



11th ESDN Peer Learning Platform Discussion Paper

**Europe's Narrative for a
Sustainable Future: Foresight
and Governance Processes
Enabling Robust Sustainable
Development Beyond 2030**



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Introduction

This Discussion Paper will provide participants taking part in the 11th ESDN Peer Learning Platform with some background information on the Platform's focus, the topics that will be covered by speakers and presenters, as well as how the Platform's interactive parts will be run.

The Peer Learning Platform will be focusing on "Europe's Narrative for a Sustainable Future: Foresight and Governance Processes Enabling Robust Sustainable Development Beyond 2030". The Platform is taking place in Brussels, Belgium on the 22nd and 23rd of April 2026, and is being organized by the European Sustainable Development Network together with the Welsh Government.

The year 2030 is around the corner and it is essential to spark the discussion of what comes after the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The world has changed since 2015 when the SDGs were adopted. Security and geopolitics are receiving more attention and priority in the political discussion and other topics, like sustainable development, seem to fade into the political background.

The transformed security environment in Europe has significantly reshaped geopolitical relations. The global community is facing an evolving international order, which in turn creates challenges for forging and maintaining international commitments. At the same time, emerging pressures and the rise of nationalism are prompting states to turn inward. On the other hand, for example, the outcome of the Hungarian parliamentary elections suggests a degree of change in the European Union's internal cohesion, though it remains to be seen to what extent this development will extend and create a momentum for more transformative EU policies.

When looking beyond 2030 and considering the beyond 2030 discussions, it is necessary not only to review progress of current SDGs but also to assess whether the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs are sufficiently transformative. The world is falling behind in progress towards the SDGs, and it might mean irreversible changes in the Earth's ecosystems. These would mean significant changes in the lived-reality and changes on the level of paradigms. This creates a growing need for transformative policies. Europe and the EU have an opportunity to act as an accelerator if that role is decided.

Chapter 1 will focus on the current situation of sustainable development, especially in Europe, as well as providing a brief overview of how it is decided what comes after the SDGs. This chapter will also focus on the presentations that will be given in the Platform's Session 1 on the broad perspective on the future and the European narrative of sustainable development. This chapter will also feature a short excerpt from the Session 1 keynote speakers from the Finnsus, which will be followed by ESDN Vice President's remarks of the European narrative for sustainable development and the views of the Youth by an ESDN Youth Network Member.

Chapter 2 focuses on foresight. It provides a basic understanding of futures thinking and foresight, with a particular focus on the foresight processes and the importance of strategic foresight in public policies. A short excerpt from the Session 2 keynote speaker from the European Commission's Joint Research Centre is included in this chapter.

Chapter 3 brings into focus the transformative change in systems as well as risks and opportunities Europe faces when preparing for sustainable development beyond 2030. This chapter will draw on short excerpts from the Session 3 keynote speakers from the European Environmental Bureau, Stakeholder Forum for a Sustainable Future, and Social Climate Fund, DG CLIMA.

Finally, the ESDN Peer Learning Platforms take place under the Chatham House Rule, where we do not publish anything with anyone's name on it. This allows for a more honest discussion and exchange with everyone. The participant list and the presentations, after attaining permission from the speakers, will be shared with everyone who attended the Platform, but should not be widely shared beyond those who took part.

After the Platform, an ESDN Policy Note will be published that will highlight the main outcomes, ideas, and recommendations that come out of the presentations, the discussion panel, and from the Exchange Spaces. The ESDN will publish this as soon as possible.

Chapter 1: The Future of Sustainable Development in Europe now and beyond 2030

This chapter focuses on the current situation of the Earth and sustainable development with particular emphasis on the ecological sphere of sustainable development and the SDGs. It is vital to understand the systemic nature of sustainable development. The wedding cake model illustrates the biosphere as a foundation for society and the economy, and as the basis of the SDGs (see Stockholm Resilience Center 2016). Society and the economy are systems built by people, which, in order to exist, require the biosphere. The biosphere functions as the foundation for human life and therefore is a prerequisite for humans to exist.

The concept of sustainable development is formed by the idea of development, needs, and future generations.¹ The roots of the concept go back to the 1970s, when the Club of Rome argued that there is a need for people to change their behaviour towards the planet, and when the concept of sustainability was conceptualized in the contemporary frame of sustainable development.² The concept of sustainable development was formally introduced in 1987 by the Brundtland Commission.

The concept of sustainable development is shaped by the temporal and contextual environment in which it appears. Consequently, the current ecological state of the planet defines the boundaries within which any post-2030 framework must operate. It is therefore important to examine how the current goals have performed and what major bottlenecks have emerged. Understanding these challenges is essential for identifying solutions and improving sustainability.

Current state of the Earth requires urgency

The Planetary Health Check (PHC) report provides information on the state of the planet. Planetary health is defined by nine planetary boundaries, which are identified scientifically as key factors in regulating the stability, resilience, and life-support functions of the Earth system. These nine processes are climate change, changes in biodiversity integrity, land system change, freshwater change, modification of biogeochemical flows, ocean acidification, increases in atmospheric aerosol loading, stratospheric ozone depletion and introduction of novel entities.³

Planetary boundaries define and quantify the safe levels of change for all biophysical processes regulating the state, resilience, and life support on Earth.⁴ However, seven of these boundaries have been breached,⁵ and in five we are already operating in the high risk zone.⁶ Crossing these boundaries means we are currently operating outside of the safe space and therefore pushing the limits of the Earth systems.

¹ Klarin 2018, 67-68.

² Klarin 2018, 71.

³ PBScience 2025, 24-25.

⁴ PBScience 2025, 44.

⁵ PBScience 2025, 62.

⁶ PBScience Executive Summary 2025, 3.

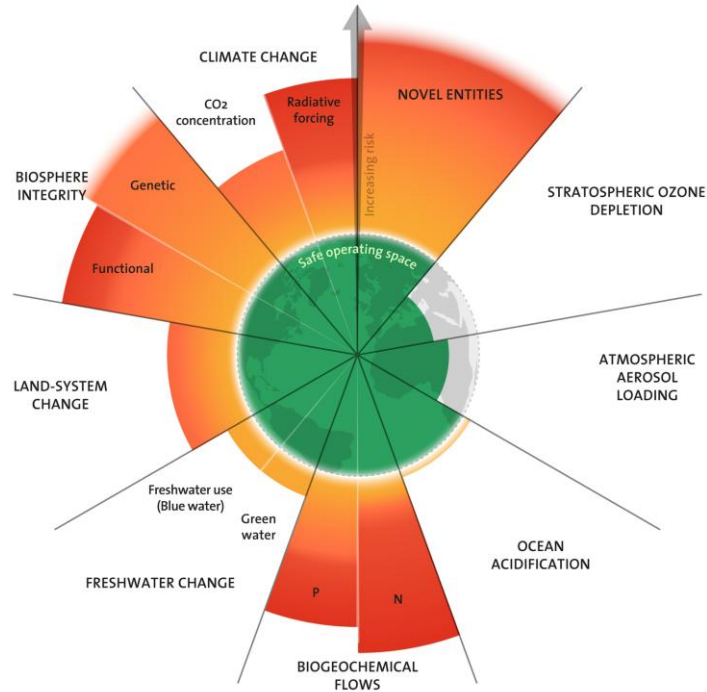


Figure 1. Planetary boundaries status (Azote for Stockholm Resilience Centre, based on analysis in Sakschewski and Caesar et al., 2025). Stockholm Resilience Center 2025.

