



IMPACTS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND THE SDGs IN EUROPE

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Introduction

European countries are, at the time of writing this Report (July 2020), recovering from the immediate impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic and the numbers of new infections seem under control in many European countries. However, these achievements are fragile and the upcoming autumn and winter season may pose new challenges to dealing with the pandemic.

Many governments are currently in the process of designing or even implementing recovery plans and strategies that will alleviate the impacts of the economic shutdown following the spread of the Sars-Cov-2 (Covid-19) virus in Europe. This ESDN Report examines how the economic recovery can be designed in a way that does not jeopardise recent positive achievements in sustainable development (SD) overall, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in particular, and to avoid quick fixes that may potentially turn out to be unsustainable. As governments in Europe roll out substantial stimulus and recovery packages to revive the economy and society, SD can play a key role in using the recovery to set the world on a more sustainable path and even accelerate the achievement of the SDGs. Many political leaders have expressed their commitment to a sustainable recovery and there are many policy proposals by international organisations and think-tanks on the table. However, economic pressure may also lead governments to resort to quick fixes that may turn out as harmful to society and/or the environment on the long-run.

The first chapter of this report discusses the economic, social and environmental impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic and presents a number of proposals from international organisations and stakeholder institutions on how to mitigate these impacts in a sustainable way. It also discusses challenges in the field of governance and international cooperation.

The second chapter examines the European Union's recovery plan, 'Next Generation EU', which is closely linked to the Multi-annual Financial Framework 2021-2027. Both also build heavily on the Green Deal. These first two chapters are based on desk research.

The third chapter provides a comparative analysis of a survey conducted by the ESDN Office about the role that SD plays in the recovery programmes and strategies of national governments of European countries. The survey is based on the input and answers of the ESDN National Focal Points (NFPs), who are representatives of national government ministries in Europe responsible for SD policy in their respective administrations.

The fourth and final chapter is a reflection on the desk research, the survey results, and inputs from discussions of the 18th ESDN Workshop, which was held virtually at the end of June 2020. It identifies five main themes that should be considered when assessing the role of SD in the Covid-19 recovery process in Europe.

Chapter 1: Impacts of Covid-19 on Sustainable Development and Proposed Policy Solutions

The Covid-19 crisis is the “worst human and economic crisis of our lifetimes”, according to the UN General Secretariat in their 2020 annual [Sustainable Development Goals \(SDG\) report](#).¹ While the world was not on track to achieve the SDGs by 2030 to begin with, the SDG report states that some positive achievements will now be reversed, and in some areas, developments will be set back by at least a decade if there is no targeted and internationally coordinated effort to prevent this from happening. Most evidently, Covid-19 is devastating health systems around the world. Additionally, the lockdown measures and shutting down of economies threaten to exacerbate extreme poverty and advances in education, as over 90% of the global student population has been affected by school closures. In order to reverse these setbacks, the report estimates that 10% of global GDP would have to be mobilized.²

On the other hand, the economic recovery programmes provide an opportunity to set the world on a more sustainable path and even accelerate the achievement of international objectives, such as the Paris Climate Agreement and the SDGs. However, due to the pressing needs of an economy in recession, there is a danger that long-term strategies may be side-lined. The OECD conducted a [survey](#) about the impacts of the Covid-19 crisis on governments’ ability and commitment to achieving the 2030 Agenda. The results show that 72% of respondents stated that the consequences of the virus outbreak would impact on their capability to achieve the SDGs.³

As argued by the OECD, the immediate response to the health crisis has in many cases shown the ability of societies and governments to act quickly and decisively. The health crisis has also emphasised the fact that no individual country is immune to global risks and a global response is therefore necessary. In addition, the recovery will mobilise historic levels of public expenditure, which will set the path for the decades to come. Public awareness for risks, such as climate change, has never been stronger.⁴

The next several pages of this ESDN Report outline the economic, social, and environmental impacts of the global Covid-19 pandemic and discuss some of the policy solutions that have been brought forward by international organisations and selected stakeholder institutions that published on Covid-19 and how to address its impact from a sustainable development perspective.

Economic Impacts and Suggested Solutions

On top of the immediate health crisis, the whole world is facing an **economic recession**. Many countries are facing GDP losses of up to 20%. For the Eurozone, the OECD projects an overall decrease in GDP of 9%, which could reach 11.5% if a second wave of the Covid-19 outbreak hits Europe later this year. In this case, the [OECD estimates](#) that **Europe will reach pre-Corona economic output levels only at the end of 2021**.⁵

¹ United Nations Economic and Social Committee. 2020. "Progress Towards The Sustainable Development Goals- Report Of The Secretary-General. (p.2)

² United Nations Economic and Social Committee 2020

³ "Building A Coherent Response For A Sustainable Post-COVID-19 Recovery - Preliminary Version". 2020. Tackling Coronavirus (Covid-19): Contributing To A Global Effort. OECD.

⁴ OECD 2020c

⁵ OECD. 2020. "OECD Economic Outlook 2020 Preliminary Version".

The economic crisis accompanying Covid-19 has exposed social and economic struggles in communities around the world. The inequalities within and between countries have not only become visible, but were exacerbated by the crisis. Both, the virus and the economic shutdown, have disproportionately affected the poorest and most vulnerable people globally. Also in Europe, there has been a vast disparity in the number of deaths between different countries despite the economies of Europe being the most homogenous compared to any other region in the world.⁶

According to the [World Business Council for Sustainable Development](#) (WBCSD), the health crisis has revealed the **scale of systemic risks** we face and the **lack of resilience** that is **built into the current economic system and operating models**. One of these is our dependence on economic growth. This is likely one of the reasons why governments were initially so reluctant to shut down, as they wanted to keep the economy running for as long as possible.⁷ In the long-term, this has probably exacerbated both the health and economic crises, especially in countries without strong social safety nets, as this has led to a humanitarian crisis. Additionally, the focus on efficiency and short-term value by businesses counteracts resilience of supply chains and production systems.⁸

