

European Union policy for sustainable development – foundation, perspectives and results during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract: The modern concept of sustainability as incorporated in the UN Agenda 2030 appears to be at the very heart of the EU endeavors under the auspices of the policy for sustainable development. However, the famous ten-year strategy Europe 2020 for a smart, sustainable and inclusive growth just ended and the launched drive for sustainable development seems to be overshadowed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Arguably, the COVID-19 pandemic can be seen as any other crises and thus implying threats as well as an opportunity to get down to true roots and values, and could ultimately lead to a more eager, just and fair sustainable development. Hence, it is instrumental to review the modern EU framework and setting, and to identify and assess key parameters of the EU policy for sustainable development. Consequently, appropriate EU strategies and their 24 initiatives are identified along with all 17 Sustainable Development Goals of the UN Agenda 2013 and, based on that, a holistic and heuristic Meta-Analysis is performed to assess (I) their foundations, including their ethical dimension, (II) current perspectives and (III) results based on indices. This is organically done in the recent contextual teleologism while using simplified Delphi scoring and Eurostat indices and while reflecting the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The result offers a set of valuable inputs leading to propositions that there is a lack of a common foundation, discrepancy in ethical dimension, manipulation in perspectives and, most importantly, a strong fragmentation and artificial tying of desired results, such as the Green Deal and COVID-19. The EU policy for sustainable development is at the crossroads and COVID-19 is an opportunity to become more consistent, legitimate, effective and efficient.

Key words: EU; policy; SDGs; sustainable development.

JEL: K32; M14; O29; O38; O44; Q01; Q56.

Introduction

Modern Western civilization is a complex society reflecting global competitiveness, digitalization and post-industrial features [Balcerzak & MacGregor Pelikánová, 2020; Lafferty 2019]. However, despite its fast evolution marked by a myriad of external determinants, it is strongly marked by its roots tracing back to ancient philosophy, to Christianity and to Roman law [MacGregor Pelikánová, 2017]. Therefore, each and every legal system of a jurisdiction belonging to modern Western civilization, regardless whether sharing the continental law or common law tradition, is in an ongoing manner marked by an ephemeral system of moral principles – ethics. Several kinds of ethics interact [Hooker, 1996; Law, 1999] and regional as well as national preferences for Bentham utilitarian or consequentialist ethics (good results), Kantian deontological ethics (good intentions), Aristotelian ethics (good sense of human life) with arithmetic and geometric perceptions of justice, can be observed. The biblical desire for

a just and ongoing growing prosperity vested in the concept of sustainability acquired a new dimension in 18th century Saxony, where Hans Carl von Carlowitz published his influential book, *Sylvicultura Oeconomica*, about *Nachhaltigkeit*. Consequently, individual responsibility became extended to long-term responsibility vis-à-vis the entire society, in particular the environment and available resources in the forest and wood industry. The *Nachhaltigkeit* got *perpetuitas* dimension and the global and eternal responsibility based on the modern concept of sustainability fully developed in the 20th century [Schüz, 2012]. The United Nations (“UN”) became the top international institution advancing that and the 1st milestone in this respect was the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (“UDHR”). In the 1960s, in a large part of the Western world, there emerged a reinforced interest in social progressive values, along with political awareness under the auspices of “communitarianism”, and in the 1970s, this was transformed into an individualist focus marked by a set of world crises and a general move from Keynesian economic theory to neoliberal theory [Balcerzak & MacGregor Pelikánová, 2020]. This has shaped the modern concept of sustainability and put it on three pillars: environmental, social and economic, while underlying the dramatic need to reconcile available resources as an increasing world population emerged [Meadows et al., 1972; Zikic, 2018]. Again, the UN took the international leading initiative and issued the 2nd milestone - the Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development Report: Our Common Future, prepared by the Brundtland Commission, published as the UN Annex to document A/42/427 in 1987 (“Brundtland Report 1987”) [MacGregor Pelikánová, 2019a]. Nevertheless, the most significant and recent international instrument regarding the concept of sustainability is definitely the 3rd milestone - the UN Resolution A/RES/71/1 from 2015 - Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable development (“UN Agenda 2030”), which brought 17 Sustainable Development Goals (“SDGs”) and 169 associated targets [MacGregor Pelikánová & MacGregor, 2020].