The Safe Operating Space means the state of the Earth system that allows humanity to develop and thrive now and in the future.⁷ Operating outside of the Safe Space strains the resilience of the Earth and affects its ability to self-regulate. The resilience of the Earth is defined by Earth’s ability to maintain conditions supportive to life. Consequently, there are signs of the stability of the Earth beginning to crumble when the planet is not able to recover from the breaches of the Safe Operating Space of the climate-biosphere regime.⁸

Progress towards the SDGs is falling behind

There has been progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals, but the progress has varied across regions.⁹ The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) provides an annual report on the SDGs. According to the 2024 report, fewer than 20 percent of the 135 SDG targets that can be assessed through global trend data were on track to be achieved by 2030, whereas almost 50 percent of the SDGs were off track. The result underlines the urgency of intensified efforts to achieve the SDGs.¹⁰

The EU published its first Voluntary Review (VR) on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in July 2023. A VR on SDG Implementation is a self-assessment which the EU submits to the United Nations to report on their progress toward the SDGs. In the review, the EU describes how it is implementing the SDGs, what progress has been made, where challenges remain, and what policies, data, and partnerships support SDG work. The reviews are presented at the UN High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF), which is the global platform for the follow-up on SDGs.

⁷ PBScience 2025, 37; Steffen, W. & al 2015.

⁸ PBScience 2025, 42.

⁹ Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the Secretary-General 2023, 19.

¹⁰ UN DESA 2024, 4.

The EU adopted a comprehensive approach to implementing the SDGs. At the beginning of her mandate, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen’s political programme integrated the SDGs into all Commission proposals, policies and strategies. The guidelines set out six headline ambitions which mainstreamed the SDGs into EU policies (Figure 2).¹¹



Figure 2. The strategy to deliver on the SDGs in the EU. VR 2023, 8.

The VR shows strong commitment to the SDGs but uneven progress. According to the VR in 2023, the EU performed best on the goals of ensuring decent work and economic growth, reducing poverty, and fostering peace, security and inclusive societies and institutions.¹² The biggest issues relate to climate change, biodiversity loss, and natural resource use. For example, the Eurostat 2025 assessment (Figure 3) shows no significant progress for life below water (SDG 14), clean water and sanitation (SDG 6), and life on land (SDG 15).¹³

¹¹ European Commission: Secretariat-General 2023, 8.

¹² European Commission: Secretariat-General 2023, 6.

¹³ Eurostat 2025, 9.



Figure 3. Overview of EU progress towards the SDGs over the past 5 years, 2025 (Data mainly refer to 2018–2023 or 2019–2024). Eurostat 2025, 11.

Although Europe and the EU have progressed towards the SDGs, numerous challenges remain. For example, the Covid-19 pandemic and Russia’s war of aggression have had a significant impact on Europe. However, there were challenges already before those occurred.¹⁴ Against this backdrop, the uneven progress toward the SDGs, combined with accelerating ecological risks, underscores the need for a renewed global framework beyond 2030.

Sustainable development beyond 2030 is under construction

In September 2024, the Summit of the Future adopted the Pact of the Future. The Pact covers a broad range of themes, including peace and security, sustainable development, climate change, digital cooperation, human rights, gender equality, youth and future generations, as well as the transformation

¹⁴ Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the Secretary-General 2023, 19.

of global governance. The Pact illustrates how the international system could respond to the 21st-century challenges.¹⁵

Action 12 in the Pact of the Future calls nations to plan for the future and strengthen the collective efforts for the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda by 2030 and beyond. In addition, it invites the High-Level Political Forum to consider in September 2027 how the nations will advance sustainable development by 2030 and beyond, as a priority and at the centre of their work.¹⁶ By this, the Pact of the Future mandated the 2027 SDG Summit to initiate the formal deliberations on the post-2030 framework. This creates a window of one and a half years to build the momentum.

The adoption of the SDGs in 2015 was a major step that is difficult to repeat. Also, there are new questions which need to be considered in the post-agenda discussions. In recent years, there has been an increasing body of research that highlights the need to critically reassess the concept of sustainable development and the SDGs. For example, Dr. Markus Vogt has argued that the SDGs lack a coherence between the social and the ecological components as well as a naming of power conflicts (see Vogt 2022). These raise questions whether the current understanding of sustainable development and the SDGs are sufficient to address global sustainability issues.

The path beyond 2030 will not be an easy one. The world is in a very different situation than before, and achieving the goals set earlier would require even more ambitious and fundamental transformations. These developments highlight that the post-agenda framework would need to be more transformative and the global community more coherent in their actions. It remains uncertain to what extent the global community can deliver such change under current conditions. Europe, however, holds an advantage in the unity it has built over more than seventy years.

Keynote: Towards the Post-2030 Era - What is likely, what is desirable, and how to make the desirable more likely

The Session 1 keynote presentation will be held by Sami Pirkkala from Finnsus. Discussions around the post-2030 agenda are slowly picking up speed in different forums. In the keynote, Sami will present how the world has changed since 2012, when the post-2015 discussions were getting underway, and what might realistically be possible in 2030 given the shifts in the global landscape and within the UN itself.

After the presentation there will be an opportunity for a discussion. The purpose is to encourage participants to consider whether, given global realities, it makes sense to continue with the current agenda or whether something entirely new is needed, and what that might look like, with the focus on securing human wellbeing within the planet's carrying capacity.

Keynote: Goals of the ESDN: A European Narrative for Sustainable Development

Over the next months, the ESDN is aiming to develop a European Narrative for Sustainable Development that will seek to provide guidance on the question: "How can we better position sustainable development as the foundation and enabler for long-term stability, resilience and security in an increasingly complex and uncertain world?"

¹⁵ United Nations 2024.

¹⁶ United Nations 2024, 11.

