

ESDN Policy Note

Post-2030 Agenda: 10 Years of SDG Implementation and Ideas for a Future Agenda

Introduction

The **ESDN Conference 2025** took place in Copenhagen, Denmark on **25-26 November 2025** during the time of the Danish EU Presidency (second half of 2025). It was organized by the [European Sustainable Development Network \(ESDN\)](#) in cooperation with [Nordregio](#) and the [Nordic Council of Ministers](#). The conference focused on **“Post-2030 Agenda: 10 Years of SDG Implementation and Ideas for a Future Agenda: What has worked well, what has not worked well, and what is next?”**. The conference theme was discussed and reflected upon through keynote presentations, a panel discussion, and interactive exchange formats. Over 90 participants from all over Europe attended the conference, representing various stakeholder groups, like policymakers, research, civil society organizations, youth, international organizations, and business.



When the **2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development**, entitled “Transforming our World”, with its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) was adopted in September 2015, it was with great hope and the ambition of a universal agenda that not only aims to achieve positive actions for people, planet and prosperity, but also strengthens universal peace. Over the years, the **2030 Agenda has become a global lingua franca**, a shared language for sustainability and, as one keynote speaker pointed out, a **“north star”, guiding global efforts towards sustainability**.

However, another keynoter expressed the current state on the implementation of the 17 SDGs: “We must be honest, we will not reach every SDG by 2030”.

After more than 10 years of implementation, the latest data from the [UN’s SDG Report 2025](#) shows that **the world remains far off track from achieving the 2030 Agenda**. Of the 169 SDG targets, 139 could be assessed using global trend data from the 2015 baseline to the most recent year. Among these, **only 35% show adequate progress** – 18% are on track and 17% are making moderate progress. In contrast, **48% of targets show insufficient progress**. Most alarming is the fact that **18% of targets have regressed** below 2015 baseline levels.

Having only 4 more years until 2030, it is pertinent to **reflect on how to intensify SDG implementation efforts over the next years to live up to current commitments and how to design sustainability goals and policies post-2030**.



5 recommendations were made by the participants which will be elaborated further below in this Policy Note:

- 1) Intensify SDG implementation efforts until 2030**
- 2) Reform the governance framework for the post-2030 period**

- 3) Increase civil society and youth involvement in current and future SDG implementation efforts
- 4) Strengthen sub-national activities and multi-level policy coordination
- 5) Develop new and innovative ideas to measure socio-economic progress

2030 Agenda implementation at a crossroads: Challenges to be addressed and lessons learned

Since the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs have been adopted in 2015, **various developments have changed the framework conditions dramatically**: We have witnessed a global pandemic, the break-out of a war in Europe, economic instability, and a questioning of multilateral collaboration over the past few years that impacted on SDG implementation in various ways. One keynote speaker argued that we face a growing de-prioritization of the 2030 Agenda, an ‘SDG fatigue’, and a decreasing popularity of the term sustainability. As some countries even work against multilateral cooperation and international sustainability goals, another keynoter reminded participants that setting a global agenda and agreeing on common goals is not something to be taken for granted.

Given the mixed results in global SDG implementation and our challenging times, it is important to mention that **European countries are the leaders when it comes to achieving SDGs**. Looking at the [Sustainable Development Report 2025](#) by the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN), European countries occupy the top 19 places in the SDG implementation ranking, with Finland in the lead, followed by Sweden, Denmark, and Germany. And in terms of environmental and climate policy achievements, the EU is ahead of many other countries worldwide, despite the need to accelerate to fully achieve sustainable development. While global GHG emissions are increasing, the EU’s domestic GHG emissions

have decreased by 37% since 1990 with the aim of moving towards the 2030 target of a net 55% reduction¹. In the EU, there is a growth in sustainable business models and in Green Jobs (6.7 million jobs in 2022 which equals 3.1% of total employment) as well as a growing share of renewable energy sources in final energy use. Therefore, **Europe can be regarded as an important front-runner in sustainable development** compared to worldwide trends.

