: <https://www.futuregenerations.wales/impact/transport/>.

[20] Fernández-Trujillo, Francisco & Gastaldi, Pablo: Generation Austerity: When Governments Cut Budgets, Young People Suffer. Don’t Do It Again. European Youth Forum, Brussels 2022.

Toñi: “I worked from Monday to Sunday. I never made more than €700. The money just went, I only had money to pay. As for living... Let’s see how you’d manage that. I’d sneak past the barriers in the metro, steal from supermarkets, take things out of the bins, pick up clothes from free clothes shops (...) Dammit, if I’m working and I can’t even afford a room that has heating at least...”[21]

Such testimonies show how important it is to recognise that austerity measures and policies fundamentally regressive, undermining the social fabric that has been built up over time and that has supported communities for decades. This is why it is crucial to enhance social protection spending to prevent increasing inequalities and to ensure prosperity for all.

## A civil society vision for the policy

To effectively ensure sustainable public finances, it is important to improve the tax system to make it fairer and more progressive. At the same time, the European economic governance review should embed powerful incentives for Member States to implement the necessary reforms. They must also increase public investment to address the economic, social and environmental challenges, applying the golden rule for public finances, while ensuring a just transition for all and with all.[22]

The system in place is still very much focusing on debt, debt reduction, or a balanced budget. We should rethink the system more broadly and start thinking beyond growth. Therefore, it is imperative to move away from the economic system driven by Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth and therefore abandon the current overly narrow focus on GDP as an indicator to determine recovery. The measurement of our societies’ prosperity and wellbeing should be more inclusive, with the EU placing human and planetary wellbeing at the heart of the social-making processes. The SDGs and the Agenda 2030 can provide guidance to overcome health and economic crises and effectively tackle climate change and nature loss.

We have learnt that austerity measures are not inevitable, there is no need for populations to endure adjustment cuts. Governments should increase public revenues to finance a people’s recovery.[23] They should invest in social protection, since establishing universal social protection and implementing the human right to social security is crucial to obtaining social justice and containing inequality.[24] Additionally, the EU and Member States should fully integrate adequate wages, minimum income schemes, energy efficiency and

[22] Ibidem.

[23] Investing in our Future, Joint Policy Brief, February 2023.

[24] Ortiz, I.; Cummins, M.: End Austerity: A Global Report on Budget Cuts and Harmful Social Reforms in 2022–25, September 2022.

[25] International Labour Office, Flagship Report, World Social Protection Report 2020–22, ILO, Geneva 2021.

fair prices in their national climate and energy plans in order to realise a socially just transition, where the impact on people and groups in a vulnerable situation is put at the forefront.[26]

## Civil society recommendations

- Free future-oriented spending from arbitrary constraint, improve the monitoring of debt sustainability and introduce a social imbalances procedure. Ensure the involvement of civil society in the reforms.[27]
- Reform the European Semester to deliver on EU environmental, economic and social objectives.[28]
- Wellbeing indicators should be developed to guide EU decision-making and track Member States' performance. EU governance and accountability should be improved to foster a sustainable transition towards a Wellbeing Economy. Policy making processes need to be transformed to enable meaningful participation and be truly democratic. Policies that incentivise businesses which are positively affecting wellbeing should be adopted. Furthermore, legislation that enshrines the rights of future generations should be adopted. [29]
- Reform the EU economic system to go beyond GDP, replace the Stability and Growth Pact with a Sustainability and Wellbeing Pact, to go beyond GDP and define new wellbeing indicators to drive economic and social policymaking-and to move toward financial flexibility to allow the necessary social spending. Create fiscal space for investing in SDG implementation in particular strengthening social protection systems and the provision of essential infrastructure and social services. This should include an "Excessive Emissions Procedure", for member states that diverge from their NDC paths and a similar procedure for countries unable to meet wellbeing targets.
- Austerity measures must be avoided. Instead, further investment in social protection is required to prevent poverty and inequality. Replace debt reduction pathways with "Green and Social Investment Pathways" that force member states to invest in the just transition according to a newly developed green economy and brown economy typology.

[26] EAPN Statement, Energy Poor Must Not Bear the Costs of Soaring Energy Prices, Brussels, November 2021

[27] Investing in our Future: Seven EU economic governance reforms for a stronger, greener and more resilient Europe, Joint Policy Brief, February 2023; Interview with Katja Reuter, Senior Policy and Advocacy Officer at Social Platform, 9. 3. 2023.

[28] Ibidem.

[29] European Youth Forum, Youth test: <https://www.youthforum.org/topics/eu-youth-test>.

- Centre care and social reproduction in EU policies, whilst acknowledging that the care burden disproportionately affects women and girls in all their diversity and make steps to alleviate this burden including gender budgeting and increased investment in social security. Introduce a mechanism for EU Member States to interact with CSOs and citizens via Citizens Assemblies and other participatory processes, to set the amount of funds for social support.
- To lift people out of energy poverty we need continuous crisis funding at the EU level to cover investments, services, safeguards and compensation for the vulnerable. A bold and much needed move and investment towards more renewable forms of energy is very much needed so that energy is affordable and accessible to all. Adequate income support, technical assistance, and working conditions for the most vulnerable need to be secured, not only with emergency measures but also by adopting long-term policies tackling structural causes of energy poverty.
- Facilitate economic and financial systems and infrastructures that promote a gender-responsive energy democracy, move away from the top-down market-based approach for energy production, distribution, and control and address energy poverty as a gendered issue.

# PLANET

In the time of multiple crises in various areas, a new geopolitical landscape and only seven years to go until the deadline for the implementation, the SDGs remain the compass that guide the European Union (EU) to address the current challenges and reorientate towards a socially and environmentally just transition that leaves no one behind.

## The state of play

The European Green Deal (EGD), introduced by the EU Commission in 2019 and based on the Paris Agreement and the SDGs framework, was at the heart of policy making in the EU. As a result, some progress towards the SDGs was made, however, in most cases (except SDG 16 where greatest improvement was noted) this progress was moderate, and in some cases even a negative trend was marked.

A most remarkable example of the EU's intentions to reach the goals of the EGD and with that also achieving the SDGs, is the introduction of the European Climate Law (ECL) in July 2021. The ECL writes into law the goal set out in the EGD for the EU's economy and society to become climate-neutral by 2050 and sets the intermediate target of reducing net greenhouse gas emissions by at least 55% by 2030, compared to 1990 levels. As a follow-up to this, the European Commission (EC) launched the "Fit for 55%" package for restructuring EU's climate policy framework in order to put it on track for the 55% reduction in carbon emissions by 2030, and net-zero emissions by 2050. Although a positive step forward, since 2021 many revisions to existing laws and new proposals that cover the areas of climate, land use, energy, transport and taxation were/are being made. However, many of these were perceived as missed opportunities for higher climate ambition, hence the progress made on 'Climate action' (SDG 13) is seen as moderate in the last years. There will be no climate justice without environmentally, socially and economically sustainable development.

There is also space for improvement on 'Responsible consumption and production' (SDG 12) and 'Life on land' (SDG 15). Although the Circular Economy Action Plans, the right to repair and the EU's Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 (adopted 2020) set commitments for increased efforts, still the EU's ecological and material footprint and pressure on ecosystems remains high and there should be more incentives for both industrial transformation as well as lifestyle changes. The EU also continues to import many of its raw materials abroad, very often with negative effects on local ecosystems and citizens.