The ESDN Executive Committee has already initiated the creation of this European Narrative. Our hope is that this Peer Learning Platform and Visit, as well as all our upcoming events in 2026 will allow us to develop this further with the help of our ESDN Members and event participants through their experiences, expertise, and insights.

Keynote ESDN Youth Network Perspective

The ESDN is proud to be able to offer a space in this event for the views of our ESDN Youth Network regarding sustainable development now and beyond 2030, which will draw from the ideas of our entire Youth Network of over 150 members, many of whom are current or former UN Youth Delegates.

Chapter 2: Introduction to Futures Literacy

This chapter focuses on how to approach the future through foresight. It provides a basic understanding of futures thinking and foresight, with a particular focus on the foresight processes and the importance of strategic foresight in public policies. The growing uncertainty and complexity of recent decades have fostered the development of futures thinking, foresight and strategic planning.

Futures research as an academic discipline began to take shape during the second half of the 20th century. The meta-discipline of futures research was founded on the premise that a plurality of possible futures existed and that these futures can be estimated, forecast and shaped.¹⁷ In the 1950s and 1960s, the concept of "modern" futures research was established in the USA and Western Europe.¹⁸ From the outset, futures research was focused on scientific methods. Intellectuals and scientists from different disciplines applied scientific approaches to predicting, planning, and thinking about the future.¹⁹ According to Professor Dr. Elke Seefried, a dominating feature of futures research was confidence in the ability of science to forecast future developments and their consequences, which enabled steering of the future.²⁰

Closely linked to futures research, strategic foresight emerged in the aftermath of World War II, initially within the military context. Corporate decision-making soon became another driver of foresight practices. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, foresight practices were incorporated into the operational activities of corporations. The challenges of the globalised market, together with the increased uncertainty and complexity highlighted the strategic importance of foresight practices in the 1980s and 1990s. Since the 2000s, strategic foresight has been mainstreamed into organisations' routines and in the 2020s it has gained significant momentum.²¹

During the upcoming Peer Learning Platform, Yannick Dujardin, Policy Analyst from the European Commission's Joint Research Centre, will provide an interactive session on Futures Literacy and the future of multilateralism.

Academical and practical approaches to the future

'Futures thinking' is in plural to emphasise that there is not one single future, but rather multiple alternative futures. Futures research begins from the premise that it is not rational to analyse only one option and to believe it to be the only possible outcome. Instead, futures research explores different futures and how they can be achieved.²²

Dr. Joseph Voros distinguishes five classes of alternative futures: potential, possible, plausible, probable, and preferable. Potential futures encompass all alternative futures. Possible futures include all the futures that could occur, without making claims about their likelihood and desirability. Plausible futures are those consistent with our current knowledge. Probable futures refer to those considered likely to occur, while preferable futures are what we would want to happen.²³

¹⁷ Seefried 2014, 1.

¹⁸ Seefried 2014, 2.

¹⁹ Seefried 2014, 4.

²⁰ Seefried 2014, 3.

²¹ Schwarz 2024.

²² Aalto & al. 2022, 12.

²³ Voros 2003, 16-17.

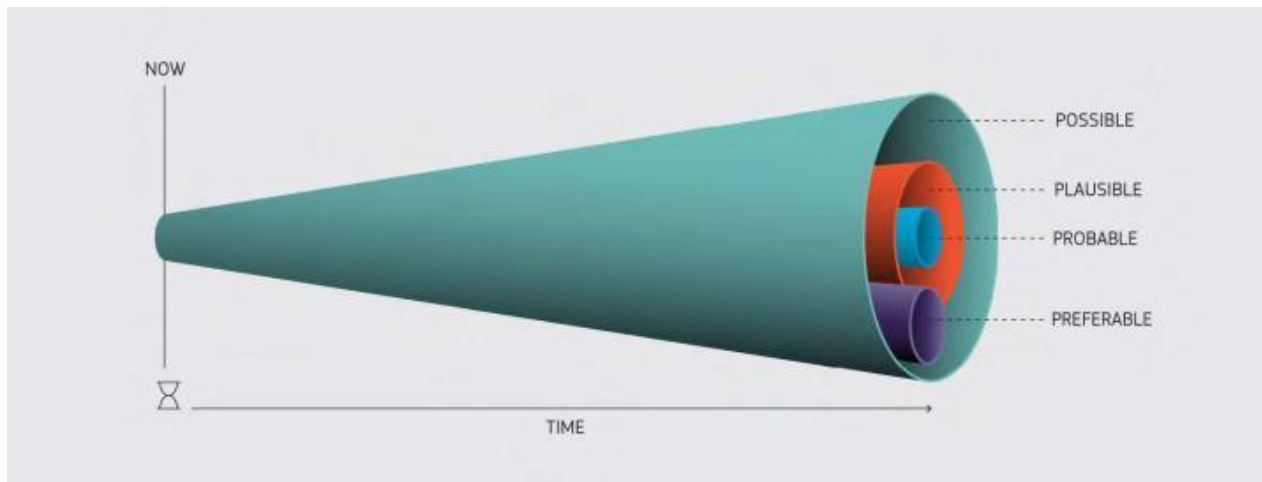


Figure 4. Futures cone by the European Commission depicting the four main classes of futures: possible, plausible, probable, and preferable. In Voros' future cone, time would be replaced with the 'potential futures.' European Commission 2025.

Whereas futures research focuses on the scientific methods and theoretical foundations, foresight brings the theories on a practical level. Voros describes foresight as an aspect of strategic thinking that enables the exploration of the strategic options available and supports strategy-making.²⁴ The timeline in foresight tends to be shorter than in futures research. Importantly, neither of these are predictions.²⁵ Both, futures research and foresight, rely on an analysis of knowledge using a scientific method.

The basics of foresight methods

The foresight methods can be categorised as qualitative or quantitative, with semi-quantitative methods positioned between the two. Qualitative methods provide meaning, whereas quantitative methods measure variables.²⁶ These methods may be used separately or combined, depending on the purpose of the analysis and the expected results of the outcome. Dr. Rafael Popper has introduced the Foresight Diamond (Figure 5) which positions methods based on their main type of knowledge source.²⁷

²⁴ Voros 2003, 12.

²⁵ Aalto & al. 2022, 12.

²⁶ Popper 2008.

²⁷ Universal foresight.