For businesses, the WBCSD recommends to **focus on the three “Rs”: Responsibility, Resilience, and Regeneration**, especially for companies that receive government bailouts, as they will come under intensified scrutiny regarding the building of cash reserves and abandoning buyback strategies. Businesses will need to focus on building up resilience to be prepared for the next shock. The WBCSD also emphasises that it will be important to pay attention to creating a perception of fairness and inclusiveness. To this effect, some governments have already indicated that they will not bail out companies registered in tax havens. Ownership and governance arrangements that include all stakeholders should be reinforced. This would mean that **governmental regulation should encourage maximising stakeholder value rather than shareholder value**. For example, payment of executives should reflect the value created for all stakeholders (not just shareholders), including communities and the natural environment. These aspects are crucial for a green and inclusive recovery.⁹

On a regulatory level, the UNECE recommends facilitating connectivity. This includes harmonising frameworks for border crossings and harmonising standards for trade. This is especially important on a regional level. Connectivity will ensure the supply of essential goods and can help foster growth in the recovery process.¹⁰ In addition, Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) should be supported, with a special focus on women and youth.¹¹

Social Impacts and Suggested Solutions

According to the WBCSD¹² and [UN DESA](#)¹³, economic inequalities have overall led to inequitable access to healthcare and unequal vulnerability to lockdown measures. The most vulnerable to health and economic threats include women, children, ethnic minorities and migrants, and the most vulnerable countries, in particular the Least Developed Countries.¹⁴ Those who were subjected to precarious

⁶ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. 2020. "UN/DESA Policy Brief #65: Responses To The COVID-19 Catastrophe Could Turn The Tide On Inequality".

⁷ World Business Council for Sustainable Development. 2020. "The Consequences Of Covid-19 For The Decade Ahead". Vision 2050 Issue Brief. WBCSD.

⁸ World Business Council for Sustainable Development 2020

⁹ World Business Council for Sustainable Development 2020

¹⁰ UNECE. 2020. "Responding To The Socio-Economic Impacts Of The Covid-19 Pandemic In The UNECE Region". Geneva: UNECE.

¹¹ UNECE 2020

¹² World Business Council for Sustainable Development 2020

¹³ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2020a

¹⁴ United Nations Economic and Social Committee 2020

working conditions before the crisis either saw their income cease entirely or are now heavily dependent on government aid. Additionally, not everyone is able to work from home, and it was often those with lower paid jobs that were deemed “essential”, who had to continue working to keep society going, such as people working in supermarkets or health care.¹⁵

UN DESA strongly recommends that recovery measures should **address the social inequalities and vulnerabilities the crisis has exposed**. Governments should focus on strengthening and expanding public services, which include healthcare, education, sanitation and social protection.¹⁶

Most evidently, **health care systems and their resilience to shocks should be strengthened**. Because of deforestation, climate change, urbanisation and global connectedness, the world faces the threat of pandemics every three to four years, according to experts.¹⁷ Considering these warnings, most health systems were remarkably underprepared to address the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic, often due to austerity measures that had been implemented after the Financial Crisis in 2008, according to the WBCSD.¹⁸

Additionally, **efforts towards universal social protection** should be expanded. This can make social safety nets more responsive to shocks, including climate shocks that are likely to occur within the next decades. In line with this, there should be **increased fiscal spending on public employment programmes** to ensure greater labour market resilience. Here, the focus should be on promoting jobs in sustainable and resilient sectors, as [suggested by UN DESA](#).¹⁹

Finally, there should be a **focus on social cohesion and community resilience**. Structural vulnerabilities and inequalities need to be assessed and vulnerable groups need to be empowered, for example through increased internet access. In addition, legal and institutional frameworks should be enhanced to scale up community resilience, protect, and foster public institutions, democracy, and multilateralism.²⁰

Environmental Impacts and Suggested Solutions

Initial environmental impacts of the economic shutdowns due to Covid-19 have been largely positive. CO₂ emissions and air pollution decreased substantially, at least temporarily. However, CO₂ emissions are still projected to fall by 8% in 2020, which would bring them to the level of 2010. Emissions fell more than overall energy demand, as renewables are the only energy source projected to grow this year.²¹

However, these impacts are only temporary. They need to be treated with caution, as emissions also decreased after the 2008 Financial Crisis, but then bounced back with the greatest year-to-year increase in 2010.²² In addition, CO₂ levels did not fall to levels that would be needed to achieve the Paris Agreement. This has shown, according to the OECD and the IEA, that the impact of individual action is limited, and that sustained and coordinated political action is needed.²³

¹⁵ World Business Council for Sustainable Development 2020

¹⁶ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2020a

¹⁷ World Business Council for Sustainable Development 2020

¹⁸ World Business Council for Sustainable Development 2020

¹⁹ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2020a

²⁰ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2020a, 2020b

²¹ International Energy Agency. 2020. "The Impacts Of The Covid-19 Crisis On Global Energy Demand And CO₂ Emissions". Global Energy Review 2020. IEA.

²² International Energy Agency 2020b

²³ OECD 2020c, International Energy Agency 2020b

The [OECD](#)²⁴ has outlined five key dimensions for building back better and ensuring that **the recovery from the economic crisis is green**. Recovery measures should be assessed against these dimensions and all elements should be screened for their long-term impacts. The **five environmental dimensions** are: 1) alignment with net-zero greenhouse gas emission targets; 2) strengthening of climate resilience; 3) reducing biodiversity loss; 4) innovation building on behavioural changes; and 5) improving supply chain resilience and circularity. In addition, as an overarching theme, the recovery needs to **focus on wellbeing and inclusiveness**; it needs to be people centred and aim at reducing inequalities.

