

ESDN Policy Brief 4

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Recommendations for Utilizing the European Green Deal as a Vehicle to Transform Europe to a Sustainable Society

Introduction

The European Sustainable Development Network (ESDN) is an informal network of national policymakers and other sustainable development (SD) experts working on SD policies and strategies. The ESDN's main aim is to advance SD and the implementation of the 2030 Agenda at the European, national and sub-national level by bringing together government representatives and expert stakeholders. The ESDN is the largest policy network on SD in Europe that facilitates the exchange of good practices and experiences across Europe by publishing Reports, organizing flagship Conferences, Workshops, and Peer Learning Platforms, which cover topics in sustainable development, of which the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are the recent driving force.

The European Green Deal

The European Green Deal (EGD) was presented by the European Commission in December 2019. It is the European Union's growth strategy and the primary vehicle to achieve the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Climate goals. Its main goals are a climate neutral EU by 2050 and to decouple economic growth from resource use and greenhouse gas emissions. The EGD consists of a collection of strategies, policies and directives, which will be implemented during the coming years. Topics range from renewable energy, circular economy to biodiversity and sustainable agriculture.

The ESDN Conference and the Youth Camp

The ESDN Conference was held virtually on 12-13 October 2020. It was hosted by the German Ministry for Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety. On day two of the

Conference, participants discussed different topics surrounding the implementation of the EGD. The outcomes of these discussions provide the basis for the recommendations in this Policy Brief. In addition, the German Federal Ministry for Environment organized a European Youth Camp in the run-up to the ESDN Conference. During the Youth Camp, Youth Representatives from many European countries prepared a "Manifesto" that directly addressed the challenges of the EGD. This "Manifesto" has also led to some of the policy recommendations presented in this Policy Brief.

Policy Recommendations

The following policy recommendations are structured around the breakout group topics at the ESDN Conference.

1. Sustainable Growth

- **End the dogma of endless growth**

In most economic discourse, growth is treated as an end in itself. However, **growth**, as well as the overall economy, **should only be a means to achieve social and environmental goals**. This was mentioned by both the Youth Representatives as well as Conference participants. In addition, many scientists question whether economic growth is at all possible within planetary boundaries. Therefore, it is necessary to carefully examine the necessity of economic growth for achieving the social and environmental goals.

- **Make the recovery from Covid-19 green, sustainable and inclusive**

There should be **no new money for old ideas**. In particular, no money should be spent on subsidizing industries that are destructive to the planet or for projects that will have a long-term lock-in effect of high carbon emissions. **Recovery**

packages should focus on creating green jobs and ensuring intergenerational equity, an aspect that was particularly highlighted by Youth Representatives.

- **Internalize impacts and set the prices right**

Emission-footprints are often based on production. However, when using consumption as a base, it is estimated that Europeans contribute 18% to global greenhouse gas emissions (with just 10% of the world population), as opposed to 16% based on production, as many products are produced outside of the EU.¹ Therefore, Youth Representatives demanded that **consumption-based emissions should be included in greenhouse gas emission calculations, estimates and targets**. Furthermore, **all impacts of economic, social and ecological activities on a global level should be internalized and reflected in the prices of products and services**.

2. Sustainable Food and the farm to fork strategy

- **Integrate a strategy to reduce the consumption of animal products**

Animal agriculture contributes more to the EU's emissions than all private vehicles together.² For example, over a third of methane emissions in the EU come from cattle alone.³ Yet, the EGD is very vague about the need to reduce the consumption of animal products.

- **Utilize the potential of cities and regions**

Cities and regions need to be integrated into the processes of developing strategies for sustainable food, landscape strategies and strategies for urban development.

- **“Turn the world into a garden”**

This phrase was coined by Youth Representatives and picked up by many participants throughout the Conference. Europe should lead by example

¹ <https://ourworldindata.org/global-inequalities-co2-consumption>

² <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/sep/22/eu-farm-animals-produce-more-emissions-than-cars-and-vans-combined-greenpeace>

in renaturing its territory. To **protect and increase biodiversity, there needs to be more incentives and subsidies for nature-based solutions**, for example for turning farmland into wildlife conservation spaces, a suggestion by Youth Representatives.