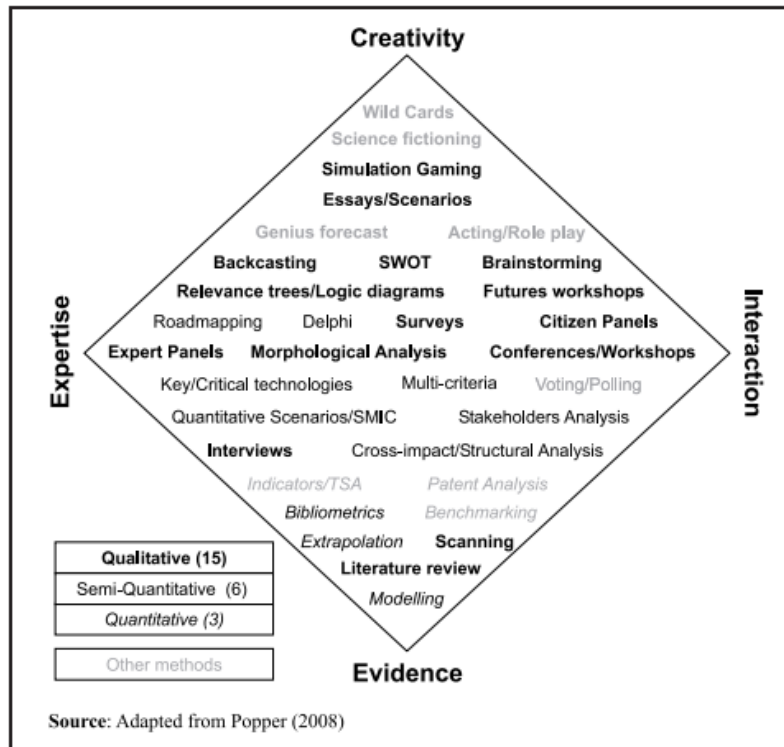


Figure 5. The Foresight Diamond. Popper 2008, 66.

Qualitative methods are expertise-based methods that draw on the knowledge of individuals expertise in a particular field or subject. Quantitative methods apply the similar principles but typically engage more participants than qualitative ones, for example, expert panels. Creativity-based methods rely on imagination, whereas evidence-based methods are grounded on the support of reliable documentation and means of analysis.²⁸

The anatomy of foresight processes

Foresight as a systematic process can be divided into five interconnected and complementary phases: pre-foresight, recruitment, generation, action, and renewal. In the pre-foresight phase, strategic and process-related decisions are made, including the definition of goals and the selection of methods. The generation phase is in the core of the foresight process, as it is the phase in which knowledge is applied and shared visions are created. Exploration, analysis and anticipation take place in this phase.²⁹ The process is illustrated in the *Foresight report for policy- and decision-makers* (Figure 6).

²⁸ Universal foresight.

²⁹ Popper 2008, 66-68.

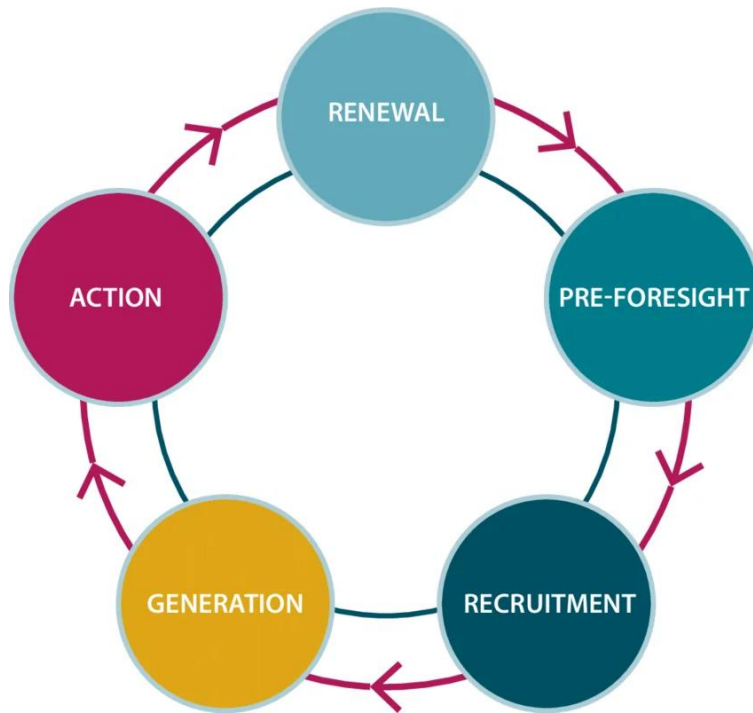


Figure 6. Ian Miles (2002) provided a systemic illustration on the foresight process, outlining the five complementary phases. (Redrawn from Dr Rafael Popper). Leitner, M. & al 2019, 20.

The report *Reference Foresight Scenarios* by the Joint Research Center of the European Commission serves as an example of the generation phase. The report presents the outcomes of a foresight process aimed at developing reference scenarios for the future global standing of the European Union (EU) in 2040. The four reference scenarios are intended to support decision-makers in strengthening their preparedness under uncertainty.³⁰ The four scenarios address the key uncertainties that shape the EU's future.³¹

The scenarios were developed through a participatory process based on the Oxford Scenario Planning Approach, which enables participants to recognise the interpretive frames they use to make sense of the world and to explore alternative frames in different future contexts.³² The scenario development process consisted of four steps: identifying and exploring assumptions, research on relevant issues, scenario development, and validation (Figure 7).

³⁰ JRC 2023, 3.

³¹ JRC 2023, 6.

³² JRC 2023, 8.

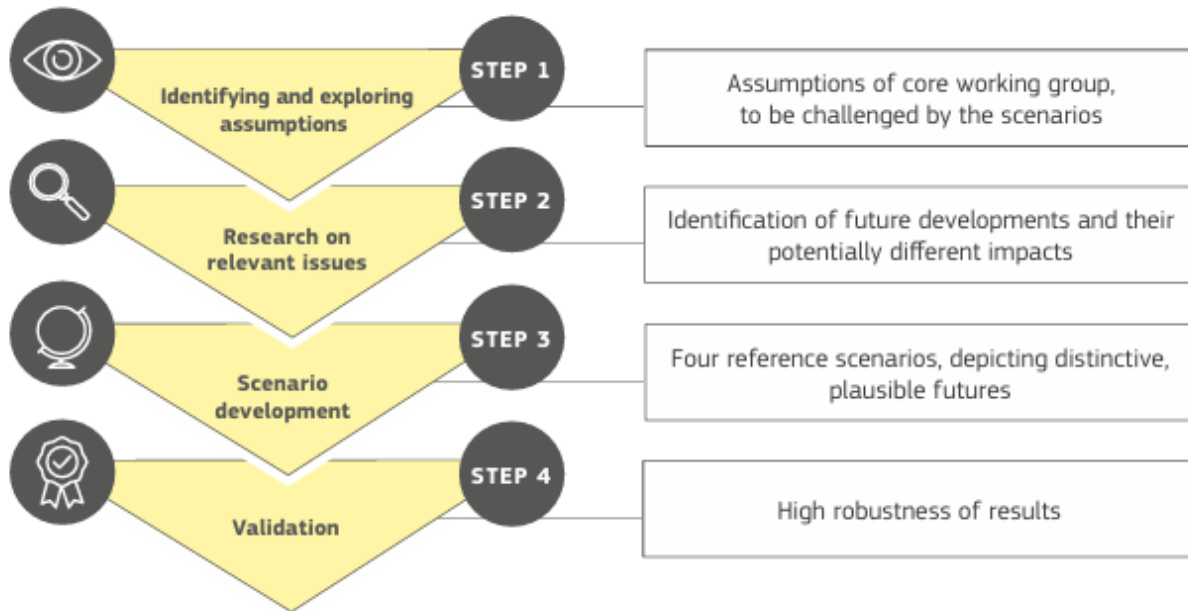


Figure 7. Scenario Development Process. JRC 2023, 9.