Another important aspect of SDG implementation is the **governance mechanisms applied**. The OECD assessed the progress and gaps of governance mechanism in its member countries over the past 10 years². On the one hand, there is **significant progress** regarding long-term vision for sustainability (in 85% of member countries); high-level political commitment for policy coherence (84%); stakeholder inclusion for knowledge exchange (76%); and high-level coordination mechanisms (73%). On the other hand, there are **key gaps** concerning lack of data assessing transboundary impacts (73%) and limited technical capacity to enforce policy coherence (45%). In addition, only 28% of the member countries include sustainability in the budget process, and a small minority (15%) have mandates to resolve policy trade-offs.



During the conference, the participants were asked about their **main lessons learned from 10 years of implementing the 2030 Agenda**. Here are the ranked results:

- 1) **Collaboration**
 - Coordination and co-creation are key success factors, but there is still need for more intensified coordination;

¹ EEA report, “Trends and projections in Europe 2024”, 11/2024

² OECD (2024) Unleashing Policy Coherence to Achieve the SDGs An Assessment of Governance Mechanisms, Paris, OECD

- Collaboration drives progress for successful implementation;
- Ownership and collective action are important drivers.
- 2) **Persistence:**
 - There was a slow uptake in the implementation procedure, but the ball is now rolling;
 - Patience is required, but there is a need to keep intensify the implementation process;
 - There is a long way to go, but persistence will pay off in the end.
- 3) **Inclusion:**
 - Public engagement and stakeholder involvement are a necessary precondition for successful implementation;
 - Empowerment for collective action is creating an important foundation;
 - Civil society's inclusion is key.
- 4) **Trade-offs:**
 - Win-win concept was in the focus for a long time;
 - However, practical implementation is also about addressing trade-offs;
 - Thus, implementation needs to focus on trade-offs.
- 5) **Governance:**
 - Policy coherence is crucial and policy areas need to be better connected;
 - Political will is a key precondition;
 - Current governance systems are hardly fit-for-purpose for future challenges, and better governance principles are needed.

Although there are **still 4 years to go in implementing the 2030 Agenda and SDGs**, the **schedule for formal discussions on the post-2030 Agenda** has already been sketched out. There will be a UN Secretary-General's report on the 2030 Agenda to the Member States in March 2027, and the UN High Level Political Forum "SDG Summit" in September 2027 will consider how to advance sustainable development by 2030 and beyond.

[Recommendations for the 2030 Agenda implementation and the post-2030 future agenda](#)

The participants of the ESDN Conference 2025 made the following **five recommendations** for

policymakers at all political levels and responsible stakeholders to foster SDG implementation until 2030 as well as to develop ideas for concrete activities for the post-2030 period:

1) [Intensify SDG implementation efforts until 2030](#)

- **Enable proactive and effective SDG implementation for the remaining 4 years.** Although it is important to develop ideas and strategic approaches for the post-2030 era, there are still 4 years to go in implementing the 2030 Agenda and live up to the commitments made. This time should be used wisely and effectively: Current implementation is largely off track, and the post-2030 negotiation process will, very likely, depend on the actual success of SDG implementation over the next few years.
- **Strengthen the mechanisms that have contributed to accelerating SDG implementation.** For instance, coordination and collaboration arrangements between institutions and stakeholder groups; ownership of SDGs and collective actions; persistence in engaging with SDG implementation and interconnected policies; etc.
- **Learn from past mistakes and shortcomings.** For a long time, sustainability was portrayed as creating primarily win-win situations for all parties involved. This has, however, obscured the trade-offs between different policy areas or different stakeholder groups. Going forward, such trade-offs need to be more clearly acknowledged and addressed. In addition, governance arrangements and frameworks need to be reconsidered when implementation has not delivered expected results.

2) [Reform the governance framework for the post-2030 period](#)

- **Carry out a stock-taking of governance experiences made over the past 10 years in SDG implementation.** This includes governance mechanisms and tools as well as institutional arrangements established for SDG implementation. Looking into what

worked and what has not worked so well, as well as the reasons why, will help in updating governance frameworks.