In connection to this, the EU is also failing to preserve the ecosystems within its own territory. Namely, there is a negative assessment for 'Life on land' (SDG 15). According to Eurostat, while both the EU's forest area and terrestrial protected areas have increased slightly, pressures on biodiversity from land take continued to intensify. Habitat loss is one of the reasons for the long-term decline in common birds and grassland butterflies. On top of that, does our need for more strategy autonomy also open up new possibilities for mining as seen in Sweden[30] thereby putting an increasing pressure on fragile northern ecosystems, already under huge pressure from climate change and the indigenous people living there.[31] In general, there should be a better connection between climate and environmental issues and social justice and human rights issues.

## Deforestation

The EU has now passed the first-ever law against deforestation. For years, deforestation has been creeping into our home. Our fridge. Our lunch. Our coffee and the paper cup it comes in. Although its original intention was to protect forests exclusively, experiences have shown that a narrow focus solely on forests can push destruction towards other ecosystems, such as wetlands and savannahs.

During the negotiations, the European Parliament pushed to add nuance to the law by proposing to include "other wooded areas." This would have been a significant improvement to ensure a more comprehensive understanding of valuable natural habitats. However, the proposal faced resistance, and the Parliament failed in implementing it. The compromise reached was that within the first year of the law's implementation, the Commission will assess whether other wooded areas should be included, and after two years, all ecosystems can be covered.

Civil society would have preferred to see the final law not only protect forests but also include other ecosystems such as wooded savannahs and similar habitats. Now, we are left with a law that protects forests but simultaneously allows for the clearance of other ecosystems without consequences - at least for the next two years.

The rights of indigenous peoples have been a controversial topic among EU decision-makers, and it was only at the eleventh hour that the Parliament and the Council reached a compromise. Indigenous peoples' claims to their territories are partially acknowledged when enshrined in local legislation.

[30] Sweden has not yet ratified ILO 169 on Indigenous People's rights to land. Source : [https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:11300:0::NO::P11300\\_INSTRUMENT\\_ID:312314](https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:11300:0::NO::P11300_INSTRUMENT_ID:312314)

[31] Mining Europe's biggest rare earth deposit could make life 'impossible' for Sámi communities. EURONEWS, 2023. Available here: <https://www.euronews.com/green/2023/02/11/mining-europes-biggest-rare-earth-deposit-could-make-life-impossible-for-sami-communities>

At the same time, as part of their due diligence, companies are also required to consider the rights of indigenous peoples.

All in all, although some progress was made, however, with less than seven years remaining until 2030 for the implementation of the SDGs, the EU needs to make an urgent effort for a rapid change of course, especially on climate change, biodiversity and our footprint on the rest of the world. A comparative visualisation of the high consumption of the EU countries is the calculation from the Earth Overshoot Day which shows that almost all countries in the EU are passing the yearly planetary boundary as early as March[32], which is an alarming statistic. The EU's action on this needs to be quick and grounded in a comprehensive response to the interlinked global crises that the EU faces today and a renewed commitment to multilateralism and international cooperation, as well as achieving the EGD and thereby greening our economy.

## Key challenges and gaps

Although the EGD is a solid backbone to a transformative agenda in the EU, the challenge remains in not addressing issues partially, but rather increasing the efforts and ambition of policies so that 2030 targets can be achieved. Namely, the EGD is still very much a growth strategy. Ever more evidence, as elaborated by the latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report (March 2023)[33] and by the EEA, shows that a beyond growth strategy is both necessary and possible. This report reminds us of the urgency to act to avoid the irreversible effects of climate change. In line with this, in the following text we put forward our vision and recommendations to the EU for higher ambition, so that the EU could meet its goals of interest in a Beyond GDP dashboard discussion. Whilst Treaty discussions exist as seen in the final 8EAP agreement following EP amendments, there is still a lack of sufficient political commitment from the top.

One particular example where more ambition is needed is the Fit for 55 package (2021), which whilst being a comprehensive package with many good elements, it is still insufficient to push the EU onto a pathway to a 1.5°C limit due to lack of ambition and setting the targets at a lower level than the one recommended by scientists to reach the Paris Agreement. The substantial revision of the policy tools to achieve the target of reducing net emissions by at least -55% by 2030, although a positive step, can also be seen as a missed opportunity. Namely, urgent action is vital in the short term to reduce emissions and increase nature-based removals while preserving biodiversity. Based on the latest available science, and in line with the equity principles of

[32] Earth Overshoot Day, 2023. Available at: <https://www.overshootday.org/newsroom/country-overshoot-days/>

[33] IPCC Report, 2023. Available here: <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/syr/>

the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change the EU must recognise its historical responsibility (especially through loss and damage funding, knowledge and technology transfers for climate adaptation and mitigation, cancelling debt, etc.) and greater capacity to act. Therefore, the ambition of the EU should be higher and work towards reducing its domestic greenhouse gas emissions by at least 65% by 2030, compared to 1990 levels.

Notwithstanding the importance of all of the files included in the Fit for 55 package, somewhat crucial is the ambition set on the revision of the Emissions Trading System (ETS), the Effort Sharing Regulation (ESR), and the Renewable Energy Directive (RED). The EU missed a critical chance to significantly ramp up its climate ambition in these key files. The ETS deal fails to deliver on the EU's fair share to the 1.5 Paris Agreement target and heavily favours the protection of the polluting industry over the people. Its target set at 62% emission cuts for the ETS sectors by 2030 is far below the 70% emission cuts needed under ETS to deliver on the EU's fair share contribution to efforts limiting global warming to 1.5°C as foreseen under the Paris Agreement. Similarly, on the ESR, the target is up from 30% to 40% emissions reduction by 2030 and in the end (if countries use all the available flexibilities) in practice the agreement might deliver merely half of the amount of emission reductions than on paper and the compliance rules are weak. Another missed opportunity, since the EU should achieve at least 50% emission reductions by 2030, compared to 2005 levels, to do its fair share in reaching the Paris Agreement. Equally important for delivering on the SDG13 are EU's renewable energy policies that need to be aligned with the Paris Agreement. The proposal within the REpowerEU package to increase the EU renewable energy target from 40% to 45% is a step in the right direction, but the proposed level of ambition is still too low and not yet aligned with the Paris Agreement's objective to limit temperature rise to 1.5°C. Instead, the EU binding target for the share of energy from renewable sources in gross final energy consumption should be at least 50% by 2030.[34] Moreover, we want to flag that the rise of artificial intelligence (AI) uses calls for regulating and limiting the energy consumption for new and emerging technologies such as AI in the currently drafted and proposed AI legislation.

In connection to SDG 15 (Life on land), the Forest Strategy (2021) is another example of watered-down ambition, even though it reiterated important elements from the EU's Biodiversity Strategy and committed the Commission to propose a Law on Forest Monitoring. Biodiversity loss and increasing pressure on ecosystems remains a major challenge for the EU. This is also due to the impact that EU policies have on the rest of the world.