Research was carried out in seven identified key areas that will influence the EU’s future development: geopolitics, technology, environmental sustainability, economy, global social values, regulatory environment, and demographics. The research question was: *How could developments in each area impact the standing of the EU in 2040?*³³

After the research, the scenarios were created by assessing five key drivers:³⁴

1. Which social values dominate globally?
2. What is the nature of geopolitical power?
3. How has the global society reacted to environmental degradation?
4. How did the nexus of food, water, energy, and health evolve?
5. Which technologies are predominant?

The scenarios were then examined from the viewpoint of the transactional environment, which allowed considering the broader perspective.³⁵ Key questions for this exploration were: *How does Europe function?* and *What is the situation regarding Europe’s institutional memberships?*³⁶ These questions enabled the consideration of the EU’ and Europe’s position across the different scenarios.

Strategic foresight in public policies

According to OECD, “strategic foresight is an approach that involves thinking about the future systematically and proactively developing strategies in the present to prepare for long-run uncertainty.”³⁷

³³ JRC 2023, 12-19.

³⁴ JRC 2023, 21.

³⁵ JRC 2023, 8.

³⁶ JRC 2023, 24-47.

³⁷ OECD 2025, 14.

According to the JRC, foresight scenarios support decision-makers in identifying and exploring the key uncertainties, thereby enabling them to broaden their perspectives and to decide on the best strategy.³⁸ In other words, strategic foresight involves a systematic review and assessment of the future possibilities and the development of strategies to prepare for the envisioned futures.

Public policies are made to respond to the visions of the future and to create the future that is considered preferable. Public policies have long-term effects, and therefore it is essential to approach them through strategic foresight. The OECD has developed *The Strategic Foresight Toolkit for Resilient Public Policy* (“the toolkit”) to encourage policy makers to explore the possible future disruptions and to evaluate the future-readiness of existing public policies. The OECD has illustrated the process to stress-test public policy (Figure 8).

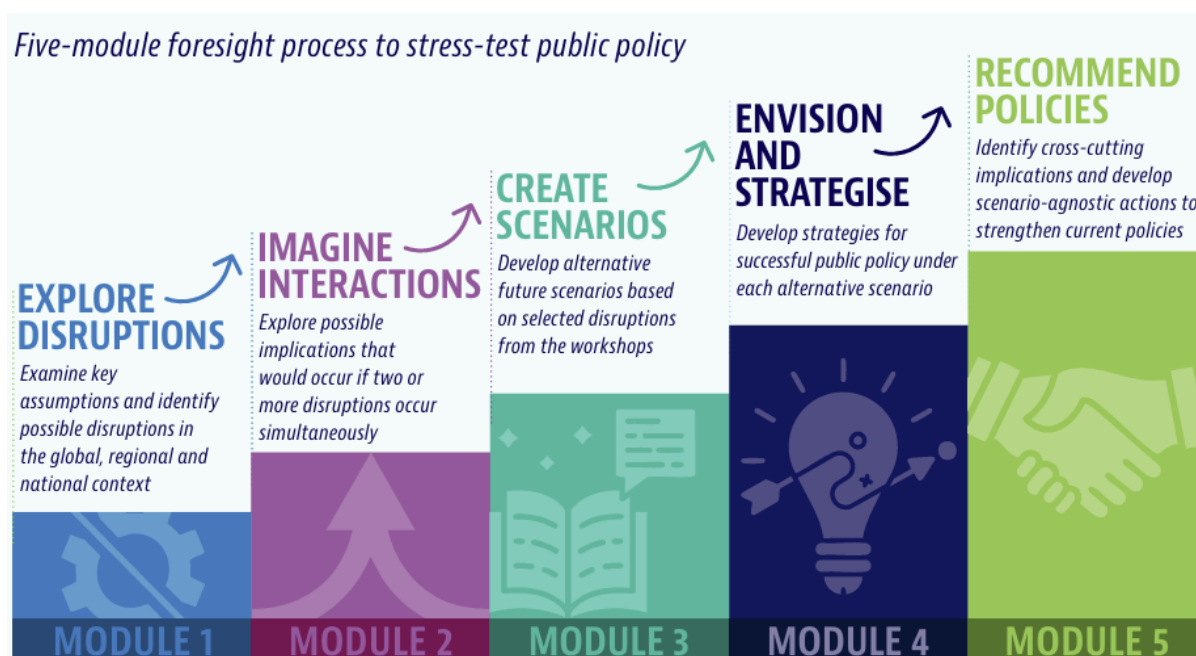


Figure 8. OECD 2025, 16. Five-module foresight process to stress-test public policy.

A concrete example of stress testing was done by the JRC, when after the reference scenarios were complete, participants assessed whether six selected policy options were robust or not in different reference scenarios. The stress-testing process included both a quantitative and qualitative method. First, participants evaluated the policy proposals as positive, neutral, or negative. Second, they discussed their assessments, considered different option’s robustness, and formulated recommendations on how the policy options could be improved.³⁹

Keynote: Introduction to Futures Literacy: an interactive session

The session 2 keynote is held by Yannick Dujardin, Policy Analyst from the European Commission's Joint Research Centre. It is an interactive session, which provides an intro into foresight, what is it and why do it, Futures Literacy, and the use of scenarios for future robustness. [Futures Literacy](#) is an ability, which

³⁸ JRC 2023, 7; 50.

³⁹ JRC 2023, 48-49.

allows people to better understand how today and the future are connected. It empowers the imagination and resilience when changes occur. As a skill, it helps to understand how actions are shaping the future.

