

E.U. SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT – FACTS AND TRENDS

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Abstract:

Today, the EU's struggling efforts to offer a coherent and unified response to the endless refugee and migration flows prove that, beside some vague diplomatic declarations, the real, painful lack of sustainable development imported from other parts of the world will certainly put under pressure the Europe equilibrium, being a direct challenge to the continent. Once upon a time the sustainable development was the EU's big idea for the future. Without having till now, a realistic vision in which areas Europe needs to be reformed, it is unlikely that the EU representatives will be able to engage in a meaningful negotiation with China, India or other Asian of African region or territory on topics like the 2030 Agenda or other sensitive ones.

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In 1987, the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) published a paper, which will prove to be an important milestone on the path of sustainable development. The report, named “Our common future”¹, will be known later as the “Brundtland report”. Among many things, this document is important to us, because it contains maybe the most usually used explanation of *sustainable development*. According to its authors, the concept of sustainable development means that type of “development which meets the needs of the current generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”². Since then, the environmental issues have been found constantly on the international agendas. Since that moment, all ecological, social and economic issues and topics were analyzed and negotiated as one single issue.³

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¹ www.un-documents.net/our-common-future.pdf

² Idem 3

³ Sustainable development in the European Union page 24 <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/3217494/6975281/KS-GT-15-001-EN-N.pdf>

In 1992 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, *The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development*, can be considered as a new cornerstone of how we understand the sustainable development concept and how we translate this concept into different policies. At the end of the conference, *The Rio Declaration on Environment and Development*, and *Agenda 21* were the considered as the most important international documents of the Rio conference.⁴ But beyond documents and statements, the Rio Conference have stressed the need of developing a new set of indicators, capable of answering to the need to determine trends in all three components of sustainable development.

Putting this objective into practice proved to be very difficult and till now its implementation across world produced varied results at country level. We actually don't need for some new statistical indicators to see some disturbing facts: the constant growing trend of the world populations leads to a constant rise in consumption patterns and volume, which will affect now and in the future the environment, the world economy is still struggling with a major gap between the richest and the poorest countries despite all the efforts made by politicians and diplomats; the average income is different in almost every country, despite the impressive growth of world GDP in recent decades; the social component of the sustainable development is almost the biggest problem of the international forums. Today the less developed countries are not able to offer to their citizens a set of minimum realistic solutions to live in decent conditions, to have access to resources, to remove the risk of living in conditions of severe poverty and without some basic needs achieved, like safe drinking water, access to food supply, basic hygiene or access to electricity. And unfortunately, we can see today in some European countries, members of the EU (and I am talking about our country right now), that in some isolated small villages, the daily living conditions are not very different that the ones already mentioned above.

The development needs of the humblest world population has been again on top of the global political agenda through *The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)*, which were agreed in 2000, by UN. The initial target date for reaching MDGs objectives was set for 2015. We are now in 2017, and those objectives are still unreached.

Five years ago and twenty years after the first Rio conference, a new landmark was put on the sustainable development timeline. A new conference, *the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (UNCSD)* was held in 2012, again in Rio de Janeiro. At the end of the Conference, also known as "Rio+20", all present leaders decided to launch a new procedure for defining of a new set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which obviously had to replace the previous MDGs after 2015 failure. After the Rio+20 Conference, the UN also launched, a new procedure, which has been concluded by designing and having some new objectives, known as *the 2030 agenda for sustainable development*.

Realizing that, achieving the objectives assumed by the Rio+20 document critically depends on the governments capacity and will to mobilize every necessary financial or non-financial resources, each and every UN Member States agreed during Rio to launch a distinct intergovernmental procedure addressed to negotiate and to agree upon the available means and ways of financing the sustainable development process. In 2013, that unified will of the UN Member States produced a new Intergovernmental *Committee of*

⁴ Idem 5

Experts on Sustainable Development Financing (ICSDF), recognized by the UN General Assembly and meant to implement all the negotiated objectives.

Since that moment, the Committee repeatedly outlined the need for a functional financing strategy designed to support the world sustainable development. A new conference took place on 2015 in Ethiopia; the conference produced a new document which again outlined the need for realistic actions meant to mobilize the international financial support for the post-2015 development agenda.⁵

European Union could not create and was not a distinct opinion on the sustainable development evolution path. Former German Chancellor, Willy Brandt, declared that Europe will not develop as an island of wealth in a sea of poverty.⁶ Being actually the world largest economic block in the present, the EU must prove a relevant impact and contribution on the sustainable development agenda. The EU has been an active actor in all past years, and agreed in 2015 upon a **2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development**.