The OECD brief also includes several practical policy solutions to integrate these dimensions. It is very important that there are **no lock-in effects from emission-intensive infrastructure projects**. Governments may lean towards these kinds of projects, because they know how to implement them quickly. In order to prevent this, it could be useful to have a prepared list with quickly implementable sustainable infrastructure projects, which should be at the ready. When these projects are easily accessible, governments may be less likely to fall back on commonly used infrastructure projects, like building roads. The [International Energy Agency \(IEA\)](#) recommends **focusing on energy efficient infrastructure programmes**, such as smart grids, electric vehicle charging, and digital connectivity.²⁵

The stimulus packages provide an opportunity shape the energy path for decades to come, and this should be used to **accelerate the deployment of low carbon energy sources**. This includes the spread of wind and solar energy, and the expansion of electricity grids.²⁶

Furthermore, the IEA argues that governments should also actively support **green financial flows** and organise their **public procurement in a way that supports green and innovative sectors**²⁷ and the OECD recommends using an SDG methodology to assess green investments.²⁸ In a similar vein, the OECD recommends investments in areas such as low-carbon and resilient electricity systems, improving the resilience of supply chains and promoting **a shift towards circularity**.²⁹ Investments in energy-efficient housing can create many green jobs while simultaneously reducing CO₂ emissions.³⁰

In [a working paper](#)³¹, the OECD developed lessons learned from green bailout funds after the Great Financial Crisis of 2008. The most notable finding from assessing the 2008 green recovery packages was that many governments conducted ex-ante, but few ex post, evaluations, meaning that many packages were never really evaluated regarding their impact. It is hard to say whether they had a positive environmental impact. Therefore, it is recommended that **evaluation and review mechanisms are built into the packages**.

The OECD working paper also recommends investments in reparability, recycling and the circular economy. This could create a large number of new, green jobs. Another measure are investments in renewable energy. Different to 2008, large scale financing for renewable energy projects is now more affordable and economically attractive. Research and Development stimulus should also target

²⁴ OECD. 2020. "Building Back Better: A Sustainable, Resilient Recovery After COVID-19". Tackling Coronavirus (Covid-19).

²⁵ International Energy Agency. 2020. "Energy Efficiency And Economic Stimulus". IEA Strategic Considerations For Policy Makers.

²⁶ IEA sustainable recovery

²⁷ International Energy Agency 2020a

²⁸ OECD 2020c

²⁹ Agrawala, Sahrdul, Damien Dussaux, and Norbert Monti. 2020. "What Policies For Greening The Crisis Response And Economic Recovery? Lessons Learnd From Past Green Stimulus Measures And Implications For The Covid-19 Crisis". Environment Working Paper.

³⁰ International Energy Agency 2020

³¹ Agrawala, Dussaux and Monti 2020, OECD 2020

renewable energies as well as technologies that are currently underdeveloped and further away from the market, for example energy storage or smart grids.

For the debts that governments are likely to accrue by financing these measures, the OECD recommends considering environmental taxes, as they will further steer the economy in a green direction. However, it is important to **address potential social and distributional consequences** of such policies.³² The effects of environmental policy that does not take social dimensions into account became evident in France after a carbon tax was implemented in a way that working and middle class people were the most affected. This sparked the Yellow Vest movement, which initially led to massive social unrest and is still active to this day.³³

Governance

In order to implement policies that are sustainable with regards to their economic, social and environmental impact, **political leadership and strong commitment** are needed. According to a study conducted by the OECD Division of Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development, the response to the Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the benefits of strong political leadership and of a **“whole of society” approach**. This includes a coordination between different line ministries in the government, under the leadership of the Centre of Government. Many countries have established inter-ministerial groups to ensure better horizontal integration. According to the respondents of the survey, SDG coordination mechanisms have been employed to organize crisis recovery, for example, information sharing, joint decision-making, assessing sustainability and increasing dialogue with the subnational level.³⁴ The OECD sees **policy coherence** as a key tool for a successful recovery. Strengthening policy coordination will also allow for capitalizing off synergies across economic, social and environmental goals. It is important to understand and assess the impacts of policies on other sectors and the spillovers into the rest of the world and to assess long-term impacts. Assessing the impacts of policies will help avoid future sustainability and other shocks.³⁵ A part of this policy could be to attach SDG-based conditions for bailouts.

A number of organizations emphasize the benefits of increasing **international coordination and cooperation**. UN DESA recommends enhancing multilateral cooperation on collecting data, technological transfer, sustainable finance and debt management.³⁶ Utilizing the existing multilateral structures and systems can facilitate international coordination. Similarly, UNECE emphasizes the benefits of strengthening existing international agreements to support recovery. The focus should be on the Paris Agreement and the 2030 Agenda. In fact, the report argues that if there had been greater improvements on the targets from these international agreements, the impacts of the crisis would have been less severe.³⁷ The UNECE warns from protectionist measures, such as inhibiting the export of essential supplies, which could be witnessed at the beginning of the crisis in Europe. Similarly, the WBCSD stresses the dangers of nationalism and argues that a lack of international cooperation has inhibited an effective crisis response.³⁸ In line with this, the UNECE also recommends greater regional cooperation. One main focus should be ensuring connectivity and facilitating trade.³⁹

³² Agrawala, Dussaux and Monti 2020, OECD 2020

³³ Schofield, H. BBC 2018. France protests: PM Philippe suspends fuel tax rises.

³⁴ OECD 2020c

³⁵ OECD 2020c

³⁶ UN DESA 63

³⁷ UNECE. 2020. "SHARED RESPONSIBILITY, GLOBAL SOLIDARITY: Responding To The Socio-Economic Impacts Of COVID-19."

³⁸ World Business Council for Sustainable Development 2020

³⁹ UNECE. 2020a. "Responding To The Socio-Economic Impacts Of The Covid-19 Pandemic In The UNECE Region". Geneva: UNECE

Overall, policy recommendations by international organizations mostly **focus on a green recovery that is also inclusive and socially equitable**. This may reflect a growing public awareness of the urgency of addressing environmental challenges. According to an opinion poll conducted by [IPSOS](#), 65% of respondents from 29 countries stated that environmental concerns should be the focus of the economic recovery.⁴⁰ While many ideas for policies and strategies are now on the table, it is up to governments to implement them. For this, the majority of organizations highlight the importance of multilateral cooperation and coordinated responses. One such response is the recovery package presented by the European Union and agreed by heads of government in mid-July 2020. This will be discussed in the next chapter.

⁴⁰ IPSOS (2020), How do Great Britain and the world view climate change and Covid-19?