3. A New Push for Democracy

- **Establish a European Sustainability Culture**

The idea of a European Sustainability Culture was first brought up by Youth Representatives and was further developed throughout the Conference. **Sustainable development should be the new leading narrative of the European Union**, after ‘No more war’ for the post-war generation and ‘economic growth’ for the generation afterwards. The goals of the EGD and the 2030 Agenda need to be communicated transparently and clearly to all European citizens

- **Focus on creating and sustaining public consent and ownership**

Citizens, especially **the marginalized and Youth, need an opportunity to voice their concerns and opinions** in order to create buy-in and ownership of the green transformation. However, this will only be effective when these concerns are integrated into policy-making. For this, there **needs to be established and institutionalized processes**.

- **Reach out to people who are not yet interested**

In order to avoid ‘preaching to the choir’, we need to employ unusual methods to reach out to people who are not yet informed about, or involved in, efforts surrounding sustainable development. Unusual ways with a potentially big outreach could include social media influencers, sports clubs, art associations and more. This suggestion was part of the Youth Manifesto.

4. Sustainable Finance

³ Statista dossier on emissions in the European Union (EU)

- **Include social aspects in the EU sustainable finance taxonomy**

The taxonomy is a great first step to greening the financial sector. However, it leaves out the social aspects of sustainable development. **A more holistic taxonomy could then be used to pave the way to sustainable finance globally.**

- **Develop tools to assess the impacts of national budgets**

The SDGs are being mainstreamed into national budgets in most European countries. However, there are few and insufficient tools to assess the impacts of national spending and policies. Thus, **increased efforts are needed to develop ex-ante and ex-post assessment of national budgets.**

5. Resilience

- **Use principles of resilience (such as preparedness and foresight) to guide and advance systemic transformations**

The Covid-19 pandemic has underlined how interconnected our societies are globally. **Any strategies for transformation need to take into account the impacts of our actions on communities elsewhere.** On the other hand, strengthening resilience in the rest of the world will also protect us from future crises.

- **Focus on evidence-based policymaking**

During the Covid-19 crisis, many governments relied highly on the advice of virologists and epidemiologists. **For the highly complex and interconnected challenges related to sustainable development and the climate crisis, scientific and expert analysis is crucial.** However, there is a **need to foster dialogue and develop new formats to make interactions between scientists and policymakers more efficient and fruitful.**

6. Sustainable Mobility

- **Change the priority given to people moving in public spaces**

Most cities are built in a way that gives highest priority to private vehicle transport. **This ranking needs to be turned on its head, giving the highest priority first to pedestrians, then cyclists, public transport and last to private vehicle transport.** Giving more space to pedestrians and cyclists in urban planning will make it safer to use the more sustainable modes of transport.

- **Make the most sustainable option the most convenient option**

Similar to concerns about safety, people tend to choose their mode of transport by convenience. **In order to incentivize people to walk, use their bikes or public transport, these modes need to be the most convenient option.** On the other hand, **there should be no subsidies or special arrangements for car use.**

7. Missing links

- **Include the social dimension in the EGD**

So far, the EGD mainly focuses on environmental issues. While the Just Transition Mechanism acknowledges the potential social repercussions of the green transition, the EGD lacks a clear strategy of how it will actively address the social challenges related to the SDGs, such as inequality. **The EGD should be a more holistic strategy.**

- **Take a global leadership role**

It will not be enough for Europe to become climate neutral. Only when the whole world reduces emissions, can we avert an even bigger climate crisis. Therefore, Europe can use its potential to work with partners, especially in the Global South. Furthermore, it needs to **take into account the role of emissions caused by European consumption elsewhere.**

- **Increase ambition**

Youth Representatives argued that Europe is lagging behind in achieving climate targets, both with respect to setting its own targets and with achieving these low targets. **High ambition and strong collaborations are needed** to address the challenges of our time.