



Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development “Transforming Our World”

A position paper from
the Regional Environmental Center
for Central and Eastern Europe



REGIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL CENTER

Executive summary

The “Regional Consultation on the Implementation of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Central and Eastern Europe” brought together representatives from governments, academia, civil society and the business sector from Eastern European EU member states and the countries of South Eastern Europe (SEE). As a neutral, independent, international organisation, the Regional Environmental Center (REC) provided a platform for a facilitated regional multi-stakeholder consultation to identify priorities and actions, where participants discussed how these efforts could become part of a coherent global framework. The outcomes of the consultation are now offered for consideration to the European Commission in its ongoing efforts to establish a framework for the EU-wide uptake and implementation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The structure of the conference allowed participants to draw recommendations from two different groups of countries in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE): the Eastern European member states of the EU; and the countries of the SEE region. Some recommendations, such as the importance of capacity building and ownership, are shared, while others are specific to a given area.

Key points emerging from the concluding plenary session

1. The SDGs offer a vision of a fairer, more prosperous, peaceful, sustainable and inclusive world.
2. The SDGs cannot be achieved in isolation: reaching all the goals paves the way to ending hunger and poverty.
3. Among the diverse political institutions engaged in implementation, a proper approach to SDG implementation must promote ownership at all levels and in all sectors.
4. The implementation of the SDGs should be initiated and take place through participatory processes, adhering to the principle of subsidiarity.
5. The SDGs need to be translated into national targets and then localised in their entirety, not just by pursuing “low-hanging fruits”.
6. Capacity and knowledge are of key importance in transition processes.
7. Policies and programmes must be evidence based and transparent, with proper monitoring to ensure accountability.
8. Actors, including governments, must be ambitious and push beyond the limits with sustained efforts.

Key messages from the Eastern European EU member states

9. The key lesson learned from the two recent, partly overlapping, transformations in CEE — the transition to democracy and a market economy, and the EU accession process — is that multi-stakeholder preparation and international guidance and monitoring are the prerequisites of success.
10. Awareness raising, capacity building and public participation are key to the successful implementation of the SDGs.
11. Gap analyses, experience sharing and a new kind of institutional cooperation are essential at all levels.
12. High-level coordination — including from EU institutions — is required to facilitate the process. The EU needs to enhance inter-institutional cooperation on the SDGs for effective implementation.
13. An ongoing commitment to leave no one behind is important after the highest-priority goals have been addressed.

Key messages from South Eastern Europe

14. Besides the usual emphasis on transposition, assistance to EU accession must also include capacity building for the implementation of the SDGs.
15. The EU needs to institutionalise the SDGs for effective regional implementation.
16. The SDGs must be mainstreamed into existing government structures after a thorough gap analysis.
17. Capacity building is an obvious priority both at the start of the process and throughout, as it is an enabler and facilitator.
18. Educational curricula should refer to and support the SDGs, as appropriate, at all levels.
19. During the implementation process there is a need for horizontal coordination within governments and with all external stakeholders.
20. “Living strategies” — that is, regular, frequent feedback and adjustment periods — are needed towards implementing and achieving the SDGs.

Introduction

On January 1, 2016, the 17 SDGs of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development — adopted by world leaders in September 2015 at an historic UN summit — officially came into force. Countries and regions are now developing their strategies for the successful implementation of the SDGs. The REC, in pursuit of its mandate from the signatories to the Charter of the REC to assist the post-2015 global transformation process in the region, organised the “Regional Consultation on the Implementation of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Central and Eastern Europe”. The objectives of the regional consultation, which took place on April 11 and 12, 2016, were to:

- raise awareness of current sustainability issues, as defined by the UN 2030 Agenda in the light of the relevance of the SDGs and their targets for Eastern European EU member states and SEE countries;
- provide a forum for discussing the implementation of the SDGs by Eastern European EU member states and SEE countries in the light of their national and subnational development strategies and their implementation;
- identify modalities for science–policy dialogue and interaction between stakeholders from Eastern European EU member states and SEE countries, promoting solutions and methodologies for the UN 2030 Agenda;
- increase the visibility of Eastern European EU member states, drawing conclusions from the experience of the recent political and economic transformations in CEE, and consider willing countries from CEE as a pilot group for SDG implementation; and
- submit the conclusions of the consultation to the attention of the European Commission and its European Political Strategy Centre.