[34] Main source for targets in this chapter: Climate Action Network Europe policy positions. Available at: <https://caneurope.org/news-publications/>

Policies on raw materials (e.g., the Critical Raw Materials Act) need to take into account impact on local biodiversity and livelihoods in the countries outside the EU. The Raw Materials Strategy, however, has a high focus on short-term economic gains of mining for virgin raw materials without fully considering long-term environmental and social impacts. Demand-side solutions to reduce the need for raw materials are not at all considered within the strategy, which is connected to the SDG 12 (Responsible consumption and production) that the EU needs to deliver on. Although the implementation of SDG 12 has been advancing with the support of policy instruments, the world is not on track to use natural resources sustainably or reduce the levels of food waste generation. Namely, the natural resource consumption should be reduced in absolute terms until it is in balance with the carrying capacity of the Earth. A positive development is the adoption of the Circular Economy Action Plan (March 2020) with its Sustainable Product Initiative (SPI), the Strategy for Circular and Sustainable Textiles and the overhauled Ecodesign rules aim to make sustainable products the norm. A missed opportunity is, however, the Waste Shipment Regulation proposal (November 2021). Although it is a clear improvement compared to the existing text, it still missed the opportunity to phase out plastic waste export outside the EU and to align the law with the Basel Convention for intra-EU plastic waste. A negative development is that gas and nuclear were included in the Taxonomy delegated act (February 2021) and biomass in the climate delegated act (January 2021). This has unfortunately demonstrated that political interests can trump science-based approaches and undermine the confidence in both the taxonomy (despite some positive features in other chapters more reflective of the original positive ambition) and the EGD. On SDG 6 (clean water and sanitation) and in relation to plastic waste, microplastics and toxins in the water, the EU is far too slow in its reaction and policies should be adopted that support accessible nontoxic plastics-free products.[35]

Regarding having a leadership role on climate action and incentivizing policies in the rest of the world, the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) is a good step forwards, although its implementation is yet to be seen. However, it is foreseen that for the EU's closest neighbour like the Western Balkan countries the CBAM would actually have adverse effects on their economy, whilst not contributing substantially to emission reduction. A similar challenge when it comes to the effects of the EU outside its borders is the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans which although in general is a very positive step, however, the investments in gas infrastructure that it proposed under the IPA III flagship project could bring another lock in effect in the region from one fossil fuel to another, thus failing on the climate ambition of the

[35] Main source for this chapter: Mid-term Assessment of the European Green Deal, European Environmental Bureau, 2022. Available here: <https://eeb.org/library/mid-term-assessment-of-the-european-green-deal/>

Western Balkan countries to also achieve climate neutrality by 2050. To reduce its impacts in-house and abroad, especially in connection with SDG 12, the EU needs to support industrial transformation and prepare industries to adapt their production processes through site-level transformation plans (article 27d) to be aligned with EGD objectives of carbon neutrality, and reduced energy and resource consumption. A coherent and comprehensive EU industrial policy toolkit needs to build upon the ETS and CBAM, which are pure pricing mechanisms, and must include ambitious policies addressing products and production processes. Moreover, in relation to reducing the overconsumption of energy consumption for transport in Europe, it is of high importance for the EU to work on changing and adapting mobility related infrastructure (e.g., a faster transition to sustainable urban transport systems with a focus on bicycle and public transport infrastructure) and incentivize and enable sustainable lifestyle changes. All in all, a challenge remains for the EU to synchronise its commitments under the Paris Agreement and the EDG, with its specific policies as well as its role in the global efforts towards sustainability.

The European Union's growth-based economy is driving a depletion of Earth's finite resources. This is fuelling a double burnout of people and the planet. The current system extracts, produces, consumes and wastes more than ever, much faster than Earth's resources and nature can regenerate. This concerns not only individual consumption like clothes and phones, but society-wide - infrastructure for transport, buildings, energy systems, supply chains, military. The extraction and processing of materials, fuels and food make up about half of total climate emissions. They are responsible for more than 90% of biodiversity loss and lack of clean water. Europe's material footprint - the total amount of fossil fuels, biomass, metals and minerals consumed, including in imports - is double a sustainable level. The people and nations who consume the least pay the highest price, including women, Indigenous peoples and other marginalised groups. For example, nearly 90% of air pollution-related deaths occur in low- and middle-income countries, many due to industrial activities feeding Western overconsumption.

European Union decision-makers are trying to fix the problems caused by overconsumption with yet more materials and resources. There is increasing political and industry rhetoric about 'greening the economy' and a 'circular economy' especially in the much-hyped European Green Deal. But overconsumption, and the resulting harm to people and planet, continue unaddressed. Overconsumption is essentially fuelled by a systemic obsession with growth. The climate crisis, and other ecological and social crises, can only be addressed by tackling overconsumption and transitioning to a new economic model that is not dependent on continuous economic growth.

## **Testimonies – external impacts of the EGD**

A concrete example on the EGD not taking into account impacts beyond EU's borders that was mentioned during the Forum was the one on the green transition in the Western Balkans which although supported by the EU, nevertheless, there are mixed signals and policy proposals made that are questionable. Such as the GAWB and its proposition on investments in gas instead of renewable energy. There is no reasonable excuse to build more gas infrastructure in the region and any further EU support for gas infrastructure would create new, long-term problems by increasing the region's gas lock-in – like the one the EU is currently trying to extract itself from. The region has high potential for renewable energy, so the funding from the EU should concentrate particularly on suitably sited solar and wind projects, geothermal where greenhouse gas emissions are low, electrification of heating and transport, and energy efficiency measures including housing retrofits and heat pumps. Moreover, the EU should stop exporting its waste to the Western Balkans. The example of Serbia was mentioned in the case of introducing the Waste Laws as part of the EU accession process, which allows for waste from the EU to be imported into the country, without the adverse consequences being fully considered and addressed. Similarly, Serbia's lithium mines (as one of EU's suppliers) are the cause for, in many cases, irreversible damage to the environment and therefore the EU should step up its response mechanisms to address this for all the countries where it imports its raw materials from, especially the EU candidate countries.

Another example on mining can be drawn from the conclusions from Green Extractivism – Mining, March 2023, where it is stated that the sourcing of raw materials is impacting communities on the ground, not only in the Global South but Europe as well. Despite the geographical differences the challenges that communities face and practices that the industry employs are quite similar. To get the energy transition right we need to reconsider how energy is produced and used and who is impacted. There are legitimate concerns that need to be addressed for a just energy transition. These topics related to green extractivism, resource use reduction and critical raw materials are closely linked to advocating for stronger circular economy strategies and binding absolute resource use reduction targets to reduce the EU's material footprint, the EEB will promote the rational use of raw materials and strict criteria for the mining of new materials.

## **A civil society vision for the policy**

The European Union must take decisive action to tackle climate change, promote sustainable development, and improve social wellbeing. To achieve this, the EU should adopt a bold policy vision that incorporates ambitious targets, strengthened regulations, and innovative approaches to measure progress and promote sustainability.

First and foremost, the EU should increase its target to reduce domestic greenhouse gas emissions by at least 65% by 2030, compared to 1990 levels. This target should be binding and enforceable, with robust mechanisms in place to ensure compliance. Additionally, the EU should increase its binding target for the share of energy from renewable sources in gross final energy consumption to be at least 50% by 2030. These measures will help the EU to meet its obligations under the Paris Agreement and to become a global leader in the fight against climate change.

In addition to these targets, the EU should commit to reducing its material consumption by introducing a target for reduced material use of 70% across the whole of the EU by 2050. This will help the EU to live well and prosper within planetary boundaries, meet climate objectives while reducing energy demand, and improve the EU's strategic autonomy, all while improving the wellbeing of workers worldwide and the wellbeing of EU citizens.