	Targets	Flagship Initiatives
Smart Growth	— 3 % of GDP to be invested in the research and development (R&D) sector. — Reduce the rates of early school leaving to below 10 %, and at least 40 % of 30 to 34 year olds to have completed tertiary or equivalent education.	— Innovation Union — Youth on the move — A digital agenda for Europe
Sustainable Growth	— Reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 20 % compared to 1990 levels. — Increase the share of renewables in final energy consumption to 20 %. — 20 % Increase in energy efficiency.	— Resource efficient Europe — An industrial policy for the globalisation era
Inclusive Growth	— 75 % of 20 to 64 year old men and women to be employed. — Reduce poverty by lifting at least 20 million people out of the risk of poverty and social exclusion.	— An agenda for new skills and jobs — European platform against poverty and social exclusion

Europe 2020 and the EU SDS as a complementary system

Figure 1 The Europe 2020 strategy's key priorities, headline targets and flagship initiatives⁷

The Europe 2020 Strategy, which came into life through the European Council in 2010, is right now the *EU most important strategy for sustainable growth*. It contains three main objectives to make from future Europe a smarter, more sustainable and more inclusive place:

- *It envisages the transition to smart growth through the development of an economy based on knowledge, research and innovation.*
- *The sustainable growth objective relates to the promotion of more resource efficient, greener and competitive markets.*

⁵Idem 6, page 32

⁶https://ec.europa.eu/epsc/publications/strategic-notes/sustainability-now_en

⁷http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/europe-2020-in-a-nutshell/targets/index_en.htm

- *The inclusive growth priority encompasses policies aimed at fostering job creation and poverty reduction.*⁸

Eurostat monitors the accomplishment percentages of these three objectives through a scoreboard of nine main indicators and another four additional indicators. The newest monitoring report '**Smarter, greener, more inclusive? Indicators to support the Europe 2020 strategy**' was published in 2015.

Also in 2015, Commission President launched the so called European **Year for Development**, saying that: "universality is fundamental: we should recognize that all countries have common challenges and opportunities for a shared future, and that we all need to make concrete commitments – both global and domestic – to make change happen."⁹

However, in the past year, Europe did not look to be in her best profile, as one of the leading region when it comes to actually applying the assumed agenda and seems rather overwhelmed by its internal problems, unable to commit to the agenda it has so strongly advocated for.

Today, the EU's struggling efforts to offer a coherent and unified response to the endless refugee and migration flows prove that, beside some vague diplomatic declarations, the real, painful lack of sustainable development from other parts of the world will put under pressure the Europe equilibrium, being a direct challenge to the continent.

On November 22, 2016 the European Commission issued three policy proposals, named "Communications", outlining again how the EU plans to encourage sustainable development both in its domestic and external policies.¹⁰ These documents actually recognize the fact that the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development must be a unique milestone for European future development.

According with the official statements, the EU's answer to the 2030 Agenda will be based on two directions: the first one, is the EU will to fully include the Sustainable Development Goals in the European policy framework, current and future Commission priorities; secondly is the EU desire to launch a reflection on Europe longer term vision.¹¹ In the same time, the officials acknowledged that the EU encountered some serious delays in the development and implementation of the agenda and agreed that EU policies will be in the next years the main vehicles in implementing the Agenda.

Yet, how the EU intends to respond to the present global challenges by reforming its own policies remains still unclear.

Without having till now, a realistic vision in which areas Europe needs reforms and must change quickly, it is unlikely that Europe will be able to engage in a meaningful negotiation with China, India or other Asian of African region or territory on topics like the 2030 Agenda or other sensitive ones.

⁸http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Sustainable_development_-_broader_horizon

⁹http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-15-3100_en.htm

¹⁰https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/sites/devco/files/communication-next-steps-sustainable-europe-20161122_en.pdf.

¹¹http://ec.europa.eu/environment/sustainable-development/SDGs/implementation/index_en.htm

“The EU proposals of 22 November shied away from experiments. It is now up to the other stakeholders to inject further creativity and ambition into the EU’s contributions to global sustainable development, including for its own sake”¹² was one of the recent opinion stated by relevant European decision factors.

Unfortunately, we hardly are able to see that most invoked leadership in the recent EU behavior.

The recent Bratislava roadmap, suggested a possible future path for the EU, but the words said something different. The lack of leadership is unfortunately obvious for all of us. The expectations for the 2017 are almost absent, both national and supranational leaders are nowadays more focused on how to maintain the European project together and stopping the rot.

Jeroen Dijsselbloem, the Dutch finance minister, said during a press conference the painful truth. “We start projects but never really seem to finish them,”¹³ he told to some European journalists last year. The migrant issues, the political escalation of the populism in many European State Members, the warning messages received from some member states, concluding with the rough response offered by the British people by voting BREXIT, is overwhelmingly right now a weak Europe.

Once upon a time the sustainable development was the EU’s big idea for the future. Today Europe as a peace project is no longer a brand to sell to a younger generation which is more attracted to action, weapons, blood, wars, realistic shooters or inexistent heroes.

Ten years ago, David Milib and, a very influent British politician, said that the environment was the topic that could best keep connected all European leaders, and could regain the people lost trust in EU institutions. For sure, the EU was a champion in terms of preserving the environment and promoting the sustainable development. But the picture of the European Green Union was quickly destroyed by the endless last decade economic crisis.¹⁴

Europe is changing. To avoid taking in migrants from war zones, the EU preferred negotiate getting away of his main principles, once declaimed by Europe founders. Since the politicians seems less and less able to defend democracy and human rights inside Europe, what is the future prospect of once much desired sustainable development? An uncertain one, and that’s for sure!

After all, dangers lurk upon EU not only from outside the Union, but mainly from inside, as Brexit and the rollback of freedom in Eastern Europe have recently demonstrated.

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