Chapter 2: The European Union Recovery Plan

Like in the rest of the world, the Covid-19 pandemic has exposed already existing challenges in Europe. In her [speech](#) introducing the proposal for the European Recovery Package, EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen identified the **key challenges for Europe** in the wake of Covid-19 as **rising inequalities, a digital divide, and the advancing climate crisis**. The EU recovery plan is inspired by “competitive sustainability” and has the Green Deal at its core. Therefore, the SDGs may be more crucial now than they were before the crisis.⁴¹

After five days of negotiation, the European Council decided on a **recovery package, “Next Generation EU” (NGEU)** and the next **Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF)** on July 21, 2020. The MFF is comprised of €1,074.3bn, and NGEU adds another €750bn specifically for economic recovery in the next three years.⁴² This adds up to a total budget of €1,824.3bn. The European Council hopes that together, NGEU and the MFF will transform the EU through its major policies, specifically the Green Deal and a digital revolution. NGEU and the MFF are linked, as the recovery will only be effective if it is connected to the long-term budget.

For **“Next Generation EU”**, the European Commission is authorized to borrow funds on behalf of the Union on capital markets. Of the €750bn, €360bn are foreseen as loans and the remaining €390bn are expenditures. Like in the MFF, 30% of the total amount of expenditure is earmarked for climate action.⁴³ This is 5% more than originally proposed by the Commission.⁴⁴ Additionally, climate action should be mainstreamed in all policies and programmes. €10bn of the €750bn are dedicated to the Just Transition Fund⁴⁵, as opposed to €40bn proposed by the European Commission.⁴⁶ The Just Transition Fund supports regions that will undergo great structural transformations during the shift from fossil fuels to renewable energy. Among its mechanisms are the re-skilling of workers, the creation of economic opportunities for Small and Medium Sized Enterprises (SMEs) and overall diversification of economic activity. It is part of the just transition scheme of the Green Deal.

The **MFF** is organised under seven headings that correspond to areas of spending:

- I. Single Market, Innovation, Digitalisation
- II. Cohesion, Resilience and Values
- III. Natural Resources and Environment
- IV. Migration, Border Management
- V. Security and Defence
- VI. Neighbourhood and the World
- VII. European Public Administration

These headings have been designed to reflect the Union’s political priorities. Dedicating 30% of the entire budget to climate action is in line with the Union’s commitment to the Paris Climate Agreement and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

⁴¹ European Commission. 2020. "Speech By President Von Der Leyen At The UN High-Level Event On Financing For Development In The Era Of COVID-19 And Beyond".

⁴² General Secretariat of the Council. 2020. "Special Meeting Of The European Council (17, 18, 19, 20 And 21 July 2020) – Conclusions". Brussels.

⁴³ General Secretariat of the Council, 2020

⁴⁴ European Commission. 2020. "Recovery Plan For Europe". *European Commission*.

⁴⁵ General Secretariat of the Council, 2020

⁴⁶ European Commission. 2020. Fact Sheet Recovery Plan.; European Commission. 2020. Fact Sheet InvestEU.

The investment programme InvestEU, the Connecting Europe Facility, and Digital Europe fall under the first heading of *Single Market, Innovation and Digitalisation*. The second pillar of InvestEU is dedicated to the Just Transition Scheme as a second pillar of the Just Transition Mechanism. The Connecting Europe Facility focuses on expanding transport, energy and digital networks. This is meant to facilitate cross-border connections and growth, as well as decarbonisation. Under the third heading of *Natural Resources and Environment*, there will be a modernised and sustainable maritime and fisheries policy. Furthermore, funding will be spent to advance climate action and promote environmental and biodiversity protection. The Common Agricultural Policy is built on two pillars. The first consists of direct support to farmers, while the second is focused on rural development. This includes delivering climate and environmental public goods. Under the sixth heading of *Neighbourhood and the World* the EU plans to strengthen coordination between internal and external policies with neighbour states. This should ensure proper implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement.⁴⁷

Investments should adhere to the newly released Sustainable Finance Taxonomy, which lays out six objectives for investments, climate change mitigation, climate change adaptation, sustainable and protection of water and marine resources, transition to a circular economy, pollution prevention and control, protection and restoration of biodiversity and ecosystems. Crucially, the taxonomy also includes a 'Do-no-significant-harm principle', stating that activities cannot do significant harm to any of the six objectives.^{48 49}

The **EU Commission has also adjusted its Work Programme** through 2021 to adapt to the new challenges presented by the pandemic. The "renovation wave" was already the flagship of the Green Deal, as buildings are estimated to be responsible for around 40% of the EU's emissions. The European Commission has emphasised its commitment to modernising buildings and critical infrastructure, and increasing the number of charging stations for electric vehicles. As part of the economic stimulus, the Commission wants to double the renovation rate.⁵⁰ The focus is on schools, hospitals and social housing; however, the Commission hopes that their efforts will encourage additional private investment into the renovation sector. Overall, these efforts are likely to create additional green jobs, too.⁵¹ The commitment to advancing the circular economy has also been strengthened in the adjusted Work Programme.

Rural development and agriculture are another key area that the commission will focus on by increasing funds to the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development, the financing instrument of the Common Agricultural Policy⁵². The aim is to support rural areas in making structural changes for the Green Deal, such as increasing biodiversity and the EU's farm-to-fork strategy.

Investment in health will mainly focus on preparedness for another health crisis. This includes promotion of research and innovation and cooperation of research facilities across Europe. Horizon Europe, the research programme starting in 2021, will receive additional funds to invest in health research.

⁴⁷ EU Technical Expert Group on Sustainable Finance. 2020. "Taxonomy: Final Report Of The Technical Expert Group On Sustainable Finance". Brussels.

⁴⁸ Simon, Frédéric. 2020. "'Do No Harm': EU Recovery Fund Has Green Strings Attached". *Www.Euractiv.Com*.

⁴⁹ EU Technical Expert Group on Sustainable Finance. 2020. "Taxonomy: Final Report Of The Technical Expert Group On Sustainable Finance". Brussels.