To achieve these goals, the EU must also take action to address the negative externalities associated with imports and trade. Improved due diligence and supply chain controls, beyond voluntary commitments, and geo-localisation of imports are tools that may minimise the negative externalities that impact the rest of the world because of imports and trade. The EU should also ensure that green standards within the EU apply outside the EU, using EGD standards and other EU standards as frameworks for new trade agreements. Hard law regulation stands out as it is arguably more accountable than other mechanisms.

The EU must also apply civil liability rules throughout the whole value and supply chain and support the establishment of a binding United Nations Treaty on Business and Human Rights, with a focus on women's rights.

The EU should strengthen the human rights framework to incorporate the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment in the Fundamental Charter of Human Rights. All EU member states should ratify ILO 169 (relating to the example of Sweden mentioned above which has not and hence, mining activities are impacting the Sami People and Sapmi as well as fragile northern ecosystems).

The EU must also comply with the Aarhus Convention, to empower citizens and civil society organisations by granting them legal access to information, participation in decision making, and access to justice in environmental matters.

To ensure comprehensive protection of ecosystems and indigenous rights, it is crucial for EU legislation to encompass not only forests but also other vital habitats like savannahs and wetlands in its new deforestation law.

Additionally, robust measures must be implemented to give space to indigenous people in Finland and Sweden, as well as in trading partner countries.

In terms of social wellbeing, the EU must recognize that the success of a country is not measured by GDP alone. Instead, the EU should develop new indicators for wellbeing that go beyond economic gains and capture rising inequalities and a net flow of wealth from poor to rich due to rentier capitalism. Many alternative indicators already exist, and the EU should work to adopt them to provide a more accurate picture of social wellbeing. More work should be conducted on a global circular economy, a global wellbeing economy, (such as new indicators) degrowth and postgrowth policies to make global trade sustainable.

To promote sustainability in the built environment, the EU must revise the Energy Performance of Buildings Directive (EPBD) to include sufficiency and circularity measures. The revision is still too focused on energy in use stage, and neglects the potential emissions savings linked to sufficiency and circularity. By incorporating these measures, the EU can promote sustainable building practices and reduce the carbon footprint of buildings.

- The EU should increase its target to reduce its domestic greenhouse gas emissions by at least 65% by 2030, compared to 1990 level.
- The EU should increase its binding target for the share of energy from renewable sources in gross final energy consumption to be at least 50% by 2030.
- The EU should commit to 70% emission cuts needed under and on the ESR, the target should be up to 50% emissions reduction by 2030.
- The EU should reduce its material consumption by introducing a target for reduced material use of 70% across the whole of the EU by 2050. This will allow Europe to live well and prosper within planetary boundaries, meet climate objectives while reducing energy demand, and improve the EU's strategic autonomy, all while improving the wellbeing of workers worldwide and the wellbeing of EU citizens.

### **On greater participation in EU environmental policymaking**

Citizens have a unique role to play in combating climate change, and the EU and Member States can only benefit from further strengthening civic participation in environmental and social policies. To strengthen their participation and sharpen their understanding, citizens rely on accurate information on the environmental and social impacts of their consumption choices, which can be provided, for instance, through product passports

and labelling schemes.

Meaningful deliberation and consultation opportunities, such as the Conference on the Future of Europe, should offer an opportunity to promote the co-creation of policies, as well as the implementation of the Green Deal, at the European, national and local level. This can improve the quality of policies as well as the long-term commitment of citizens from all walks of life and across Europe, to support the EU's environmental and climate targets and to engage in and promote the transition towards a sustainable future.

In order to make the perspectives, the role and the challenges of women integral parts of the green transition, the EU must mainstream gender equality in the European Green Deal's goals and legislation. When designing policies and transforming sectors, jobs and skills to support the green transition, decisionmakers need to thus consider the gender implications of each measure and promote solutions that take into account the different needs and concerns of all citizens.

There is a large amount of green and sustainable technologies already available for implementation solving most global environmental issues. The size of a new green and sustainable economy has already been measured; it will create a large number of new jobs. An economy for the people and not for profits does not need to grow indefinitely to match the desired wellbeing of the citizens. Deliberative and participatory democracy can help to choose the green technologies that people want to be implemented. People can also decide how they want to live in the short and long term in harmony with the planet.

Finally, the EU should implement limits on wealth, such as taxes on wealth, multinationals, internet companies (adopt an ecofeminist principle of the internet[36]), and properties among others. Wealth taxes can alleviate pressure on the world's poorest and fund the SDGs. This approach will promote greater social justice and reduce inequality, while also providing funding for sustainable development initiatives.

In conclusion, the EU must adopt a bold policy vision to address the challenges of climate change, sustainable development, and social wellbeing. This vision must include ambitious targets, strengthened regulations, and innovative approaches to measure progress and promote sustainability. By taking decisive action, the EU can become a global leader in promoting a sustainable and equitable future.

[36] Towards a new feminist principle of the internet on the environment. APC, 2022. Available here: <https://www.apc.org/en/news/towards-new-feminist-principle-internet-environment-two-new-publications-now-available-english>

## Civil society recommendations

- Increase ambition and efforts towards the SDGs by rapidly changing course on climate change, biodiversity and the EU's footprint on the rest of the world.
- Establish more incentives for industrial transformation and lifestyle changes towards responsible consumption and production (SDG 12) and life on land (SDG 15) to reduce the EU's ecological footprint and preserve ecosystems both within and outside the EU's territory.
- Increase ambition and targets on climate change by setting the goal of reducing the EU's domestic greenhouse gas emissions by at least 65% by 2030 compared to 1990 levels, recognizing the EU's historical responsibility and greater capacity to act.
- Commit to reducing its material consumption by introducing a target for reduced material use of 70% across the whole of the EU by 2050
- The EU should set up mechanisms to ensure it is a global leader on sustainability and to reduce its impacts on other countries through reducing consumption internally as well as stepping up to its historic responsibility and aid just energy transition, climate mitigation and adaptation both in its closest neighbourhood as well as the Global South.
- In order to advance with a sustainable and green economy based on a wellbeing agenda, it is important to implement new mechanisms to control and evaluate the impact of corporate influence and financial institutions towards government institutions and public decision making.

# PEACE

The European Union plays a global and active role in peacebuilding and expresses a commitment to justice and the development of strong institutions. SDG 16 recognises that: “There can be no sustainable development without peace and no peace without sustainable development.”

There is a broad understanding of peace not merely being a lack of conflict but, as the UN explains; Goal 16 ‘is dedicated to the promotion of peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, the provision of access to justice for all, and building effective, accountable institutions at all levels.’

In an increasingly fragmented and insecure world, recent setbacks to a cooperative and multilateral world order have presented new challenges to ensuring justice, peace, and secure societies for the most marginalised, both within and outside the EU. The negative impacts of conflict, corruption, the military-industrial complex and the arms trade most often fall upon those who are least able to bear it.

Inside the European Union, Member States are mostly peaceful and democratic, with decreased crime rates and lower levels of corruption. However, EU citizens say they want more equity, transparency, and honesty from their institutions, as well as a more equal distribution of resources at home and abroad. The Panama Papers and the more recent scandals involving the global elite, such as Qatargate, have uncovered systematic corruption within our institutions, not to mention large scale tax evasion and money laundering. At the same time, the space for civil society and trade unions to act in defence of fundamental rights, freedoms and environmental protection is shrinking in many countries in Europe, undermining the Union’s fundamental values.

