

ESDN Policy Brief 8

February 2022

Recommendations for a More Resilient and Sustainable Europe

Introduction

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development calls on governments and other stakeholders to achieve 17 SDGs and 169 associated targets, bringing together economic, social and environmental considerations in ways that mutually reinforce each other. It is obvious that isolated actions and policies, focused on individual goals and targets, cannot make a decisive contribution to successfully facing the whole complex web of global challenges.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, no country in the world was on track to reach the 17 SDGs. The COVID-19 pandemic further tested the resilience of all countries in how to respond in times of crisis. However, the pandemic has also provided Europe with a window of opportunity to learn and use the knowledge gained from this crisis to build an even more resilient Europe against other threats, whether that be from another pandemic or from the effects of climate change or biodiversity loss.

As many European countries are finalizing their Recovery and Resilience Plans, the topic of resilience and sustainable development is timely and important. It is because of this importance that the ESDN and the Slovenian Ministry for the Environment and Spatial Planning organized the [ESDN Conference 2021 on the topic of “European Recovery and Resilience Mechanisms – Challenges in Systemic Approaches in Sustainable Development”](#). The insights from the Conference discussions inform the recommendations for this Policy Brief. **The Conference had over 120 sustainable development practitioners and experts as participants from 22 countries.**

Policy Recommendations for a more Resilient and Sustainable Europe

- 1) Take policy coherence for sustainable development more seriously
- 2) Foster governance processes for sustainable development transitions
- 3) Incorporate the social dimension into sustainable development
- 4) Educate and Communicate positive best practices of sustainable transformational change

The European Sustainable Development Network

The 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.

1) Take policy coherence for sustainable development more seriously

Policy coherence for sustainable development is arguably one of the most important aspects of sustainable development, as it permeates all aspects of decision-making mechanisms and how well they adhere to principles of sustainable development. Policy coherence for sustainable development is inherently a political topic, as it deals with trade-offs when policies stand in potential opposition to one another.

- **Set up intergovernmental systems and processes** that provide a mechanism to discuss, debate, and solve issues around a policy's coherence with sustainable development principles (environmental, social and economic).
- **Mandate governments to address policy incoherencies.** By working together across government ministries, a more integrated approach to policy formulation can be achieved. Integrated approaches can also be more resilient to future crisis (economic, environmental, social, health, etc.)
- **Take into account the effect domestic policies have on the Global South,** as spill-over effects may reduce another country's ability to reach the SDGs.

2) Foster governance processes for sustainable development transitions

The desired transformation of the European Union to the first carbon neutral continent will take a huge transition as opposed to many incremental changes over time. Given the nature of sustainable development and the wicked, as well as sometimes super wicked, problems it poses requires strong governance processes if it is to succeed. Policy coherence for sustainable development will play a large role in ensuring policies across sectors are aligned. However, when it comes to the systemic changes that are needed, then governance structures also need to be changed and adapted to what is needed and for where Europe wants to go in the future. This also includes not only thinking about the transformations needed to get to this point, but also how to speed them up. Recommendations for speeding this up are:

- **Phase out of unsustainable policy practices** at all governmental levels, including fossil fuels, environmentally harmful subsidies, unsustainable taxation, unsustainable levels of inequality, etc.
- **Foster a race to the top logic** for sustainable development actions.
- **View sustainability as an investment rather than a cost.**
- **Establish continuity of sustainable development policies across government cycles,** as the transitions proposed for Europe will happen over the next few decades and will rely on adding momentum.

3) Incorporate the social dimension of sustainable development

Even within sustainable development, the social dimension is often overlooked or disregarded in policy in favour of economic or environmental priorities. When it comes to the transformative change that Europe will undoubtedly go through regarding its economy and way of life over the next decades, the societal aspects that such a transition will have on the people of Europe will need to be addressed. In order to prepare people for the sustainable transitions that are coming, the following recommendations are being made:

- **Communicate the transformative changes people are likely to see,** as sustainable development and what that means has not entered people's minds in a profound way (thinking of sustainable development as recycling rather than overhauling and rethinking mobility in its entirety). If people are unprepared for massive change and the change comes anyway, then adverse effects could be

seen, as has been the case with the rising fuel prices in Europe or the Yellow Vest movement in France.

- **Help changing people's mentalities towards sustainable development** and highlight the benefits such transitions would bring to well-being and quality of life for all.
- **Provide a vision of what it would be like for people to live in a society with a sustainable economy**, as there is currently no well-functioning, low carbon economy in existence.
- **Avoid shifting the burden of transitioning to the people.**

4) Educate and communicate positive best practices of sustainable transformational change

- **Mainstream education for sustainable development** at all school levels, as education for SD will become increasingly important in understanding future challenges and how to solve them.
- **Establish education as a process to support change** rather than as an end goal.
- **Communicate positive case examples and their effects**, especially in cases of uncertainty, as this helps to show that another, previously untested method is viable, leading to scaling up and duplications. It could also provide tangible effects for people and thereby reduce feelings of uncertainty.

These recommendations are based on the presentations and discussions at the ESDN Conference 2021 on 30 November – 01 December 2021. If you would like to gain further insights about the recommendations and the examples, read the report [here](#).