⁵⁰ Simon, Frédéric. 2020. "Green Building Advocates 'Underwhelmed' By EU Recovery Plan". *Www.Euractiv.Com*.

⁵¹ EC 2020: Adjusted Commission Work Programme 2020 Annex I

⁵² European Commission. 2020. "Press Corner". *European Commission - European Commission*.

Together, the Green Deal, Recovery Package and Adjusted Work Programme aim at setting Europe on a path to a sustainable recovery, focusing on environmental and ecological sustainability while leaving no one behind, as well as digitalisation. The negotiating process has highlighted the difficulties of consolidating different national interests under one policy umbrella. At the time of writing this report, the package is being discussed in the European Parliament. MEPs have criticised the substantial funding cuts to programmes that focus on the future, such as research, or the greenest part of the Common Agricultural Policy.⁵³

⁵³ Gill, Joanna, and Darren McCaffrey. 2020. "Meps Threaten To Reject €1.8 Trillion EU Budget & COVID-19 Rescue Package". *Euronews.Com*. <https://www.euronews.com/2020/07/23/watch-live-meps-pile-on-pressure-over-1-8-trillion-euro-covid-19-rescue-package>.

Chapter 3: Survey on the Role of Sustainable Development in European Countries

How the research was conducted

A survey questionnaire was sent out by the ESDN Office via email in the beginning of June 2020 to all 32 ESDN National Focal Points (NFPs), who are all policymakers of national government ministries responsible for SD policy and SDG implementation in their respective countries. The aim of the survey was to gauge the extent to which SD principles and SDGs have influenced the recovery plans and programs with respect to Covid-19. NFPs were asked the three following questions:

- 1) How does your country address the recovery from the Covid-19 crises, i.e. in a Covid-19 recovery programme or plan? Does this recovery programme/plan, or a similar recovery approach, take the SDGs or SD principles into account? If yes, in what respect?
- 2) Will the Covid-19 crisis have a lasting impact on your national sustainable development and/or SDG strategy? Has the Covid-19 crisis changed the way your country/government approaches sustainable development?
- 3) What should be the major elements in creating a more sustainable world after the Covid-19 crisis in Europe?

By mid-July 2020, the ESDN Office had received 17 answers (most of the answers were received in mid-June 2020 before the 18th ESDN workshop took place). Two countries sent other documents as a reference and for one the presentation at the workshop was used. Therefore, **20 European countries** were included in the survey and the analysis that can be found in this chapter. At the 18th ESDN Workshop, seven countries presented their country's Covid-19 recovery strategy in more detail. These presentations have also partially been included in the analysis. For a full list of sources, see the Annex A. By the time of receiving the survey responses and of the ESDN Workshop, only four countries had passed a comprehensive national recovery strategy (Germany, Italy, Lithuania, Luxembourg). In other countries, discussions and negotiations were still ongoing, with varying levels of detail already being publicly available.

The received answers were gathered and analysed regarding recurring themes and patterns. The following analysis is intended to provide a comparative overview of the role of SD in the recovery from the economic and health crises that followed the Covid-19 outbreak in Europe.

As most countries had not yet finalised their recovery plan at the time of writing this report in July 2020, it can only serve as an indicator of intentions and political will for implementing SD, rather than a representation of the extent to which the principles of SD were actually integrated into recovery plans.

Due to the open-ended nature of the survey questions, different respondents interpreted them in different ways. For example, in the last question on the major elements to create a more sustainable Europe after the pandemic, some respondents answered with more structural proposals while others listed concrete policies they thought were necessary. The following analysis will list many proposals of either more general, structural nature or concrete policy proposals. It needs to be noted that it could still be the case that a country is implementing (or planning to implement) a certain policy, but did not mention it in their response.

National Recovery Plans from Covid-19

In all 20 countries that were included in the analysis, **the initial focus was on alleviating the immediate effects of the Covid-19 health crisis and subsequent shutdown of the economy**. Most countries launched programmes to support companies having to lay off workers or recently unemployed people. Resources were mobilised to help the health sector address the added challenges.

As the spread of the virus is currently more or less under control in most countries in Europe (as of July 2020), governments are discussing **long-term recovery plans for the economy and society**. In a few countries, like Germany, Italy, Latvia and Luxembourg, these plans have already passed or been presented to the national parliament. Most other countries are in the process of establishing a recovery plan and have adopted different strategies.

Several have set up **expert groups** to work on recovery and exit policies, for example in Belgium. In Finland, five working groups have been established. Almost all of the Finnish working groups **incorporate aspects of sustainability**, such as the *Scientific committee to advise the decisions-makers on the prevention of the harmful impacts of the COVID-19 crisis according to the principles of sustainable development* and the *Working group on sustainable recovery measures: Sustainable evaluation criteria*. In Romania, an inter-institutional working group has been set up to tackle the economic impacts of the crisis. It is comprised of representatives from the public sector (e.g. government), public institutions (e.g. national statistical agency), the non-governmental sector and the private sector.

In the Netherlands, there were unprecedented levels of cooperation between the central government and local governments. The local level was involved in the preparation and implementation of the Covid-19 approach. Their feedback on the policies provided great value and insight into making sustainable choices for the benefit of society.

Of those countries that have not yet released their recovery plan, most have explicitly stated their commitment to principles of SD or to aligning the recovery with the European Green Deal (Austria, Belgium, Finland, Greece, Latvia, Malta, Netherlands, Romania). While Belgium currently has no central government, regional governments are making plans and suggestions on how SD can be integrated in the recovery. The Netherlands are committed to integrating the concept of wellbeing into their recovery, in order to have a broader outlook than just economic recovery measured by GDP. The Dutch government has recognised that SDGs are useful to define wellbeing. Furthermore, it has recognised that crisis response needs to be aligned with efforts to achieve the SDGs and the Paris Agreement.

Many countries (Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Luxembourg, Romania) proposed policies related to **supporting SMEs, entrepreneurs and industry, in general**. In Bulgaria, the focus of these measures is on start-ups, innovation and especially digitalisation. Digitalisation is a policy mentioned by several countries (Bulgaria, Latvia, Luxembourg, Romania).