## The state of play

Peace in the world is covered by the fourth priority of the European Commission programme 2019-2024: a stronger Europe in the world. The declared aim is to “champion multilateralism and a rules-based global order through a more active role and stronger voice for the EU in the world”, and to seek a coordinated approach in external action – from development aid to the Common Foreign and Security Policy – that can secure a stronger and more united voice for Europe in the world.

The EU and G7 have strengthened relations with the United States' return to international commitments, mainly in the Paris Agreement. EU and US, EU and UK (mainly in Brexit agreement), EU and Canada, EU and Japan have also strengthened bilateral collaboration agreements, on issues such as green and digital transitions and building back better from the COVID-19 crisis. With Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine, the possibilities of collaboration with the G20 have been undermined and a rule-based international order has been put under heavy strain, alongside a renewed threat of nuclear war reminiscent of the Cold War years.

Key priorities for the European Union include EU solidarity with Ukraine by providing humanitarian and financial support to counter the Russia's aggressive invasion, as well as extraordinary asylum measures for refugees in EU countries. In addition, the EU has invested in enhancing global 'food security', with €8 billion invested by the EU for food security worldwide in over 70 countries. In addition, Europe's flagship Global Gateway plans to mobilise €300 billion of investment from EU and its Member States for external action on digital and green transitions, transport, health, education, as well as research in Africa, Latin America, and ASEAN countries. The EU and the AU (African Union) have declared their joint vision for 2030 on 17-18 February 2022 summit. Meanwhile, the EU and ASEAN (Southeast Countries of ASIA) have reinforced their Strategic Partnership in December 2022 sharing an action plan 2023-2027 for peace, security, and sustainability.

On 17 February 2021, the European Commission and the High Representative of the Union for foreign affairs and security policy adopted two Communications (JOIN (2021) 3 final) on strengthening the EU's contribution to rules-based multilateralism.

The European Commission is calling also for a Global Recovery Initiative linking investment and debt relief to the UN 2030 Agenda to secure a truly transformative, post-COVID-19 path also in the developing countries. The same idea was relaunched by the EU Council on 22 June 2021 in the Conclusions on "a comprehensive approach to accelerate the implementation of the UN 2030 Agenda for sustainable development – Building back better from the COVID-19 crisis" but has not yet been structured as a concrete political proposal.

On 18 February 2021 (COM (2021) 66 final) on Trade Policy Review – An Open, Sustainable and Assertive Trade Policy – the Commission is calling for a reform proposal of the WTO with the endorsement of the introduction in its rule of compulsory criteria on environment and human rights, in the framework of a trade policy that supports the EU's open strategic autonomy.

As unilateral initiatives influence the EU's work on peacebuilding and human rights in the world, there are other ongoing processes, such as the proposal of a directive on Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence (COM (2022) 71 final) which provide respect of human rights and environmental criteria for companies along the value chain. EU legislative tools are needed to safeguard human rights and the environment. According to research by the World Benchmarking Alliance, implementation of human rights due diligence is low in the EU and highly varied within and between EU member states. An effective policy framework is needed to hold companies accountable and ensure a level playing field within the EU.

In addition, there is the proposal of a regulation on the making available on the Union market as well as export from the Union of certain commodities and products associated with deforestation and forest degradation (COM (2021) 706 final) with the aim to ban such products mainly coming from abroad, in the EU market. Finally there is the proposal for a regulation on prohibiting products made with forced labour on the Union market (COM (2022) 453).

In the field of human rights and rule of law, the EU also engages in rule of law reporting. The 2022 Rule of Law Report examines developments across the Member States, both positive and negative, in four key areas for the rule of law: the justice system, the anti-corruption framework, media pluralism and other institutional issues related to checks and balances.

Despite these steps to support human rights, challenges in the field of peacebuilding and conflict resolution remain and are multi-faceted. These include the twin green and digital transitions, environmental justice, challenging and reforming oppressive and violent border policies, the modernisation and de-neoliberalisation of key institutions such as the WTO and WHO and, spearheading the development of new global norms, international standards and cooperation frameworks in areas such as digital, including Artificial Intelligence and other new technologies to ensure full compliance with a human-centric and inclusive digital transformation, human rights and the rule of law.

## **The impact of shrinking civic space in the EU**

Shrinking civic space is one of the most prominent threats to the health of our democracies and societies that has been in the forefront of political discussions in light of recent state crackdowns on political organising and popular dissent, be it when in solidarity with migrants or refugees, hitting the streets on behalf of our climate, or fighting racial discrimination and protecting the rights of ethnic or religious minorities. As the Civic Space Report 2023 states “These measures often mark a shift from recognising freedom of association as a means to ensure social cohesion and democracy, to looking at civil society as entities that are presumed guilty of foreign interference, lack of transparency or smuggling and that need to be supervised and, sometimes, restricted under the guise of promoting transparency and security.” The report recommends that European Institutions must ensure that the regulatory environment for civic freedoms is in line with EU values enshrined in article 2 & 11 TEU, rights protected by the Charter of Fundamental Rights and international human rights standards.

### **Ukraine**

In addition to the immeasurable human suffering and violence, the war in Ukraine has significantly harmed Ukraine’s environment and biodiversity, slowed progress towards climate targets and sustainable development goals (SDGs) and even reversed some previous gains. The Ukrainian experience during conflict has seen weaponry stored underground since World War II being targeted by opposition forces for destruction. This has caused significant human, infrastructural and environmental harms. Even when wars ended more than 70 years ago, remnants of used weaponry are found even today. Similar experiences took place in Balkan and African countries, where landmines continue to harm humans and the environment since the 1990s.

## **Key challenges and gaps**

There is a clear need for greater multilateral cooperation in international relations, including intergenerational approaches that give young people and youth organisations a seat at the table. The security and defence sector lacks diversity, equity, and inclusion. Europe must work to restore trust, to sustain stable, secure and inclusive societies governed by a renewed social contract, responsive to the wishes of citizens, free of corruption and committed to eliminating violence in all forms.[37]

[37] European Youth Forum, Policy paper on Youth, Peace and security: <https://www.youthforum.org/news/policy-paper-youth-peace-security>.

## Tackling corruption

Every year, wealth acquired through tax evasion, bribery, money laundering, embezzlement, and smuggling, totalling more than USD\$1 trillion, leaves developing countries through illicit channels. These sums regularly exceed the official development assistance they receive. Fiscal secrecy has allowed multinational enterprises to exploit loopholes in tax systems within the EU. The European Parliament estimates annual losses caused by multinationals shifting profits to low tax jurisdictions amount to €50 to €70 billion, depriving Member States of valuable resources that could be invested in education, environmental protection, health care or culture and the arts. The EU has stepped up measures on corporate transparency, but genuine tax justice requires a much bolder approach. Therefore, there is a need to:

- Assess different dimensions of corruption and bribery (including in the private sector)
- Improve monitoring and assess access to information, for example through publicly available registries;
- Gain a greater understanding financial transparency and illicit financial flows through data collection and monitoring;
- Close tax loopholes and step efforts to counter tax avoidance.