General recommendations

All recommendations should be considered in line with the principles set out in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, especially the respect for national policies and priorities, as well as the consideration of different national realities, capacities and levels of development.

1. Collect and consider general lessons learned from the recent transformations in CEE.

Ultimately, the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development aims at a profound, comprehensive, global socioeconomic transformation, hence the title “Transforming Our World”. It can be very useful to draw conclusions from the experience of recent political and economic transformations in the CEE region, including:

- transformation into democratic market economies; and
- accession to and membership of the EU.

While the first of these transitions was partially unexpected and definitely unprepared — a case of “learning on the job” — the second was coordinated and well prepared. Due to adequate awareness raising, information dissemination and capacity building, society as a whole acted in considerable unity towards EU accession, which (at the time of joining) was a common target for the overwhelming majority.

The *acquis communautaire* brought in its essence a holistic change to CEE countries. At the same time, the EU acted as a coordinator for the implementation of the required transformations. However, each country was able to find its own path to fulfil its commitments. A similar approach would also be helpful for the implementation of the SDGs. Some advocated the inclusion of the SDGs in EU strategic documents to accelerate implementation, while others recommended EU legislation for the SDGs due to enforcement possibilities (e.g. infringement procedures).

Consideration could be given to dedicating willing countries from this region as a pilot group for the implementation of the SDGs, either as a whole, or by accepting volunteer governments for the role. The lessons learned about socio-economic transition/transformation per se from the two consecutive transformations — including trade-offs, problems and faults, as well as innovative solutions and guardrails — could and should be formulated and offered to the wider international community by the respective Eastern European member states of the EU. This strategic guidance could be instrumental for effective and comprehensive implementation, for identifying appropriate European policies and instruments, and for eliminating possible impediments. An approach to piloting might be to select certain Eastern European EU member states and SEE countries for priority support from a consortium of partners. This would allow the consortium to select priority goals/targets for implementation, develop work plans for reaching them, and offer solutions for replication in other countries.

2. Maintain close cooperation with sustainability science.

One of the main reasons for the success of the SDG development process of the UN Open Working Group (OWG), and for the worldwide political support behind the present development agenda “Transforming Our World”, is that the process was a unique example of science-based, multi-stakeholder, open policy development. It is vital that all levels of governance maintain a similar knowledge-based approach during the implementation phase as well.

An open and proactive approach to the same process is also required from science. Research needs to be tuned to countries’ implementation needs. Experiences should be fed back into both academic and political processes. Existing partnerships (e.g. the climate-smart agriculture concept of the Food and Agriculture Organization) can already offer lessons learned.

Sustainability science — knowledge from all academic fields dealing with nature, society and the individual, as well as economics, technology and governance — is essential for the elaboration, preparation and management of a peaceful transition. To build a new economic model, we need to raise the complexity of the economy — otherwise there will be a collapse. This increase means more energy, which, however, needs to originate from cleaner energy sources.

A holistic, integrated, systematic approach at both EU and national levels is essential for the success of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. A coordination system at the EU level may help to achieve goals identified by the member states. It must be determined which goals and targets are more connected, and which are higher ranking than others from a systems point of view, as their implementation will have a significant impact on the entire system.

Decisive steps towards a circular economy are to be encouraged, as it also works as an “implementing agent” of the SDGs. Greenfield projects should only be authorised if they contribute to the circular economy instead of the old type of economy.

Human rights are the roots of the 2030 Agenda and are mainstreamed in the SDG system. The SDGs must not be confined to the political domain of environmental protection, as they are not only environmental but also economic and social tools and targets. In some cases, the environmental improvement resulting from the achievement of certain SDGs can be regarded as a positive “side effect”.

3. Capacity building and public participation are the two rails of the green economy track.

Right at the beginning of the implementation period of “Transforming Our World”, a strong and wide capacity-building effort should be launched with respect to transformative change, and to the SDGs as a system, to be continued year by year for each new generation of young people joining the ranks of the respective stakeholders.