- **Develop a strong and future-fit governance approach.** Governance will be key in delivering the SDGs and sustainability now and beyond 2030. Current and future governance challenges are complex, dynamic and interlinked. Therefore, governance frameworks are needed which anticipate risks, align decisions, and manage trade-offs. In addition, sustainability governance is increasingly about actively supporting geopolitical security.
- **Define priority areas for sustainability governance beyond 2030.** This could include aspects like (a) anticipatory governance to reduce crisis costs and strengthen resilience; (b) digital and data driven developments, like Artificial Intelligence (AI); (c) co-creation and collaboration arrangements for effective participation; (d) integrated governance and stakeholder engagement processes; and (e) impact-aware frameworks that address spillover effects on the global level.
- **Start sketching out ideas and suggestions for the post-2030 negotiations early and strategically.** Although there are still 4 years to go on implementing the current 2030 Agenda, it is key to start developing ideas and suggestions on how to move ahead, based on past and current experiences. On the one hand, it is crucial to learn from the negotiation experiences on the 2030 Agenda in 2015. For instance, the design of the beyond-2030 negotiations should be inclusive, transparent, science-based, and collaborative processes. On the other hand, it should be considered to create strategic alliances with like-minded countries and stakeholders to foster forward-looking sustainability concepts and enable positive multinational exchange. As European countries are leaders in SDG implementation, their proactive role will be crucial in the post-2030 negotiation process. The challenge will be to find a balance between forward-

looking goals and establishing collaborations with many countries.

3) Increase civil society and youth involvement in current and future SDG implementation efforts

- **Create effective dialogue and exchange formats with civil society actors, especially for the post-2030 debate.** The expertise of, and support from, civil society will be key, as the current SDG implementation and post-2030 goals depend on their active involvement.

SDG Dialogue Forum in Austria

The SDG Dialogue Forum is a yearly event organized by the Austrian government in cooperation with civil society, with a focus on SDG implementation experiences. The aim is to collect views to build a common understanding, based on the efforts to be undertaken and challenges until 2030. The [SDG Dialogue Forum 2025](#) was on the post-2030 agenda and with a perspective on the SDG summit 2027. The discussions with civil society representatives created useful inputs for upcoming discussions at national but also at EU level.

- **Involve youth more comprehensively in all efforts of current and future SDG implementation.** Youth participation is not only important because this will be the generation most affected by the post-2030 decisions, but youth should also bring in their views and perspectives into the current policy debates. The [UN's Pact for the Future](#) (2024) has an entire sub-chapter with four actions on youth and future generations. It is argued that "we must ensure that decision-making and policymaking today takes greater account of the needs and interests of the generations to come, and that they are balanced with the needs and interests of current generations".

ESDN Youth Network

For several years, the [ESDN Youth Network](#) offers the opportunity for young people from all across Europe to network, gain access to practitioners and decision-makers from the ESDN member countries, be active participants in the ESDN events, and participate in workshops and lectures on relevant topics. Every year, ESDN Youth Representatives meet in a workshop to discuss key sustainability topics and develop policy recommendations they share with policymakers.

Youth Participation at the Regional Level in Styria, Austria

The [Gen 2030+ youth engagement process](#) in the context of the post-2030 Agenda was initiated by the Sustainable Development Unit of the Regional Government of Styria and various civil society groups, and is connected to the SDG Dialogue Forum in Austria. A workshop was held in Graz in October 2025 which identified central challenges and solutions. Key solutions are: Create suitable spaces and secure resources for the long term to ensure structural continuity; ensure that engagement processes are result-oriented and effective; enable institutionalized participation opportunities where appropriate; and promote direct dialogue with policy- and decision-makers to enable exchange on decisions.

4) [Strengthen sub-national activities and multi-level policy coordination](#)

- **Provide an overview of already existing sub-national SDG implementation efforts.** The successful implementation of the SDGs depends largely on the involvement and activities at the regional and local level. Over the last 10 years, many experiences have been gained at these levels, and an overview of experiences and efforts at the sub-nation level is important, including lessons learned for the post-2030 period. For instance, about 280 Voluntary Local

Reviews (VLRs) have been submitted to the UN. Institutionalizing the contributions of regional and local governments, and ensuring their data and experiences is considered, will shape the next generation of SDGs.