## Respecting the rule of law and fundamental rights

- There is a strong need to counter shrinking civic space and ensure our democracies are protected. This could be tracked and monitored, for instance, through data obtained by the Fundamental Rights Agency of the EU. We all deserve to live safe from harm and to be treated with compassion, dignity, and respect.
- A free media and protecting journalists at risk from state surveillance and suppression is vital. While the EU is facing rule of law challenges from within and outside the Union, it is important that it sends a strong signal at the European level and internationally that it will stand firm against any threats to erode rights and freedoms.
- Both online and offline, the rule of law and fundamental rights apply. Online and offline harassment occurs, and huge challenges are present which impact citizens if good principles are not upheld and enforced at European level.
- With respect to digitalisation and the European Declaration on Digital Rights, the EU must improve its implementation in fostering participation in public and digital spaces. Digital surveillance, market monopolies and the rise of artificial intelligence present huge risks to the quality of our democracies.

## **Preventing war and conflict and ensuring an intersectional approach to peacebuilding**

- There is a strong need to monitor arms exports from EU Member States. The EU should therefore better support efforts to prevent and eradicate the illicit trade in conventional arms and to prevent their diversion. This has become increasingly important considering the Russian War in Ukraine. Whilst recognising the necessity of support provided to Ukraine in the form of weapons transfers, most of the weapon's flows are conducted with little oversight. Indeed, the consensus reached to urgently channel arms as a matter of practical and symbolic support for Ukraine has obscured some of the well-known risks associated with sending vast amounts of arms into conflict zones. The EU should also work to close loopholes in the ongoing arms embargo to Russia and work to reign in coercive security institutions.
- War on European soil should not diminish the global attention and focus from ongoing humanitarian and human rights crises in Myanmar or Yemen, among many others, where thousands of civilians have been killed and millions are displaced.
- The growth of military spending and militarization of EU countries should be halted. Investments in armament consumes the resources that could be used to build a better and stronger social Europe. The rearmament of EU states sends clear signs to other nations to do the same. Europe should focus on peace, human rights and diplomatic resolution of international conflicts.
- Post conflict restoration processes need to include all stakeholders, including the environment.
- Supporting local communities in fragile contexts is one of the Union's key aims. There is a need for new ideas and innovative community practices to provide a welcome respite from a traditional securitised discourse on peacebuilding and to take positive steps forward to address the persistent and interlinked structural challenges facing communities. The EU should do more to address the gendered impacts of conflict which fall more heavily on women and girls.

## **Protecting our environment**

- There is a clear need to mainstream human rights-based approaches to climate action, including the community's right to say no to mining projects, to protect environmental rights defenders, to recognize ecocide in a court of law, and to grant environmental rights to those not yet born. Climate change is now becoming a driving force of geopolitical and economic competition, and the EU must uphold its commitment to human rights, ensuring that the social dimensions of environmental damage due to conflict is actively addressed.

- Europeans are unable to participate effectively in decisions that affect them because they are denied access to the information they need. Despite the Aarhus Convention guaranteeing the right of access to information on environmental matters, authorities regularly withhold information from people who need and have a right to it.
- In the EU, we face issues with access to justice. One example is the lack of justice for victims of human rights violations and environmental degradation in the supply and value chains of European companies. EU trade agreements contain arbitration mechanisms granting wide-ranging rights to investors over governments without giving access to justice, for instance, to local communities who suffer negative impacts on their livelihoods.
- The EU needs to stand strong in ensuring effective accountability, liability, and enforcement regimes in its Member States. The environmental rights of Europeans cannot become a bargaining chip for softening the economic blow of the recent pluri-crisis on businesses and industry.

## **Migration and asylum**

The EU is in the process of reforming the migration and asylum pact. On 22 June 2022, the Council adopted the main elements of the first stage of the European policy reform on asylum and migration. The EU plan to finish negotiating all the asylum and migration proposals currently on the table by February 2024, with the aim of having them enter into force by April 2024 at the latest.

- Current proposed border procedures in discussion at the European Council are likely to lead to further detention. The EU should not imprison people, or children, in the name of 'migration management'.
- The EU Commission should launch infringement procedures against member states where pushbacks have been clearly documented by civil society organisations and activists.
- EU must stop cooperating with governments who are violating the rights of migrants, such as in Tunisia, Morocco and Libya.
- The EU should decriminalise search and rescue operations.

## A civil society vision for the policy

As it is declared in the preamble of universal human right declaration, recognition of human rights are the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world. We need a new vision for the EU in the world based on human rights for peace, a transformative vision that can make the UN SDGs and the global climate and biodiversity agreements real and achievable. The EU in its ambition of champion of sustainable development and defender of human rights, according to the cultural value enshrined in its Treaties, must get behind a fundamental economic system change and renew the social contract to ensure peaceful and inclusive societies.

This can be inspired by the “Earth for all” report to the Club of Rome pleading the cause of a giant leap if we sincerely want to pursue sustainable development. It means a reform of the international financial system to facilitate rapid poverty alleviation in most of the world, allowing the IMF to allocate over \$1 trillion annually for green jobs creating investment and cancel all debt to low-income countries. It means to introduce a global ecological tax to finance a citizen fund to give all citizens in the world their fair share of wealth, meanwhile reducing the ecological footprint of the richer world.

This implies a break at EU political level (and worldwide) with the financial and economical ideological vision that has created the current situation of environmental degradation and growing inequalities, fuelling conflict and human rights violations in the world. There is a clear contradiction between the principles of respect for human rights proclaimed by the EU and enshrined in international treaties, and the way EU and some of our countries intend to deal with the migration issue at the borders. The way to solve the problem in its root causes is in our hands. We need a coherent and crystal-clear multilateralism policy, free from ideology and pressure from partisan interests, unless they are aligned with the common interest and a sense of fairness without leaving no-one behind and for the wealth of future generations.

## Civil society recommendations

- When tackling corruption, the richest in society must pay their fair share. We urge the Commission and Member States to ramp up their engagement and work towards progressive reforms of the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank Group and multilateral development banks in order to adjust these financial institutions' visions and operating models with a focus on strengthening the fight against poverty and rising inequality and promoting a green and just transition, including debt free monetary support, debt cancellation for low-income countries and long-term financial strategies.
- On protecting the environment, we call for the recognition of uneven economic and ecological exchange and nature exploitation between global North and global South and call for new action strategies and the recognition of the concept of ecological debt, as well as the re-orientation of the existing financing status-quo towards resolving the existing power imbalances.
- There is a clear need to mainstream human rights-based approaches to climate action, including the community's right to say no to mining projects, to protect environmental rights defenders, to recognize ecocide in a court of law, and to grant environmental rights to those not yet born. Climate change is now becoming a driving force of geopolitical and economic competition, the EU must now ensure that the social dimensions of environmental damage due to conflict are actively addressed.
- The EU must ensure it fulfils its legal obligations the EU must uphold its commitment to human rights, by respecting the rule of law and the fundamental rights of all persons, nature and sentient beings. This includes violations of human rights committed at the EU's borders and in the field of migration and asylum. Violations of human rights must be duly addressed in whichever setting they occur. The EU should pay reparations for past violations of human rights and commit to strengthening fundamental rights and the rule of law across the Union.
- The EU should shift its existing approach to pursue new forms of peacebuilding, by incorporating a gender and intersectional approach to peacebuilding. The EU must also commit to eliminating illegal exports of arms which fuel conflict around the world and preventing war and conflict wherever possible, to ensure the human right to live in peace and dignity is secure. A special focus should be given in areas where data shows regression or no progress.