Several countries have introduced financial **benefits for the most vulnerable or expanded unemployment benefits** (Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Germany, Italy, Lithuania, Romania, Sweden). In Germany, all families receive a one-time payment of €300 per child. Other countries have strengthened unemployment benefit systems or lowered barriers for receiving certain benefits. Bulgaria, Germany and Romania have reduced the value-added tax, either for certain products or for all products.

While several countries have introduced measures to **support their health care workers**, France has also launched a public consultation with 300 stakeholders from the health sector. Until mid-July 2020, France is working on recommendations regarding 4 aspects; (I) transforming and upgrading jobs in the care sector, (II) defining a new funding and investment policy in the care sector; (III) radically simplifying hospital teams' organisation and daily operations; and (IV) bringing together health actors at the local level in the services of users.

Most other specific policies mentioned by respondents fall in the category of **green transition or green growth**. Investments in housing and energy efficiency were mentioned by four countries (Austria, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg), of which most already published their plans.

There are several policies related to **mobility and transport**. While some countries are investing in expanding public transport (Austria, Germany, Italy), others also promote electric vehicles (Germany, France, Luxembourg). France is raising the subsidy for buying electric vehicles for both private citizens and companies and investing in improving charging infrastructure. France is the only country so far with a specific policy related to improving biking. In addition to subsidies for repairing used bikes and expanding infrastructure, there will also be lessons for citizens to safely ride their bike.

Germany and Austria will **financially support municipalities**, which have also seen their income shrink dramatically as a consequence of the economic downturn. Some of this support is earmarked for improving public transport networks.

Finally, **investment in research**, either in general or specifically in health and digitalisation will contribute to economic recovery in at least five countries (Austria, Bulgaria, Germany, France, Lithuania).

Generally, the crisis has highlighted the **importance of cooperation and of overcoming silos**. Several countries have established committees with experts from different sectors and areas to work on or advise the government on a recovery plan. In the Netherlands, the crisis has also led to unprecedented levels of vertical cooperation. In terms of specific policies, most countries have established some sort of support for affected industries and are giving stimulus directly to businesses. Often the focus here is on SMEs. Supporting the most vulnerable is a priority in many countries. Sometimes there is also a separate focus on healthcare workers. Most policies designed to stimulate the economy, however, can be attributed to the environmental dimension, including public transport, e-mobility and housing renovation.

The Impacts of Covid-19 on National Sustainable Development Strategies

Almost all NFP respondents indicated that their country would **continue their commitment to SD and to achieving the 2030 Agenda**. In fact, the crisis is perceived as an **opportunity to accelerate working towards sustainability objectives**. In Lithuania, for instance, the government rejected calls to curtail social and environmental standards in order to accelerate the economic recovery. Likewise, in Germany, some industry representatives pressured the government to abandon certain standards. On the other hand, a number of business federations demanded to stay on track with the 2030 Agenda. This points to an **increased awareness towards the importance of sustainability**, which also came up in many other responses.

In Romania and Latvia, the crisis has highlighted some of the challenges that lie ahead to achieve the objectives of the 2030 Agenda. However, the Latvian NFP pointed out that the crisis response has also increased mutual trust between government and society, which will be needed to overcome other

societal challenges. In the Netherlands, there is an increased awareness of the interlinkages and interdependencies of different aspects of wellbeing including the SDGs. It has highlighted the importance of an integrative view of SD and of inclusiveness. In Sweden, the government proposed a new bill to parliament, which will strengthen the long-term commitment to the 2030 Agenda.

In several countries, the National Sustainable Development Strategies (NSDSs) are currently under review, being reformulated, or the government is working on a roadmap for achieving the SDGs. The Covid-19 pandemic has influenced these processes. In Malta, the lessons learned from the pandemic will be incorporated in the new strategy. This mostly regards the health sector, but also increasing societal, environmental and economic resilience towards further crises. Upon reviewing the long term strategy “Estonia 2035”, policy makers found that many elements crucial for a Covid-19 recovery had already been addressed, for example, the readiness for future crises, the importance of the ICT sector, and a strong healthcare system. Croatia is aligning their crisis response with the objectives of the European Semester and the recommendations by the European Council for a National Reform Programme. Before the crisis, Italy and Romania had already started working with the OECD on improving institutional capacities for policy coherence. Both countries are committed to continuing this cooperation. In Italy, policy coherence will be a crucial element of the revised NSDS due in 2021. Recovery measures from the Covid-19 pandemic will be assessed against the objectives of the NSDS. The Romanian NFP stated that Romania is committed to utilising the cooperation with the OECD to create strategic and results-oriented management across the public administration for post-Covid-19 recovery. In Germany and Finland, Covid-19 is likely to influence the revised NSDS and the roadmap for 2030 (respectively). In France, the president set up a committee to assess the needs for tackling longer-term challenges, such as climate change, ageing populations, and inequalities, chaired by high-level economists.

Several countries will be using the **SDGs or the principles of SD as a guideline for the recovery**. The German chancellor, Angela Merkel, explicitly referred to the 2030 Agenda as a ‘compass’ to guide recovery towards a more sustainable future. In the Netherlands, there is an ongoing public discussion on how sustainability principles can be used as a guideline for recovery measures. It is likely that a more integrative view of the SDGs will influence the recovery. The Estonian NFP pointed out that the SDGs are now more important than ever, as the SDGs support vulnerable groups who are most affected by the Covid-19 crisis.

Overall, commitment to SD seems to be strong. However, most respondents also pointed out that the crisis had exacerbated and highlighted existing gaps and challenges with regards to achieving the SDGs. At the same time, maybe because of this, awareness of the importance of SD both in society and in governments seems to have increased during the crisis. In several countries, there is a public debate around using SD principles to guide the recovery. In addition, several respondents said that their governments resisted pressure from businesses to lower societal or environmental standards. The influence between SD and the Covid-19 pandemic and recovery seems to go both ways. On the one hand, the health and economic crises are likely to set back some achievements towards the SDGs. These developments, but also the lessons learned from the crisis will impact national strategies in the future. On the other hand, the principles of SD can also serve as a guideline for designing the recovery. Some countries have already integrated some aspects of sustainability in their recovery packages and most others have indicated their intention to do so.