The UN Agenda 2030 is based on the five Ps and is an aspirational plan of action for people, planet, prosperity, peace, and partnership. It is an international law instrument with rather declaratory than mandatory features, with a global nature and ultimately a performance framework arguably difficult to be cascaded to the sub-national and individual business levels [Patel et al. 2017, Galli et al. 2018]. To put it differently, although the UN Agenda 2030 binds only signatory states and is not empowered by a strong enforceable mechanism, the concept of sustainability and SDGs are illusory and futile [Bali & Fan, 2019]

without a universal commitment at all levels – regional, national, local and even individual. An appropriate, and probably the only feasible, model for that is a multi-stakeholder model [Van Tulder, 2017] and cross-sector partnership [Van Tulder et al., 2016]. Consequently, the concept of sustainability with its SDGs needs effective and efficient support by all, and within the context of the EU, the first one is the EU itself with all its policy for sustainable development and for the commitment of businesses via their Corporate Social Responsibility (“CSR”) [Balcerzak & MacGregor Pelikánová, 2020; MacGregor Pelikánová, 2018]. Nevertheless, there are voices that the EU with its policies is not doing enough and that Europeans fail in making adequate provisions oriented towards SDGs [Adshead et al. 2019, Thacker et al. 2019]. There are even propositions that the concept of sustainability with SDGs is merely unrealistic and that the EU policy for sustainable development is a just a declaration without any legal liability [Sroka & Lőrinczy, 2015], detached from the pragmatic and often strong materialistic profit-increasing orientation of EU member states and Europeans [MacGregor et al. 2020a & 2020b]. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic arguably makes this even worse and ultimately the commitment to go for SDGs is falling behind, especially at the local and individual levels [Mansell et al. 2020; Metzker & Streimikis 2020]. Hence, let us identify and assess the European Union policy for sustainable development, and in particular its (I) foundation and (II) perspectives during the COVID-19 pandemic as well as (III) results based on indices. Organically, this can be achieved, firstly, by dealing with the current EU context and listing all key instruments, secondly, setting an appropriate methodology and, thirdly, going over the results, while paying particular attention to (I) foundations, including their ethical dimensions and (II) current perspectives and (III) results based on indices.

Theoretical premises – key EU legislation and strategies for sustainable development

The EU has relatively closely followed the described international law endeavors under the auspices of the UN and embarked on a journey in the name of sustainability, in particular of sustainable development, just at the turn of the millennium. The starting point was the Treaty of Amsterdam, which was signed in 1997 and entered into force in 1999 (“Treaty of Amsterdam”), and significantly amended the Maastricht Treaty on EU (“TEU”). Indeed, the Treaty of Amsterdam is a primary source of the EU law, which brought substantial changes

and, together with the Treaty of Nice from 2001/2003, built the way to the reformative Treaty of Lisbon from 2007/2009. In particular, the Treaty of Amsterdam replaced the existing 7th recital of the TEU with the the following: *"Determined to promote economic and social progress for their peoples, taking into account the principle of sustainable development and within the context of the accomplishment of the internal market and of reinforced cohesion and environmental protection, and to implement policies ensuring that advances in economic integration are accompanied by parallel progress in other fields."* To avoid any misunderstandings, it included as one of the top objectives of the EU *"to promote economic and social progress and a high level of employment and to achieve balanced and sustainable development, in particular through the creation of an area without internal frontiers, through the strengthening of economic and social cohesion ..."*.

The consolidated version of the TEU, i.e. after the reform by the Treaty of Lisbon, states in Art.3 para 3 *"The Union shall establish an internal market. It shall work for the sustainable development of Europe based on balanced economic growth and price stability, a highly competitive social market economy, aiming at full employment and social progress, and a high level of protection and improvement of the quality of the environment. It shall promote scientific and technological advance."* Indeed, the entire EU constitutional trio of primary sources, i.e. TEU, TFEU and Charters, is notorious with its drive to underline the social and environment dimensions [Polcyn et al., 2019].