# PARTNERSHIPS

Recognizing the interlinkages between our planet, people, prosperity and peace, the 2030 Agenda is universal and calls for action by all countries of the world to ensure that truly no one is left behind. It is clear that the SDGs can only be realised with a strong commitment to global partnership and cooperation, which means stable, constructive and enduring partnerships between governments, the private sector, academia and civil society. Out of the 17 SDGs, Goal 17 is dedicated to strengthening the means of implementation and revitalising the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development. This chapter discusses the state of play for SDG 17, alongside the main challenges in its implementation and offers recommendations from civil society to accelerate progress on partnerships.

## The state of play

Over the past few years, the EU has been developing a number of significant initiatives to strengthen SDG 17 and the international and multilateral cooperation needed to achieve the SDGs. This includes the European External Investment Plan introduced during the Juncker Commission, which offered financial and technical assistance to partner countries to help them achieve the SDGs, as well as the European Fund for Sustainable Development (EFSD), which provides additional financial resources to support sustainable development initiatives. In 2017, the EU adopted the European Consensus on Development, which outlines an integrated approach to development cooperation. This includes the use of innovative financing instruments and the promotion of public-private partnerships. In early 2020, the EU launched its 'Team Europe' package, intended to support partner countries in tackling the impacts of the COVID 19 Pandemic. More recently, Global Gateway is the latest overarching European strategy to mobilise infrastructure investments of up to EUR 300 billion across the world for green democratic and secure economic development and has been a key focus of the EU Voluntary Review, despite only being launched in December 2021.

In addition, 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, Next Generation EU 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, posing opportunities and also risks for the green transition, with the potential to redefine the relationship between the EU and partner countries.

With such flagship initiatives, the EU has the potential and the ambition to take a leading role in implementing the 2030 Agenda. Whilst the existing plans and programs listed above are a positive step in the right direction, civil society have highlighted that more action at EU level will be necessary for the EU to successfully foster the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development.

With respect to monitoring and evaluation of the SDGs, Eurostat, the statistical office of the European Union, published the 'Sustainable development in the European Union – 2022 monitoring report on progress towards the SDGs in an EU context' in May 2022, providing a statistical overview of progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the EU. The data included in the report show that over the last five years, while progress towards reaching some goals was faster than for others, movement away from the sustainable development objectives also occurred in several areas. For SDG 17 in particular, the overall assessment by Eurostat of EU progress for partnerships was more or less neutral, which means that they were characterised by an almost equal number of sustainable and unsustainable developments. While imports from developing countries continued to grow, the overall financial support from the EU to these countries has fallen in recent years. This decrease could be explained as a result of strong annual fluctuations in private investments, while official development assistance (ODA) has grown steadily, especially when factoring in COVID-19 financial aid and related public spending. Moreover, the already low share of environmental taxes in total tax revenues has declined even further. On a more positive note, there has been a strong increase in the share of households enjoying high-speed internet connections, contributing to achieving the EU's 2030 connectivity objectives.

With regard to indicators on global partnerships, although the EU adheres in theory to the notion that to achieve the SDGs, partnerships are necessary between governments, the private sector, civil society and other parties, and that the EU, as a wealthier economy, should support the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in developing countries through public and private, financial and non-financial resources, overall the global partnership indicators show a mixed picture for the EU over the past few years.

For example, the Sustainable Development Solutions Network's (SDSN's) fourth edition of its independent quantitative report on the progress of the

European Union and its member states towards Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), argues that overall, both global and European Indices show that SDG progress has stalled since 2019. Regarding Global Goal 17 in 2022, SDSN's data paints an even bleaker picture. According to SDSN, in 2022 out of the EU's 27 Member States, Goal 17 Partnerships for Sustainability has been achieved only in 2 countries, namely Denmark and Germany. The vast majority, 22 countries to precise, are deemed to still face significant challenges or even major challenges before achieving the Goal and only 3; Croatia, Finland and Sweden, are reported to fare a bit better and have only some challenges remaining.

In terms of the trend reported between reporting periods, 8 out of the 27 member states are depicted as “moderately improving”, with the rest reported as “stagnating”. Finally, in 2 countries -Ireland and the Netherlands- their progress is even “decreasing”.

Slow progress on the SDG Index since 2019 has largely been driven by stagnation or even reversal of progress on the socio-economic goals and targets. Vulnerable groups and populations in Europe and in the rest of the world have been particularly affected by COVID-19 (Lancet COVID-19 Commission, 2021). In Europe, COVID-19 caused a decline in life expectancy that hadn't been seen for 70 years (Aburto et al. 2021) and caused delays in health interventions and increased mental health issues (OECD 2021). Levels of material deprivation and unemployment rates, however, remain above pre-pandemic levels in the EU27, while some indicators were showing signs of recovery in 2021, including reductions in the share of young people not in employment, education or training (NEET). But the Russian aggression in Ukraine, the energy crisis, inflation and budgetary constraints all threaten to slow down or even reverse this recovery.

## Key challenges and gaps

Significant gaps and challenges will need to be addressed at EU level in order to implement SDG 17. Official development assistance (ODA) has not reached the targeted level; private investment flows are not well aligned with sustainable development; there continues to be a significant digital divide; and there are on-going trade tensions. When it comes to real world implementation there are several adverse critiques on the progress of SDG 17 in the EU:

**1. Lack of ambition:** The European Union has been widely criticised for its lack of ambition in implementing the SDGs. Despite the European Commission's pledge to “leave no one behind”, the overall progress made in the EU on SDG 17 has been seen as insufficient.

**2. Inadequate resources:** The EU has been criticised for failing to allocate adequate resources to meeting the goals set out in SDG 17. This has been especially true in the case of the European Development Fund, which has been seen as lacking adequate funding for the implementation of SDG 17.

**3. Poor coordination:** Despite the commitment of the EU to the SDGs, there has been evidence of poor coordination between member states in implementing the goals. This has caused a lack of clarity over the implementation of SDG 17 and the monitoring of the progress made.

**4. Lack of accountability:** The lack of a mechanism to hold member states accountable for their progress on SDG 17 has been seen as an obstacle to achieving the goals. This has been a source of frustration for many campaigners and experts, who believe that better accountability measures are necessary to ensure that the SDGs are implemented effectively.

**5. Lack of recognition of historic responsibilities;** Despite narratives of 'partnership' the EU still wields unequal power in a world system built on colonialism. Partnerships should be centred on recognition of asymmetries of power and the ways in which the EU currently benefits from this advantage, for example in its trade agreements and extractivist projects.[1]

When it comes to the challenges facing Goal 17, the EESC concluded that overall, the progress on SDG 17 is too slow and significant challenges remain on EU's spillovers related to economic and financial flows. The EUVR 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".

## A civil society vision for the policy

Regarding businesses, enterprises and the private sector, for civil society it is imperative that greenwashing is avoided at all costs and that increased investments are truly aligned with sustainability objectives, ensuring greater policy coherence for sustainable development. Businesses must therefore promote transparency in their activities and work and cooperate with third parties and governments. An important step forward is also improved governance, as many businesses do not yet incorporate the SDGs or a planetary boundaries framework with social impact measurement on direct and indirect externalities, for instance across their global value chains.

[1] Crochet, V. (2022) 'Trade Defence Instruments: A New Tool for the European Union's Extractivism', *European Journal of International Law*, 33(2), pp. 381–410.