The session includes an interactive exercise based on UNESCO's Futures Literacy Lab. In 2023, UNESCO published [a guide](#) for co-designing a lab to explore how and why we anticipate: *the Futures Literacy Laboratory Playbook*. Each FLL uses a co-design and implementation, and UNESCO has outlined a core process that can be adapted to different local contexts and communities. The guide leads teams through the five stages of developing an FLL: 1) starting, 2) co-designing, 3) rehearsing, 4) implementing, and 5) following through, and offers practical tools such as instructions, examples, checklists, and scripts.

Chapter 3: European Union: Preparing for Sustainable Development in Europe Beyond 2030

This chapter focuses on the transformative needs in systemic change required to achieve the SDGs, as well as the risks and opportunities for Europe and the EU in sustainable development beyond 2030.

To achieve the SDGs by 2030, stronger action is needed, drawing on a combination of levers.⁴⁰ The 2019 Global Sustainable Development Report (see Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the Secretary-General 2019) proposed six entry points, which are closely interconnected systems that offer opportunities to leverage synergies across multiple targets and to reduce or resolve trade-offs between them. These entry points are: human well-being and capabilities, sustainable and just economies, sustainable food systems and healthy nutrition, energy decarbonization with universal access, urban and peri-urban development, and global environmental commons.⁴¹

To generate broad transformative impacts across these entry points, the 2019 Report identified four key levers of change: governance, economy and finance, science and technology, and individual and collective action. The 2023 Report added a fifth lever, capacity-building, which is both valuable in its own right and essential for strengthening the other levers. The required capacities identified are:⁴²

- Strategic direction and foresight
- Innovation and generation of new alternatives
- Orchestration, engagement and negotiation
- Identifying and overcoming impediments
- Learning and resilience

Transforming the systems

Dr. Donella Meadows studied systems thinking and system dynamics. Meadows examined the leverage points, the parts of complex systems where a small intervention can produce large changes. Meadows identified 12 places to intervene in a system (in increasing order of effectiveness)⁴³:

12. Constants, parameters, numbers (taxes, subsidies, or standards)
11. Buffer sizes
10. Material stocks and flows (transport networks, pipelines, production facilities)
9. Delays
8. Balancing (negative) feedback loops
7. Reinforcing (positive) feedback loops
6. Information flows (e.g., transparency, monitoring systems).
5. Rules of the system (incentives, punishments, constraints)
4. The power to add, change, evolve, or self-organise system structure
3. System goals
2. Paradigms which the system arises

⁴⁰ Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the Secretary-General 2023, 47.

⁴¹ Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the Secretary-General 2023, 44-46.

⁴² Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the Secretary-General 2023, 46-47.

⁴³ Meadows 1999, 3.

1. Power to transcend paradigms

Considering these leverage points from the EU perspective, Meadows illustrates where to intervene to transform systems. The EU has primarily intervened at the lower levels, for example, in parameters, material stocks and flows, information flows, and rules of the system. These are important actions. However, higher-level leverage points, the system goals, paradigms and the power to transcend paradigms, remain under-addressed.

The EU is committed to the SDGs and they have been mainstreamed into EU policies. Nevertheless, Meadows emphasises that the whole system's goals often differ from what we think we have set. System-level goals are not necessarily the goals articulated: instead, they can be inferred from the system's behaviour.⁴⁴ In addition, Meadows argues that there is a shared mindset in society, which constitutes that society's paradigm: shared social agreement about the nature of reality. According to Meadows, paradigms are the sources of systems and therefore far more difficult to change than anything else about the system. The only thing more effective than the paradigms themselves is the power to transcend them.⁴⁵

Building momentum and transformation

The climate in which the post-2030 will be built is not the easiest one. Limiting global warming to 1.5°C, as set out in the Paris Agreement in 2015, already required unprecedented changes in 2018 according to the IPCC,⁴⁶ and the requirements remain in place today. The world is also falling behind on sustainable development: globally, less than 20 percent of the SDG targets are on track to be achieved by 2030.⁴⁷

Konosuke Matsushita Professor of Leadership from Harvard University, John Kotter, has analysed transformation in organisations, mostly companies. He has identified eight steps which help to explain why transformation efforts fail. In comparison to Meadow's leverage points, Kotter's model of transformational change could offer useful insights. The steps Kotter has identified are not paradigms as such, rather mechanisms to understand how these deeper paradigm shifts could be led in practice.

Kotter has defined eight steps to transform organizations:

1. Establishing a sense of urgency
2. Forming a powerful guiding coalition
3. Creating a vision
4. Communicating the vision
5. Empowering others to act on the vision
6. Planning for and creating short-term wins
7. Consolidating improvements and producing still more change
8. Institutionalizing new approaches

The first error, according to Kotter, is failing to establish a great enough sense of urgency.⁴⁸ As shown in the chapter regarding the current state of the Earth, there is an undeniable need for change and

⁴⁴ Meadows 1999, 16.

⁴⁵ Meadows 1999, 17-19.

⁴⁶ IPCC 2018.

⁴⁷ UN DESA 2024, 4.

⁴⁸ Kotter 2011, 3.

transformation. However, the sense of urgency is not at the same level as it was in the late 2010s. The publication of the IPCC report in 2018 heightened public awareness of climate science and the strengthening of the climate movement, in addition to the worldwide attention for activist Greta Thurnberg, amplified the sense of urgency. In 2019, *climate emergency* was The Oxford Word of the Year.⁴⁹

Other significant errors Kotter mentions are failing to create and communicate the vision, followed by insufficiently empowering others to act on the vision.⁵⁰ The EU has set ambitious goals, such as being climate-neutral by 2050, and visioning a sustainable Europe by 2030 (see European Commission 2019). Despite this, the vision is not as bright and shared as it might have to be in order to be achieved. Across Europe, nations are debating on several matters. According to Meadows, changing a paradigm requires pointing out the anomalies and failures of the old paradigm, as well as inserting the new paradigm in places of public visibility and power.⁵¹

One of the errors Kotter identified was not forming a powerful guiding coalition.⁵² The total population of Europe is almost 750 million, of which 450 million in the European Union. The EU forms the world's largest single market and is the source of 15% of the world's trade in goods,⁵³ which gives it leverage in negotiations. Nevertheless, Europe is facing its own challenges when it comes to the unity that is essential for coalitions to act.

Current challenges that hinder Europe's and the EU's role

The current multilateral system was created almost 80 years ago after the Second World War. After that, the way of living has transformed into something that was not even imaginable in the 1950s. The borders of the states which were in the beginning of the multilateral system have shifted. Some states have disappeared, while new states have emerged. These changes, together with the transformation in the way of living due to, for example, the rapid development of technology and globalisation, have affected the dynamics of the global community.

During the last ten years, and especially during the last five years, Europe and the EU have moved from one crisis to another. To name a few of the recent major crises: Covid-19 Pandemic, Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine and the situation in the Middle East.⁵⁴ All of these have had manifold consequences also on Europe and the EU, such as rising rates of interest as well as prices of gas, oil and energy, and food, which have raised the overall cost of living.