The command of the sustainable development became projected from the primary sources of the EU law into secondary sources of the EU law, such as Regulations and Directives, as well as in EU strategies, such as the Communication A sustainable Europe for a better world: A European strategy for Sustainable Development – COM (2001) 264 final (*"EU Sustainable Development Strategy"*), the Communication Europe 2020 A strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth – COM (2010) 2020 (*"Europe 2020 Strategy"*) and the EU's Better Regulation Agenda [EC, 2021a]. It got projected even in sectoral policies such as the 7th Environment Action Programme. In addition, the EU has engaged in other activities and endeavors aimed at inspiring and inducing EU member states and ultimately all Europeans towards the concept of sustainability and sustainable development, while fully recognizing the effectiveness and efficiency of the multi-stakeholder model.

The EU has been very consistent regarding the UN Agenda 2030 and its 17 SDGs; indeed, the EU can be perceived as at least their indirect co-author. Further, in 2016, the EU

put out a press release regarding a sustainable development package – Sustainable Development: EU sets out its priorities. Consequently, the EU progresses via two tracks. Firstly, the European Commission commits to mainstreaming the SDG into EU (general or already established) policies and initiatives with all stakeholders while employing a multi-stakeholder Platform. Secondly, the EU launches reflection work on developing further longer-term vision and the focus of sectoral policies after 2020, and reorients the EU budget's contributions towards the achievement of the EU's long-term objectives through the new Multiannual Financial Framework beyond 2020 [EC, 2021b].

The new European Commission, under the presidency of Ursula von der Leyen, has repeatedly emphasized its commitment to the UN Agenda 2030 and has presented an ambitious policy programme to deliver on sustainability in the EU and beyond, across all sectors under the auspices of the European Commission 's holistic approach for sustainability and the SDGs leading to 24 initiatives [EC, 2021c]. Hence, it is highly relevant to identify and assess these initiatives and the ultimate meeting of SDGs via Eurostat indicators [EC, 2021d], i.e. (I) their foundations, including their ethical dimensions, (II) current perspectives and (III) results based on indices. This has to be done in the current setting which is strongly marked by the COVID-19 pandemic [Goniewicz et al., 2020].

Indeed, the discussion regarding the concept of sustainability, sustainable development and value judgements about justice in the distribution and use of resources [Marinova&Raven, 2006] and the meeting of 17 SDGs has been dramatically impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic [Ashford et al, 2020]. Arguably, the slow progress towards these 17 SDGs was magnified by the COVID-19 pandemic [Balcerzak & MacGregor Pelikánová, 2020] and consequently their satisfaction in 2030 is becoming more and more questionable [Filho et al., 2020]. COVID-19 is a disease caused by a version of the coronavirus that appeared in 2019 and was named SARS Covid 2 [Manojkrishnan & Aravind, 2020]. The coronavirus gets its name due its outer peripheral, crown-like, embedded envelope protein, which arguably emerged around 2002 in human beings [Rasool & Fielding, 2010] and its version called MERS in 2012 [Manojkrishnan & Aravind, 2020]. Pursuant to the data presented by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank in August 2020, it has brought a global economic downturn that had not been experienced in at least seven decades, namely the global economy shrunk by 5.2% in 2020 [WB, 2020]. It is proposed that the dynamics of the 1st and 2nd waves, especially in the EU, are worrisome [Kufel, 2020] and it is questionable if the EU manages to perceive, at least

partially, COVID-19 as an opportunity [Goniewicz et al., 2020], and this despite strong and heavily positive statements by the President of the European Commission, Ursula von derLeyen [EC, 2020].

Methodology

The modern concept of sustainability as incorporated in the UN Agenda 2030 appears to be at the very heart of the EU endeavors under the auspices of the policy for sustainable development. However, the famous ten-year strategy, Europe 2020 for a smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, has just ended and the launched drive for sustainable development seems to be overshadowed by the COVID-19 pandemic. A critical review of the modern EU framework and setting reveals a triad of top EU sustainable development strategies, which are inspired by the UN Agenda 2030: EU Sustainable Development Strategy, Europe 2020 Strategy and EU's Better Regulation Agenda [EC, 2021a]. They are distilled into 24 initiatives which, together with 17 SDGs, should be coming close to both completion and satisfaction.