Businesses must therefore be proactive in embarking on a just transition and anticipate regulatory shifts that are foreseen with the EGD and other EU regulatory and policy frameworks.

At the Member State level, governments should work to improve their competencies and ensure that impact assessments on the SDGs are considered across all stages of the policy cycle. In addition, greater accountability at government level is needed to ensure that SDG implementation is successful. Many of the monitoring mechanisms are voluntary, meaning too often that governments employ empty rhetoric but resist meaningful action and change when presented with sustainability trade-offs. A wholistic, bold and intersectional approach, with more political will is required to manage competing interests and to ensure that no one is left behind.

The EU must support greater capacity building and work to renew international cooperation and build trust for the global common good. In light of enormous shifts in international relations and threats to multilateral cooperation, there should be a greater focus on policy learning by taking into account lessons learned in the first seven years of SDG implementation. This must be thoroughly assessed within the Commission, in the European Parliament, across Member States, and by civil society. Given the mismatch between the EU's assessment in its Voluntary Review and the reports of independent scientists, analysts and civil society, the EU should consider using data and analysis from multiple sources, such as the EEA and SDSN, in its monitoring and evaluation.

At an international level, the United Nations and associated international organisations should improve their transparency, their integration with the public system and better integrate the local organisations in their programs. There is a need to improve the overall coordination system and to ensure the timely and transparent involvement of civil society. One of the problems within the International Agencies and the UN is that multilateralism is not always implemented and often work is carried out in a siloed manner. Tokenism and a lack of diversity and inclusion is also a common issue. Therefore, changes in the international framework are needed to bring about a step change in the work of the International Agencies and UN and to enable the improved implementation of the SDGs.

It is important to increase the involvement of civil society. CSOs can play a supervisory role and can ensure transparency in SDG implementation. Participatory and deliberative approaches to policymaking are vital, and the EU should first consult with the relevant citizens and stakeholders, following

best practice principles for meaningful participation, deliberation and engagement, for example those identified in the Real Deal project. The communication on all levels should be improved to allow for stronger engagement and exchange. It is also crucial trying to break down silos between academia, the civil society, the businesses and the policy makers to let them collaborate towards the common goal of implementing the SDGs.

## Civil society recommendations

- 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 a more structured engagement of young people and youth organisations.
- Foster a more 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 proposals, leading to SDG cherry-picking.
- Guarantee that trade deals will not externalise social and environmental impacts in other countries; establish a new framework for free trade agreements, economic partnership and investment agreements that guarantees the real involvement of CSOs and the social partners (e.g. via the creation of Domestic Advisory Groups) and ensures public awareness; promote the overarching and full integration of more ambitious and enforceable trade and sustainable development chapters in international trade agreements with strong civil society monitoring and participation.
- Promote policy coherence through an overarching strategy and a governance structure to enhance the implementation of agenda 2030.
- 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.

# CONCLUSIONS

# OVERARCHING

# CIVIL SOCIETY

# RECOMMENDATIONS

Each of the five thematic chapters of the report highlight interrelated points for civil society on how to address gaps and challenges identified in the EU's implementation of the SDGs. The recommendations below are overarching recommendations directed towards policymakers at EU level.

## **01** **Overarching Strategy: Introduce an EU Strategy for SDGs**

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The EU must adequately follow up on the European Voluntary Review with a costed-action plan and overarching strategy on the SDGs. This bold EU strategy should contain clear and measurable targets set to reach the SDGs in the EU and MS by 2030, as well as a structured dialogue mechanism between the EU executive and civil society, to hold public servants accountable for their sustainability commitments. The strategy must also ensure adequate financing for the attainment of the SDGs and a thorough overhaul of the global financial architecture to direct fiscal resources towards the most vulnerable. The EU must show clear responsibility and accountability for SDG governance structures.

## **02** **Wellbeing Economy: Replace GDP with indicators on wellbeing**

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Wellbeing indicators should be developed to guide EU decision-making and track Member States' performance. EU governance and accountability should be improved to foster a sustainable transition towards a Wellbeing Economy. Policy making process needs to be transformed to enable meaningful participation and be truly democratic. Policies that incentivise businesses which are positively affecting wellbeing should be adopted. Furthermore, legislation that enshrines the rights of future generations should be adopted. Wellbeing indicators must not merely be an add on to existing economic governance but must replace an economic system designed to grow exponentially.

## 03

### **Live within our means: Reduce the European material footprint**

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Increase ambition and efforts towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by rapidly changing course on climate change, environmental degradation, biodiversity loss and the EU's footprint on the rest of the world. SDG performance on environmental goals is currently the furthest behind, and yet Europeans continue to consume vast quantities of resources, with the EU-27 consuming twice the size of its biocapacity. Therefore, the EU must do more on the unsustainable practices in the continent, the impact of EU policies on other regions and the implications of our social and economic model and how to overcome them. A key step is to introduce a target for a reduction in EU material footprint of 70% by 2050. The EU should not only focus on decarbonisation, but also on dematerialisation and reversing unequal ecological exchange with other countries.

## 04

### **Social Justice: Truly leave no one behind by prioritising redistribution**

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Support proposals for redistribution and management of existing resources via a global commons for all people, favoring the reduction of the ecological footprint and greater contributions from the richest people by putting the last first. SDG implementation can be financed through the taxation of extraction and consumption of non-renewable resources, with a focus on progressive taxation that is sensitive to the welfare of marginalised and low-income people, for instance through the taxation of overconsumption and luxury goods and services. Elimination of corporate tax incentives and the phasing out of harmful subsidies, such as for fossil fuels and heavily polluting industries, remains paramount. Fiscal policies can be a powerful instrument to reduce social inequalities, eliminate discrimination and promote the transition to sustainable production and consumption patterns and should be leveraged as such. Key issues for sustainable development, such as tackling corruption, preventing war and conflict, and protecting our environment will not happen without a transition to a global feminist wellbeing economy that places people over profit and prioritises an economy of care.

## **05** Stay on track: Improve EU monitoring on the structural and systematic gaps

The EU VR must go beyond a report on the status quo of EU sustainability policies or a presentation of what the EU is doing well. Rather, it needs to analyse the structural and systematic obstacles, trade-offs and gaps the EU is facing to realise the SDGs and transform the EU politically, socially and economically. Monitoring must be rooted in the current political climate, without an honest analysis of the political challenges Europe and the globe is currently facing, otherwise it will not be able to serve as an adequate roadmap to achieving the SDGs by 2030. Monitoring should be innovative, inclusive and participatory, involving key stakeholders, citizens, and civil society. If the EU does not step up to lead by example in honest stocktaking and reporting, the whole sustainable development agenda is at risk.

## **06** Lead by example: Ensure Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development

Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development (PCSD) must be a key concept that the EU remains committed to. The achievement of the SDGs will not be successful without a holistic approach that unifies and leverages the synergies between major EU legislative frameworks including the European Pillar of Social Rights and the European Green Deal. The EU must ensure that all policies genuinely account for their direct and indirect social and environmental impacts, including their impacts upon women, the majority of the world's population, and structurally excluded persons. An intersectional approach to EU policymaking will also be paramount in addressing the gaps. At the sectoral level, sectors with wide-ranging societal harms such as fossil fuels and the arms industry should be vastly limited in their activities, and EU governments should ramp up their investments in health, social care, universal public services and housing.



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SDG Watch Europe  
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