One of the most significant key developments in the European and EU policies is the rising importance of security. Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has changed the perspective on security and the geopolitical situation in Europe.⁵⁵ The changing relationship between Europe and the USA is reflected in their cooperation, particularly in the shifting rhetoric surrounding NATO collaboration. During the Trump administration, the USA signalled a willingness to reduce its commitment to NATO, including President Trump's threats to withdraw support from the alliance and scale back the U.S. military presence in Europe.

⁴⁹ Oxford Languages.

⁵⁰ Kotter 2011, 9-13.

⁵¹ Meadows 1999, 18.

⁵² Kotter 2011, 7-8.

⁵³ European Commission 2025, 2.

⁵⁴ European Commission 2025, 1.

⁵⁵ European Commission 2025, 4.

This is a security threat coming outside of Europe and the EU, which requires unity from them. At the same time, Europe and the EU face significant internal challenges.

Concerns about the erosion of the rule of law have been documented in some EU Member States, while disinformation and information manipulation continue to challenge societies and public trust. At the same time, the increasing polarisation has increased across Europe and poses a major threat to the functioning of democratic systems.⁵⁶ Socio-economic inequalities further challenge social cohesion. In addition, the need to respond to current crises shifts attention toward short-term challenges, which can create tensions with long-standing policy objectives, particularly if these objectives do not translate into geopolitical gains (see Müller, M. 2024).

These internal challenges might constrain Europe's capacity to act cohesively and to deliver the paradigm-level transformations required for sustainable development. They may weaken its ability to lead on sustainable development and to shape what happens beyond 2030. For this reason, it is important that Europe and the EU decide to take on a leading role and develop transformative policies that can be embedded in their own actions. In doing so, they strengthen their ability to promote similar progress at the global level.

One significant paradigm shift shaping the global community has already been widely acknowledged. At the World Economic Forum's Annual Meeting 2026 in Davos, the Prime Minister of Canada, Mark Carney, stated that the old-world structure is not returning (see Carney 2026). This was also noted in the Pact of the Future where it states that the multilateral system is under enormous strain. The Pact emphasises international cooperation and strengthening multilateralism. It calls for the transformation of global governance.⁵⁷ The world is at a turning point, where the global community can agree on the new paradigms that will guide action beyond 2030.

Keynote: Good Governance Processes for Sustainable Development Beyond 2030

The first keynote of session 2 will be held by Patrizia Heidegger, Deputy Secretary General, European Environmental Bureau. The world is off track on many of the Sustainable Development Goals, and leading organisations agree that the post-2030 agenda must be more ambitious, more actionable, and more accountable. Key priorities include addressing planetary boundaries, climate resilience, biodiversity, inequality, tax justice, and social protection, while integrating digital governance and AI ethics. Civil society also calls for stronger global public goods financing, a new global financing compact, a rights-based approach, and a greater role for science, data, and foresight.

The EU has a critical role to play in shaping this renewed global vision. Civil society organisations emphasise the need for EU leadership, genuine partnership with countries globally, strong stakeholder engagement, accelerated SDG implementation within the EU, and advocacy for stronger accountability mechanisms. Proposals for better governance include a Global Sustainability Council, binding commitments in key areas, a global social protection floor, strengthened civic space, and a streamlined global indicator framework. Together, these elements can form a robust and transformative post-2030 agenda.

Keynote: Revitalizing the Sustainable Development Narrative

⁵⁶ EPRS 2025.

⁵⁷ United Nations 2024, 25-26.

The second keynote by Louis Meuleman, Chair of the Stakeholder Forum for a Sustainable Future, addresses the narrative of sustainable development. It's almost 40 years since the term sustainable development was introduced in the European and global political discourse with the 1987 Brundtland Report on 'Our Common Future'. We've seen ups and downs, with the adoption of the SDGs in 2015 as a highlight. But a lot has changed since then. While 'sustainability' has become a quality marker for many businesses, it seems that in politics less comprehensive and holistic concepts are now preferred, such as competitiveness. Sustainable development is officially (and even grounded in the Treaty) still a central goal of the EU – but much less in practice. Moreover, the number of EU member states with an actionable SD strategy seems to have decreased.

Some argue that we should replace sustainable development with a narrative that reflects our time better. But that would be admitting defeat. Sustainable development was never meant to reflect past and present but to offer guidance to achieve a better world. Asking what will happen with the SDGs after 2030 is denying the reality that many societal change processes already have a much longer lead time than 2030. Instead of giving in or giving up we must step up our efforts, and we must do this smartly.

Hence, revitalising the sustainable development narrative is not about changing it. What we need is intelligent mobilisation of actors who are prepared to take the lead. We need government people at all levels of administration to stretch limits and bridge boundaries. We need increased engagement of NGOs, business and science, and innovative local and regional governments to support and collaborate with those in national governments who are fighting against fake facts and democratic backsliding. We need increased engagement at EU level but very much also at UN level. The ['Pocket guide to Environment and Sustainable Development Governance'](#) written by [Stakeholder Forum](#) for UNEP is meant as one of the tools to mobilise [stakeholder engagement for the review of the 2030 Agenda in 2027](#) and for the ongoing [UN80 process](#).

Keynote: The Social Climate Fund: a case study for bridging silos in Europe now and beyond 2030

The last keynote of the platform is about a case study of the social climate fund by Fee Kirsch, Policy Officer – Social Climate Fund, from DG CLIMA, Belgium. What governance processes enable robust sustainable development beyond 2030? How could they look like? There are many answers to designing comprehensive and holistic strategies. But what works in theory might not work in practice. One relatively new policy instrument that might offer practical learnings at both micro and macro level is the Social Climate Fund.

This year marks the start of this Fund that was established to contribute to a socially fair transition towards climate neutrality. By mobilising 86,7 billion euros, it is a first of its kind and scale. In the next 7 years it will address the potential negative social impacts of the new emission trading system for buildings, road transport and additional small industry (ETS2).

The measures and investments of this fund will be financed based on the 'polluter pays' principle, namely by the emitters of greenhouse gases under this new ETS2. In doing so, it is a tool designed to make the distributional effects of carbon pricing more socially just. With the help of thorough targeting, the fund aims to address the most vulnerable segments of the population and the ones most exposed to fossil fuel dependency.

While the Fund only covers part of the sustainable development strategy, it might still provide valuable insights into breaking silos. Beyond its coupling of climate action and social policy, it is also installing safeguards for protecting environmental and gender equality concerns. It is long been clear that social justice and climate policy must be combined in a collective effort. Let's see if we can use what we are currently learning from the implementation of the Social Climate Fund when talking about leaving nobody behind post 2030.