As an urgent task, the SDGs must be integrated into public education curricula as well as university education. Targeted and effective programmes that contribute to achieving necessary changes in behaviour and attitudes must be developed for formal, non-formal and informal education. Throughout the 15 years of implementation, it is of the utmost importance that capacity building, investment and governance proceed in parallel, in the same way as top-down and bottom-up approaches.

Wide and ongoing awareness raising, involving not only civil servants but also the general public, will help to ensure the implementation of the SDGs. A well-informed general public will provide agents of change in grassroots communities. Ultimately, capacities on the ground will be decisive.

Participatory planning, implementation, monitoring and experience exchange processes, involving all relevant stakeholder groups, if properly established at the outset, will, in the long run, save expense and defuse tensions. Institutions, stakeholder groups, civil society and academia must participate in the planning of the implementation of the SDGs, and throughout the entire process, in order to ensure the wide acceptance of the changes required and the stability of the transition process. To this end, it is essential to facilitate the early exchange of best practices and experiences. Training and support will have to be tailored to the needs of each specific group of stakeholders.

Specific recommendations

4. Key elements for the successful European implementation of the 2030 Agenda include the following:

Increased institutional cooperation vis-à-vis the implementation of the SDGs is essential. One innovative aspect of the SDG system is that all goals are “three-dimensional”: they include environmental, social, as well as economic aspects. In addition, many issues and values have been mainstreamed horizontally across the goals. Administrations are currently working in silos, while the “soul” of the SDGs is the fact that they have been constructed using a systems approach — and they need to be implemented in the same way.

This means that progress in any of the traditional “silos”, such as agriculture, infrastructure, nature conservation or health, will be greatly assisted by the accomplishment of certain targets in other goals, possibly assigned to other “silos”. The climate change goal (Goal 13), for example, has five targets, while progress with respect to climate change mitigation and adaptation will be furthered by no fewer than 24 targets that belong under other goals. **No branch or “silo” of the administration** will be able to implement an SDG on its own, **nor should it be left alone** with such a task.

Coordination should be managed as high up in the administration as possible. As the SDGs form a comprehensive programme in which everybody has a role to play, enhanced institutional cooperation is a must. Simultaneous systems-level awareness, horizontal communication and vertical action in the civil service can underpin this approach. In many countries, at different levels (national, regional, local), institutional reforms or innovations may also be useful or necessary.

The SDGs must be institutionalised at the EU level. Since the EU, as a legal entity, has also signed up to the SDGs, its role goes beyond coordination. While keeping in mind the subsidiarity principle, the EU is obliged to take all necessary steps to ensure the success of implementation.

Lessons learned from the fate of the Brundtland Report — and the subsequent Agenda 21 — should be taken to heart. There was no comprehensive European understanding and no shared “umbrella” obligations, thus implementation was inadequate. We need to be more progressive this time, with the involvement of politicians, the business community, citizens and academia.

Increased cooperation must expand to all stakeholder groups. Relevant regional institutions and catalyst organisations will be particularly useful in providing EU assistance, facilitation and guidance for the implementation of the SDGs in the EU and its neighbouring regions. Close cooperation with relevant experts and institutions will be necessary for the wide capacity-building and planning activities described above.

It was debated whether the North must make early moves to establish credibility in the global South by strongly scaling up efforts towards sustainable consumption. Many argued that for the South, this SDG is the litmus test for Northern sincerity. Beyond the credibility issue, transforming consumption into sustainable patterns in the North may also be instrumental for making sustainability “fashionable” — that is, changing the guiding vision of the desirable future lifestyle of populations emerging from poverty.

Halting processes that cause irreversible damage, such as biodiversity loss (including agricultural), soil degradation and GHG emissions, **is an urgent priority.** Based on science, the external costs of industrial, business and financial activities must be internalised. Natural resources and ecosystem services must be properly evaluated and will have to be taken into account during all types of economic activities and the monitoring of community wealth. Nevertheless, all countries should take actions appropriate to their local conditions and capabilities.

Sustainable development institutes and other **independent, non-profit “catalyst” facilitators** in the region **are available** for use. They can break down the goals and targets into sectoral plans and legislation, and can share and disseminate lessons learned. The creation of an implementation plan for the region — on a voluntary basis — can accelerate implementation.