Major elements for creating a more sustainable world after Covid-19

The answers to this question pointed towards the great potential of using SD and the SDGs as a guideline for recovery. Even when not explicitly mentioned, the policy proposals listed by respondents

almost all aligned with a green and sustainable recovery. Out of the 20 respondents, eight explicitly stated that the **SDGs should be used as a guideline or roadmap for recovery** in their answer to the question (Belgium, Bulgaria, Germany, Greece, Italy, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Netherlands). Belgium and Germany added that the crisis should be used as an occasion to accelerate action towards achieving the SDGs.

Similarly, many countries emphasized the need for **international cooperation and adherence to international agreements** (Bulgaria, Croatia, Germany, France, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden). Italy specifically pointed towards the multilateral system provided by the UN and involving the WHO in health concerns. Sweden highlighted the need to adhere to international principles, such as human rights, equity and democracy. The responses also emphasized the importance of **strong EU collaboration and of developing a common approach by the EU** (Belgium, Germany, France, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania) with Italy and Lithuania stressing the important role the EU has as a role model in the world. Some respondents (Belgium, Greece, Latvia) also specifically pointed to existing EU agreements and strategies, such as the Green Deal or the farm-to-fork strategy.

Several countries highlighted the **importance of directing investments, budgets and fiscal policy towards a green recovery** (Belgium, Germany, Finland, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands). Finland has created a number of criteria, against which all policies and investments are to be evaluated, including impacts on employment and distribution and their contribution towards climate action, and ecological and environmental objectives. Lithuania and Luxembourg both mentioned the need to adapt legal and financial policies to the ecological challenges ahead. The Netherlands suggest increasing work in and with the financial sector to promote and improve SDG-based financing.

Many respondents listed specific policies that can help to **align the economic recovery with objectives and principles of SD**. In the social dimension, social cohesion, and reducing inequality and poverty were mentioned by Germany, France, Malta, Romania and Sweden. France and Sweden added education and working towards universal health care as important aspects. Sweden emphasized the need for leaving no one behind and protecting specifically vulnerable groups in the recovery.

In the economic dimension, the Netherlands stressed the importance of **raising awareness in and increasing cooperation with the business sector**. Similarly, Estonia also supports encouraging businesses to incorporate more long-term thinking into their practices. This will also make the economy as a whole more resilient towards future crises. The Czech Republic and Croatia highlighted the importance of supporting SMEs.

The majority of policies referred to **environmental protection and climate action**. This is also reflected in the intentions or actual policies indicated in the answers to the first question of the survey. **Circular economy** was the proposal most frequently mentioned in this context (Belgium, Croatia, Czech Republic, Germany, Greece, Finland, Netherlands). Further policies include investments in **clean and renewable energy** and energy efficiency (Czech Republic, Germany, France, Malta), decarbonisation (Czech Republic), and environmental protection and **biodiversity** (Belgium, Croatia, France, Malta).

The Czech Republic, Malta, Latvia and Romania also referred to **digitalization** as a useful policy for recovery. Resilience and preparedness for future crises were mentioned by Belgium, Germany, and Luxembourg as important aspects of the recovery. Finland and the Czech Republic would both welcome greater efforts in data collection to support decision-making and monitor wellbeing of citizens.

Overall, answers to this question indicate a strong willingness to not only continue working on the 2030 Agenda and then Green Deal, but to integrate it as a crucial part of the economic recovery in Europe. Furthermore, the majority of answers point towards a commitment to international and

European agreements, first and foremost the 2030 Agenda and the Green Deal. Several countries also mentioned the need to increase cooperation with the Global South. Specific policies mentioned in the replies referred to all three dimensions of sustainable development, economy, society and the environment, but especially to the green transition. Here, international and European agreements such as the Paris agreement, the European Green Deal and the European farm-to-fork strategy will be crucial elements.

Reflection and Final Remarks

In the following paragraphs, five overarching themes are identified, emerging from desk research, the NFP survey, and the 18th ESDN Workshop. They aim to reflect on the efforts for a sustainable recovery so far and on the challenges that lay ahead.

1) Using the SDGs as a guideline for recovery – and making a difference in practice

In the survey of NFPs, most respondents indicated great commitment to the SDGs and to integrating them into a sustainable recovery from the Covid-19 crisis. In their answer to the question about what is needed for a sustainable recovery, most suggested policies that are either directly related or closely aligned with the 2030 Agenda. From those countries that already have published full recovery plans or individual recovery policies, some have confirmed their commitment to principles of SD, such as France or Germany. However, this is not the case in all countries. In the OECD survey, cited in the first chapter of this report, 72% of respondents stated that the Covid-19 crisis will impact their country's capacities to achieve the SDGs (the OECD includes non-European countries, so there is not a complete overlap with our survey). From the NFP survey responses, there are several countries that merely focus on protecting jobs and industry and that have not yet taken measures to advance SD through their recovery efforts. In line with this, a high-level policy maker argued during the 18th ESDN Workshop that once the debt and economic crises truly hit, public spending priorities are likely to shift away from SD.⁵⁴

As governments are drafting recovery packages and policy responses, the question whether the indicated commitment to SD remains a 'lip service' or whether it will really put into practice remains. Another high-level policymaker at the recent ESDN Workshop also pointed to this challenge. As a solution, it was suggested operationalising the SDGs and translating them into more practical policies, rather than remaining on an abstract level. International organisations and stakeholder institutions have put forward many concrete proposals for sustainable recovery policies, such as investment in renewable energy, energy efficiency and public transport. The implementation of these will also depend on the political will and the ability of political silos to collaborate with each other.