Exchange Spaces: Sustainable Development Plans and Strategies – Priorities for Sustainable Development now and beyond 2030

This chapter focuses on the two Exchange Spaces that will be taking place during the Platform and provides introductions to what will be discussed at each table. The purpose of the exchange spaces is to allow participants the chance to exchange with their peers from other countries on good practice cases. Table leads will present their cases for 10-15 minutes, leaving about 30 minutes for more in-depth discussions with participants. The Exchange Spaces will take place over two rounds, so participants will be able to visit two tables during the Platform. Each table lead will also provide a short summary of the discussions that took place at their table over the two rounds.

Table 1: Romania – Priorities for Sustainable Development now and beyond 2030

Ștefania Deak, ESDN Advisory Board Member, Head of Unit - Coordination, Implementation of Sustainable Development, Prime Minister's Office – Department of Sustainable Development, Romania

Table 1 focuses on the transformations that have occurred since 2018, when Romania's Sustainable Development Strategy 2030 (RSDS 2030) was approved, requiring an update of this strategic document. The approach to reviewing the Strategy also takes into account the OECD recommendation of 2024 to have a national reference framework document to ensure the policies coherence of sustainable development. This strategic exercise represents a reconfirmation of Romania's commitment to the 2030 Agenda and the 17SDGs. The success of this process directly depends on the active and consistent involvement of each ministry, each Hubs for Sustainable Development (HSD) and all stakeholders.

The review process is structured in two major stages.

Stage I: Identification of National Priorities (2030 or post-2030)

The starting point is the identification of sectoral priorities within the line ministries, based on the diagnosis provided by the Voluntary National Report in 2023 and the sectoral strategies coordinated and/or implemented at the level of each ministry or currently being updated. The methodology adopted is rigorous, based on principles of participation (involving HSD, academia, business and civil society) and transversality, aiming to eliminate "silo" approaches by working on thematic clusters.

A key component of the methodology is represented by the HSD Focus Group sessions. These will use the titles "Challenges" and "Next Steps" of each SDG in Chapters 4 of the VNR 2023 as support material to generate an open, critical and creative debate in the sectoral Working Groups, with the aim of identifying and proposing 10-15 sectoral priorities. Subsequently, advanced statistical models (e.g.: Factor Analysis and Cluster Analysis) will be applied to the aggregated priority lists to objectively identify the 5-7 strategic National Priorities of the up-dated RSDS.

Stage II: Review the RSDS 2030 Targets

This stage will continue with an analysis that ensures that each target, assigned to an SDG, is aligned with new National Priorities and reformulated according to SMART criteria. The final result will be a revised strategy, coherent, realistic and, most importantly, aligned with current challenges and Romania's European and global commitments.

The review process was launched on November 19, 2025, during the meeting of the Network of HSD organized at the government headquarters. All 19 HSD were represented by colleagues from all ministries.

At the beginning of April 2026, after the HSD Focus Group sessions, were attended approx. 70 specialists representing all ministries / HSD, over 250 sectoral priorities were collected, which will be included in the analysis of Stage II.

The process is ongoing and is expected to be completed in the fourth quarter of the current year.

Table 2: Finland: National Process for Preparing for Discussions on the Future of Sustainable Development

Taru Savolainen, ESDN Vice President and Secretary General of the Finnish National Commission for Sustainable Development, Prime Minister's Office, Finland

The focus in table 2 will be on Finland's efforts to implement the SDGs and other sustainability targets with a whole-of-government and a whole-of-society approach. These approaches are reflected for example in the way Finland prepared their Voluntary National Reviews presented to the UN in 2016, 2020 and 2025. All government ministries participated in preparing the VNRs, with the Prime Minister's Office coordinating the work. In addition to government assessments of Finland's SDG implementation, the reports include independent views and contributions from a broad variety of stakeholders ranging from civil society organisations to companies, cities and municipalities, academia, youth and independent government and local officials.

With a few years left to really turbocharge the SDGs Finland plans to work with their stakeholders to discuss and collect key learnings and ideas on how to speed up the sustainability transition by 2030 and beyond as well as prepare for dialogue on the future of sustainable development work. Finland is planning a participatory process to be implemented in autumn 2026 in cooperation with key ministries, the National Commission on Sustainable Development, the Development Policy Committee, the Agenda2030 Youth Group and many others.

This exchange table presents preliminary plans for conducting the participatory process and discusses the key steps to consider in the work. Participants are invited to share their views of any similar processes and actively comment on the plan.

Table 3: Slovakia: Process of Integrating Sustainable Development into the Vision and Strategy 2040

Kvetoslav Kmec, Department of Sustainable Development, Deputy Prime Minister's Office for the Recovery Plan and Knowledge Economy, Slovakia

In table 3, there will be a presentation which outlines Slovakia's current efforts to build an integrated strategic planning system, centred on five key initiatives: 1) the Vision and Development Strategy Slovakia 2040, 2) the Investment Plan Slovakia, 3) the National and Regional Partnership Plan for the EU programming period 2028–2034, 4) the Monitoring of Government Performance, and 5) the Central Database of Strategic Documents. Alongside these initiatives, a robust institutional framework is being

established, including the Strategic-Co-ordinating Centre in the Government Office and Strategic-Co-ordinating Units within ministries and other central bodies, ensuring coherent governance and effective implementation.

Table 4: Poland: Developing the new mid-term national development strategy until 2035

Jakub Ruman, Chief Expert in the Department of Strategy, Ministry of Development Funds and Regional Policy, Poland

&

Michał Wielechowski, Expert in the Department of Strategy, Ministry of Development Funds and Regional Policy, Poland

Table 4 will explore the Sustainable Development Strategy of Poland. The focus will be on the structure of the document and implementation system to outline connections with the SDGs. The presentation will include SDG related examples and outline briefly the territorial dimension of the strategy. In addition, the document development process will be introduced, including public consultations, expert consultation, and cooperation with the regions.

Table 5: Implementing the SDGs at the Local Level – Biosphere Parks

Jakob Mohl, UNESCO Commission Youth Delegate, Austria

Table 5 will focus on Austria's example. UNESCO Biosphere Reserves are model regions for sustainable development and play a crucial role in adapting the SDGs to the needs and context of specific localities. As protected areas with an integrative approach, they make a decisive contribution to the implementation of the SDGs at the local and inter-municipal levels in Europe through their diverse activities in the areas of education, nature conservation, sustainable agriculture and business, culture, and research. They serve as testing grounds for sustainable solutions and as sanctuaries for present and future life in harmony with nature and are therefore fundamental to the design of the Post-2030 Agenda.

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