5. Policy coherence for sustainable development should be ensured at all three levels of governance (local, national and international).

A common understanding of the wording and interpretation of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development — including definitions and terminology — should be established and subsequently maintained throughout the process, especially among the civil service, in public education and in the media.

Content as well as member states’ **intentions and ambitions must be clarified** in the SDG framework. A concise summary of the evolution of the content of each individual goal during the OWG process would be useful in order to clarify interests and ambitions, especially in cases where the early language and wording, reflecting EU proposals, have been softened or blurred during later stages in the interests of consensus.

6. The planning of the starting phase of implementation should be science based, using the “2Rs” approach (relevance for the community and ranking in the system).

The **relevance of targets** for the European and national levels **must be established**. The involvement of the EU in the process should be according to the subsidiarity principle. Each country shall select targets based on agreed indicators, so the EU can easily report to the UN individually by member states and jointly by the Commission. Targets may be more relevant (or less relevant) from two aspects:

- a) where progress/action is urgently needed in the EU as a whole, or within a European country; and
- b) where the EU and/or the country can provide particularly valuable assistance to third parties/ beneficiaries to achieve targets and/or take action.

Urgency can be defined as a rapidly closing window of opportunity for reaping benefits or averting irreversible damage.

Targets of the “relevant” set must be ranked according to their role and effectiveness in the system.

The 169 targets comprise:

- a) Targets of particular importance, which are those that function as bottleneck openers. These are the *sine qua non* targets that are preconditions for achieving further targets. Primary education, for example, is a precondition for secondary and tertiary education.
- b) Targets with multiple causal effects that trigger multiple causal changes — that is, “snowball” or “avalanche” effects, such as the gradual elimination of environmentally harmful subsidies that are incompatible with sustainable development.
- c) “Engine-starter” targets that trigger desirable positive feedback loops, or “virtuous cycles”, in the system — for example most capacity-building efforts such as health awareness, sustainability culture, or youth engagement.
- d) “Low-hanging fruit” targets that are easy to accomplish, and the implementation of which has a trigger effect on the implementation of other targets. However, it is important to keep in mind that the exhaustion of easy targets must not result in the termination of the process.

The course of implementation must allow for correction, adjustment and flexibility. During implementation there will be paths that lead us astray. We have to develop and maintain the capacity to acknowledge our mistakes, correct them, learn from them, and carry on.

7. The demonstration of continuing European leadership at global level needs to be supported by effective reporting practices on measures and progress.

A decisive start requires a **clear chain of command** for SDG implementation at the executive level. Some participants recommended to clarify early which office/official has overall responsibility for organising SDG implementation at EU and country level. Governments should be encouraged to report to the EU Presidency and to share information with one another on the organisation of SDG implementation in their executive branches. The higher the chief responsible office/official is in the administration, the better the prospects for successful implementation.

A supporting/advisory academic network in relevant fields **should be established**, benefiting from experience gained during prior engagement in SDG development. Relevant regional institutions and organisations will be particularly useful in providing EU assistance, facilitation and guidance for SDG implementation in Europe and its neighbouring regions.

The development of proper indicators for the SDGs is a sensitive issue. Due to the large number of international initiatives undertaken at all levels by different organisations, their complementarity should be ensured. It is more important to get indicators right than to act fast. It is worth taking the time to develop/decide on a set of key or “headline” indicators that could serve both monitoring and communication purposes. This process could benefit from the results of the “Beyond GDP” initiative launched by the EU many years ago. One cautionary consideration is that, while trying to restrict the number of headline indicators for the sake of easier communication, we must avoid at all costs the “GDP trap” — that is, the oversimplification of a complex situation, which results in screening off important aspects of the process.

Identifying and **using pilot areas for implementation** and reporting **may prove useful**. Willing Eastern European EU member states and EU Neighbourhood and candidate countries, having had considerable experience in socioeconomic transition, may be among such pilots. When the EU assists partners in starting work on the SDGs or launching cooperation for transformation, the 2Rs approach to orchestrating the pattern of target implementation should be widely visible.