2) Policy coherence and political commitment

In the Word Cloud exercise about what is needed for a sustainable recovery, conducted with the participants of the 18th ESDN Workshop, policy coherence was mentioned by the greatest number of participants.⁵⁵ In their immediate response to the health and economic impacts of Covid-19, many governments exhibited exceptional levels of cooperation between different line ministries. This was a result of the OECD study, but was also indicated in the NFP survey. For example, Romania established an inter-institutional working group and Finland has several expert committees that advise the government. Adina Vălean, European Commissioner for Transport, also highlighted the unprecedented levels of cooperation in the European Commission that she experienced during the past months. She explained that a taskforce was created in March 2020, where ministers and EU Commissioners from different political silos worked together. In her own experience, this was one of the most remarkable developments during the crisis. The OECD study also highlights the 'whole of government' approach,

⁵⁴ Fetting, C. (2020). "Achieving the SDGs through a Sustainable and Just Transition: Challenges and responses to COVID-19", 18th ESDN Workshop Report, July 2020, ESDN Office, Vienna.

⁵⁵ Fetting (2020)

where in many countries strong political leadership was accompanied by collaboration across political silos.

Policy coherence and collaboration have been a key demand of the SD community and one of the most decisive principles of SD for decades. The response to Covid-19 in many countries has shown that it is possible and that it is effective when different sectors of the government cooperate. With regards to SD issues, however, political leadership and commitment are often lacking. The SD community has the practical experience and knowledge of policy coherence and collaboration and can, therefore, advise governments in how to continue in this mode of working, as well as in translating it to other challenges. On the other hand, if governments show equal commitment and leadership for SD issues as they have for Covid-19, key SD challenges could be addressed in a much more effective way.

3) Green recovery

The Covid-19 pandemic hit the world in a time of high awareness of the climate and biodiversity crises. While suggested policies by UN Agencies and international organisations do cover all three dimensions of SD, a strong focus is on a green recovery and a transition to a carbon-free economy. This is also evident in the European Union's recovery package, which is strongly linked to the Green Deal that was only presented and passed in the European Parliament shortly before the pandemic hit Europe. In their answers to the third NFP survey question about what the major elements should be for a more sustainable world after Covid-19, an overwhelming majority of the answers referred to ecological and environmental measures.

Green finance is a topic that has not widely been discussed nor mentioned in many of the policy proposals or survey answers. However, it is becoming increasingly important. Agrawala et al (2020) examine green stimulus measures taken after the Great Financial Crisis in 2008 and argue that there needs to be better monitoring and evaluation measures. The European Union is in the process of developing a green taxonomy for investments, and a first report was only recently released. The investments linked to the recovery package and Multiannual Financial Framework already have to adhere to the 'do-no-significant-harm' principle established in that report.

4) Recovery as a window of opportunity

Many of the survey respondents indicated that the recovery from Covid-19 presented a chance to accelerate the achievement of the 2030 Agenda. During the 18th ESDN Workshop it was argued that the necessary policy responses to Covid-19 offered a 'window of opportunity' to design new systems and governance structures. Governments have shown their ability to be not only proactive and decisive, but also to listen to scientists and make evidence-based policy decisions. In recent years, politics and policymaking have often been more a reaction to market developments and now a chance is presented to reverse this trend and establish a more proactive mode of policy-making.⁵⁶

5) International cooperation

Many of the policy recommendations by international organisations and UN agencies point to existing international agreements as an important tool for a sustainable recovery, first and foremost the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Paris Climate Agreement. A strengthening of the multilateral framework and existing agreements is highly recommended as sustainability and Covid-19 are both issues on a global scale and can only be addressed through international cooperation. This is echoed in responses in the NFP survey. Similarly, in the word cloud exercise during the 18th ESDN

⁵⁶ Fetting (2020)

Workshop, many of the answers referred to international cooperation, solidarity, EU solidarity, G20 recommitment, and international partnerships.

Many NFP survey respondents also stressed the importance of cooperation and solidarity within the EU. The EU recovery package represents a compromise, where the extended negotiations have shown the difficulties of consolidating different countries' interests.

Traditionally, the SD community has a very international outlook, recognizing that issues of global impact can only be solved through global cooperation. There are many political declarations of commitment to international agreements and cooperation. However, when crises hit, it can be difficult to live up to those ideals. During the 18th ESDN Workshop, it was pointed out that when it first became evident that Covid-19 was posing a health crisis, the responses were rather nationalistic – borders were closed and medical equipment withheld from being exported and the world supply bought up.

Overall, the SD community and many governments recognize the scale of the crisis brought on by Covid-19. While the health impacts are severe and ongoing at the time of writing this report, it seems that in Europe at least the focus has shifted towards recovery and rebuilding the economy. However, the situation remains highly uncertain. At this point in July 2020, it is not clear whether the containment of the virus can be maintained and a second lockdown can be prevented. Secondly, while most governments currently seem rather enthusiastic about SD and there is public pressure to deliver an inclusive recovery, it remains to be seen whether the commitments to the 2030 Agenda are kept and the recovery is used as an opportunity to implement systemic changes.

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Annex

This Annex provides an overview of the countries included in the survey and the format in which their answers were provided:

- Austria, Presentation at the 18th ESDN Workshop
- Belgium, Questionnaire, received by mid-June
- Bulgaria, Voluntary National Review 2020, Annex: “Covid-19 Response”
- Croatia, Questionnaire, received by mid-July
- Czech Republic, Questionnaire, received by mid-June
- Denmark, Questionnaire, received by mid-June
- Estonia, Questionnaire, received by mid-June
- Finland, Questionnaire, received by mid-June
- France, Questionnaire, received by mid-June, and presentation at the 18th ESDN Workshop
- Germany, Questionnaire, received by mid-June, and presentation at the 18th ESDN Workshop
- Greece, excerpt from Email and government presentation, received by July
- Hungary, Questionnaire, received by mid-June
- Italy, Questionnaire, received by mid-June, and presentation at the 18th ESDN Workshop
- Latvia, Questionnaire, received by mid-June
- Lithuania, Questionnaire, received by mid-June
- Luxembourg, Questionnaire, received by mid-June
- Malta, Questionnaire, received by mid-June
- Netherlands, Questionnaire, received by mid-June, and presentation at the 18th ESDN Workshop
- Norway, Questionnaire, received by mid-June
- Romania, Questionnaire, received by mid-June, and presentation at the 18th ESDN Workshop