- **Foster effective and proactive multi-level policy coordination in the SDG implementation process.** As SDG implementation efforts cut across different political-administrative levels, effective coordination is important. There is also plenty of experience in multi-level level governance and coordination, but further improvements are necessary.
- **Create networks and opportunities for the sub-national level to share ideas, exchange best practice, and coordinate implementation efforts.** It is beneficial to establish networks and exchange platforms for sub-national level entities to learn from one another. There is no need to reinvent the wheel when other stakeholders and sub-national entities have already established successful activities, institutions, etc.

Nordic Voluntary Subnational Review

The [Nordic Voluntary Subnational Review \(VSR\)](#) of 2024 is the first cross-national report of its kind in the world. It has been developed as a joint venture by the Nordic Associations of Local and Regional Governments and the Nordic research institution, Nordregio, with funding from the Nordic Council of Ministers. The aim of the VSR is to highlight how the Nordic municipalities and regional authorities have localized the SDGs, the progress made, as well as obstacles they have met in their work towards the 2030 Agenda.

SDG46 Network in Finland

SDG46 is a network for the six largest cities in Finland (Helsinki, Espoo, Tampere, Vantaa, Turku, and Oulu) which is facilitated by the Association of Finnish Municipalities. The network promotes the national and international influence of the six cities in the context of SDG work and cooperation with the regional actors. Within this network, the six cities have co-created SDG tools and guides for holistic and strategic steering of the SDGs in cities and city groups. Furthermore, the cities have coached each other to create better voluntary local reviews (VLRs) and shared good practices in localizing and steering the SDGs. *

Economy of Well-being Approach in Finland

Based on the principles of the Nordic welfare state model, Finland has developed an economy of well-being approach for some time. In 2023, Finland launched the [National Action Plan for the Economy of Well-being](#). Important further milestones are: The Prime Minister's Office developed a holistic assessment model to track sustainability-related risks and opportunities for Finland over a period of 5–10 years. A governance model proposal was developed by the Finnish Institute of Health and Welfare to integrate the well-being economy approach and well-being indicators into national decision-making.

5) Develop new and innovative ideas to measure socio-economic progress

- **Support socio-economic approaches which enable the well-being of all parts of society.** The long tradition of measuring the success of societal development based on Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is very limited. The wealth of countries and societies requires a broader understanding and should create stronger resilience. A systematic change beyond GDP and toward a well-being economy is suggested as a way forward. Creating room for new and innovative ideas and approaches in this direction is an important step.

Well-being of Future Generations Act in Wales, UK

Wales was the first county to legislate the SDGs in the [Well-being for Future Generations Act](#) in 2015. The act defines seven national well-being goals aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals to guide policy decisions, including resilience, prosperity, health, equality, etc. The legislation introduced long-term thinking, prevention, integration, collaboration, and involvement as core working principles. Public bodies need to make sure that when taking decisions, the impact on people living in Wales is considered.

Conclusion

The **continued efforts to implement the SDGs in the remaining years until 2030 are crucial**. It will be important not only to **strengthen implementation efforts of current SDGs**, but also to show **long-term commitment by achieving key targets**. Asked what participants would like to see and what they think will happen post-2030, **the extension of the 2030 Agenda was preferred and seen as the most likely scenario**. A new global agenda was seen as something potentially fruitful, but very unlikely. Therefore, to avoid having no agenda at all or to decrease the level of ambition of the sustainability goals, it will be **important to start designing clear and effective proposals for the post-2030 period and prepare the negotiation process well**.

The European Sustainable Development Network (ESDN) is a non-profit, pan-European peer-learning, networking, knowledge, and advocacy platform for sustainability professionals in the public sector working in collaboration with other organisations and institutions dealing with sustainable development issues. It is based on the transparent and trustful cooperation of these actors. It collects, compiles and shares information on sustainability policies, strategies, and practises, and provides expertise to political decision-makers at European, national, and sub-national levels. The ESDN also fosters sustainable development through active communication and continued cooperation with other stakeholders and civil society.

*The six cities cooperated with the project for four years 2021-2025 and now five of them (except Espoo) continue to develop their strategic management of sustainable development for the next three years, 2026-2028. During the ESDN Conference, the city of Espoo was still very much part of the project, and the exchange was about the work that had been done until November 2025.