



Progress at a snail's pace

Statement published by the SDG Watch Europe Steering Group as Eurostat publishes 2020 SDG monitoring report

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Over the past five years, since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), “the EU has made progress towards almost all goals” according to the latest SDG monitoring report released today by Eurostat. Although that sounds like good news, SDG Watch Europe, the leading civil society organisation monitoring the EU’s record on implementing the SDGs, says that not only has progress been too slow and patchy, but some of our most pressing challenges are simply not measured.

Eurostat latest SDG monitoring report concludes that there is significant or moderate progress for 13 out of the 17 SDGs. However, the situation is not as clear-cut and straightforward as the report suggests.

The politics behind the numbers

Eurostat has chosen 100 indicators for its SDG monitoring report. “Although statistics project the impression of objectivity and impartiality, the choice of an indicator can be highly political: what you measure – or not – can entirely change the picture”, says the SDG Watch Europe’s Steering Group.

Here is a simple example: the EU is the world region most dependent on imported raw materials and that this comes with heavy social and environmental impacts in other parts of the world. Eurostat looks at Domestic Material Consumption (DMC) as an indicator for SDG 12 on sustainable consumption and production. But this does not properly reflect global material footprints and does not consider all the materials extracted to produce the goods that the European public consumes.

The Raw Material Equivalent (RME) of European imports is around 2.5 times higher. “So, looking at Domestic Material Consumption rather than RME allows us to paint a rosier picture of our footprint”, the Steering Group says. “Overall, there is a tendency towards using flattering indicators rather than facing the inconvenient truth”.

Slow progress is not enough

SDG Watch Europe points out that another pitfall is how Eurostat defines progress. The majority of the current SDG indicators are not linked to any quantifiable targets. In this case, Eurostat considers any improvement as progress. “Even when progress comes at a snail’s pace and we are falling short of becoming sustainable by 2030 the current methodology paints a positive picture”, explains Ingeborg Niestroy from the Steering Group.

To stay with the example of our unsustainable level of resources use: since the adoption of the SDGs in 2015, the percentage of materials used and reused in a circular way has been hovering around 11%. The progress is so slow that we will be far away from a circular economy in 2030 – and yet the report shows us a green arrow pointing upward. The lack of clear targets cannot be attributed to Eurostat given targets are political decisions, but the definition of progress is flawed.

Who is paying the bill?

SDG Watch Europe also points out that the current indicator set falls short of monitoring the externalities of EU policies and practices: How do European supply chains affect working and living conditions of those producing our goods? How much land, water, energy, and raw materials are we using up outside our boundaries? Are we making sure the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) does not negatively impact food security globally? What about tax avoidance of European companies and its negative impact on sustainable development in other countries? Already last year, we asked the EC "[Who is paying the bill?](#)".

With some of the indicators we are even twisting our negative effects on others pretending we are doing them good: "SDG Watch Europe members can only shake their heads when they look at how Eurostat is monitoring SDG 17 on global partnership: the indicator says the more we import from developing countries, the more sustainable we are. We all know that our clothes, IT gadgets, imported foods, the fuel in our tanks or the stones plastering our town squares are too often produced in violation of human rights while destroying the environment," Patrizia Heidegger from the Steering Group adds, "why do we not measure instead how much we actually contribute to living wages and sustainable environmental management in poorer countries?".

Too many left behind

Turning to internal problems, the SDG monitoring process also turns a blind eye on things such as homelessness or people struggling to find affordable rents, child poverty, the number of refugees living in squalid camps or those millions without access to safe drinking water in the EU – all of this happening with a European economy generating a GDP of 5 trillion EUR annually.

Looking at today's report (that does not yet reflect the impact of COVID-19), it is shocking to see that in-work poverty has continued to increase (SDG 1). More than 9% of all people in Europe with a job do not earn enough to make a decent living. This is one of several striking examples how the celebrated growth in GDP (SDG 8) does not translate into a growth in well-being for people and the planet.

The COVID-19 crisis has exposed our current failures highlighting the underfunding of a profit-oriented health system (SDG 3), our dependence on global value chains (SDG 12 and 17), the hardship of people working in precarious jobs (SDG 8), of women taking on unpaid or invisible care work (SDG 5), unequal access to education (SDG 4) and missing financial safety nets (SDG 1). The pandemic has brought the deep inequalities that have been existing in the EU to the forefront: many vulnerable groups such as migrants, refugees, ethnic minorities, including Roma, people with disabilities, homeless people or older people have never had equal access to quality employment or adequate health care and are often more exposed to environmental health risks.

With [Falling Through the Cracks](#) SDG Watch Europe has shown already last year that progress on SDG 10 has been too slow, and we need political solutions. SDG Watch Europe is now calling on the EU and Member States to let this crisis be a wake-up call. With 10 key demands, SDG Watch Europe published a [statement](#) pointing out the most important elements of a sustainable, inclusive and green economic recovery just last Friday.

Failing on too many goals

The report also admits that progress towards the environmental aspects of sustainability is slow or even absent, for instance with progress on SDG 13 on climate in part stalled, and pressure on ecosystems and biodiversity (SDG 15) increasing. The indicators for SDG 2 reflect the EU's struggle in setting up a sustainable food system. The indicators show that ammonia emissions and groundwater pollution with nitrates are far too high. With only 8% of farming land under organic practices, the vast majority of agricultural land suffers from high levels of soil erosion with an average sale of 360 000 tons of pesticide in the EU each year.

In relation to gender equality (SDG 5), we are actually moving away from the Goals. Women are still less employed and less paid even though they are better educated than men. Eurostat itself argues that the progress made is not sustainable. The EC has just drafted a new Gender Equality Strategy, but its main political programme, the European Green Deal, does not even mention gender equality.

The report is unable to address how different EU policies run counter to achieving social or environmental objectives. It does not address the question how we are making sure all our policies are coherent and all contribute to sustainable development within and beyond the EU.

Need for overall strategy and strong political leadership

Today's report shows the need for the new European Commission to take up a leadership role regarding the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. The Commission President herself needs to embrace the responsibility for her team of Commissioners to deliver on the SDGs. Statements on the importance of the SDGs are not enough. We finally want to see tangible action. Beyond the European Green Deal and integrating the SDGs into the European Semester – which has not yet happened in any substantial way for the 2020 cycle – the EU needs to give itself an overarching Sustainable Europe 2030 Strategy and set clear targets to achieve all the SDGs by 2030.