COUNTRY OF ORIGIN OF PARTICIPANTS

Albania • Austria • Bosnia and Herzegovina • Bulgaria • Croatia • Czech Republic • Germany • Hungary • Kosovo* • Lithuania • Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia • Montenegro • Nepal • Poland • Romania • Serbia • Slovakia • Slovenia

INTERNATIONAL BODIES REPRESENTED

European Commission
Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)
Global Water Partnership (GWP)
International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD)
Regional Environmental Center for Central and Eastern Europe (REC)
Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN)
United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD)
United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)

CONTRIBUTORS

Participants came from government, academia, the business sector and civil organisations

Ms. Natalija Aceska • Ms. Sandra Andovska • Mr. Aleksandar Avramovski • Mr. Zsolt Bauer
Ms. Djana Bejko • Ms. Natasa Bergelj • Ms. Eva Csobod • Mr. Zoltan Erdelyi • Mr. Igor Esmerov
Mr. Karl-Friedrich Falkenberg • Ms. Tsvetelina Borissova Filipova • Mr. Sandor Fulop
Mr. Jozsef Gayer • Mr. Zsolt Hetesi • Mr. Gabor Heves • Ms. Brigitta Hidveghi-Pulay • Ms. Zsuzsa Ivanyi
Ms. Edyta Janus • Mr. Igor Jevtic • Mr. Istvan Joo • Ms. Rasa Kairiene • Mr. Daniel Kaminski
Mr. Marcin Karaskiewicz • Mr. Andrzej Kassenberg • Ms. Ariadne Abigel Kemele-Vandlik
Mr. Istvan Kenyeres • Ms. Biljana Kilibarda • Ms. Tijana Koprivica • Ms. Blanka Koron • H.E. Mr. Csaba Korosi
Mr. Igor Kostic • Mr. Peter Kovacs • Ms. Gordana Kozuharova • Ms. Aniko Kraft • Ms. Maria Sabina Lazar
Mr. Matus Lopatnik • Mr. Mihajlo Markovic • Mr. Laszlo Miklos • Ms. Sladana Miocic • Ms. Ingeborg Niestroy
Mr. Lah Nitaj • Mr. Jovan Pavlovic • Mr. Laszlo Pinter • Mr. Matthias Puhringer • Ms. Evis Qaja
Ms. Kornelija Radovanovikj • Ms. Vaiva Ramanauskiene • Mr. Vladimir Randacek • Mr. Kenty Richardson
Mr. Mitat Sanxhaku • Mr. Guido Schmidt-Traub • Ms. Mateja Sepec Jersic • Mr. Reuben Sessa
Ms. Ekaterina Shilegarska • Ms. Tatjana Studen • Mr. Istvan Szabo • Ms. Klara Szeker
Ms. Marta Szigeti Bonifert • Mr. Peter Szuppinger • Mr. Kaustubh Thapa • Mr. Rumen Valchev
Ms. Venelina Varbova • Mr. Aleksandar Voynikov • Mr. Kosta Zivanovic • Mr. Janos Zlinszky
Ms. Liliana Zugo • H.E. Mr. Dragan Zupanjevac

* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence.

This paper is the outcome of a workshop organised by the REC at the initiative of Karl Falkenberg, senior advisor on sustainable development to the European Political Strategy Centre. The event was held under the Chatham House Rule. The participating experts from various levels of government, academia, business associations and civil organisations contributed in their personal capacity. The discussion revolved around a line of thought offered by the REC's Sustainable Development Academy, as well as key issues outlined in the introductory presentations. The present paper is comprehensive and covers all the suggestions and recommendations made during the event. Every effort has been made to give proportional weight to the issues, reflecting the opinions stated in the room. The REC wishes to express its sincere appreciation for all the contributions received in writing before the workshop, and for all interventions made during the event. All credit belongs to the participants: the editors take full responsibility for any eventual imperfections in the outcome document.

The Regional Environmental Center for Central and Eastern Europe (REC) is an international organisation that works as a catalyst, accelerating sustainable solutions in partnership with governments and non-governmental stakeholders.

Our projects focus on helping communities to strengthen environmental governance, shift to a low-carbon economy, build resilience to climate change, manage natural resources, and develop capacities for future environmental stewardship.

With 25 years of experience in supporting the region's transition to democracy and sustainability, the REC is a flexible mechanism for cooperation in Central and Eastern Europe and beyond, delivering results through its office and expert network.