Thus, a holistic and heuristic Meta-Analysis is performed to assess (I) their foundations, including their ethical dimensions, (II) current perspectives and (III) results based on indices. The employment of Meta-Analysis is highly relevant, because it is the technique par excellence for such a study [Silverman, 2013], founded upon the conviction that more information is available than conventionally admitted and realized [Schmidt & Hunter, 2014], especially considering the scientific model of both direct and indirect causality [Heckman, 2005]. The measuring parameters are dual: simplified Delphi method scoring by a panel of three experts with two adjustment rounds [MacGregor Pelikánová, 2019a] regarding 24 initiatives and Eurostat indices regarding SDGs. The interpretation of data is dominated by a descriptive analysis, while using a combination of text analysis, also known as content analysis [Kuckartz, 2014], which makes replicable and valid inferences about texts and is considered an established research method. The teleological approach and the contextual factors, such as COVID-19, are reflected and the Socratic questioning method is employed.

Results

The EU policy for sustainable development has recently culminated in the following 24 initiatives [EC, 2021c], which have different (I) foundations, (II) perspectives and (III) results

based on indices. Therefore, a simplified Delphi method scoring by a panel of three experts was performed and the results are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. The overview of 24 initiatives with respect to the EU policy for sustainable development and their foundations and perspectives

	Foundation pillar	Ethical dimension	Perspective
Communication on a European Green Deal: a new growth strategy to transform the EU... no net emissions of greenhouse gases in 2050.	Environment – Green Deal	Consequential ethics	Long term actionable
Communication on the Annual Sustainable Growth Strategy 2020 ... in integrating the SDGs.	Social	Deontological ethics	Declaratory
Communication on the Green Deal Investment Plan: the EU strategy to boost sustainable public-private financing over the next decade.	Environment – Green Deal	Consequential ethics	Long term actionable
Proposal establishing Just Transition Fund.	Environment – Green Deal Finance	Aristotelian ethics – justice	Bureaucratic
Communication on a Strong Social Europe for Just Transitions.	Social	Deontological ethics	Declaratory
Communication on Shaping Europe’s Digital Future.	Economic	Aristotelian ethics - sense	Visionary, declaratory
Proposal to put into law the objective to make the EU climate neutral by 2050.	Environment – Green Deal	Consequential ethics	Long term declaratory
Coordination of a common European response to the COVID-19 outbreak to tackle the health crisis and cushion the impact of this economic hit and ERA vs CORONA.	Social and Economic – Solidarity, Finance	Deontological ethics	Short term declaratory
Communication on a Union of Equality: Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025.	Social and Economic	Consequential ethics	Short term declaratory
Communication on a New Industrial Strategy for Europe.	Economic	Deontological ethics	Declaratory
A new Circular Economy Action Plan for a cleaner and more competitive Europe.	Economic	Consequential ethics	Declaratory
Communication on an EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030.	Environment – Green Deal	Consequential ethics	Mid-term declaratory commitment
Communication on a Farm to Fork Strategy for a fair, healthy and environmentally friendly food system.	Environment – Green Deal	Deontological ethics	Part of Green Deal

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Joint Communication and the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy for 2020-2024.	Social	Aristotelian ethics - sense	Short-term declaratory
Agenda for sustainable competitiveness and social fairness and resilience.	NA	NA	NA
Package for fair and simple taxation including Communication on an Action Plan for fair and simple taxation supporting the recovery and Communication on Tax Good Governance in the EU and beyond.	Social and Economic – Finance	Deontological ethics	Shortterm declaratory
Communication on stepping up Europe’s 2030 climate ambition: Investing in a climate-neutral future for the benefit of our people.	Environment	Consequential ethic	Declaratory
The New Pact on Migration and Asylum and accompanying legislative proposals and recommendations.	Social	Deontological ethics	Declaratory
Communication on Achieving the European Education Area by 2025.	NA	NA	NA
Communication on a new European Research Area.	Economic	Consequential ethics	Short-term action
Proposal establishing the 8th Environment Action Programme.	Environment – Green Deal	Consequential ethics	Part of Green Deal
Communication on a Renovation Wave.	Environment	Deontological ethics	Declaratory
Communication on a Chemicals Strategy for sustainability.	Environment – Green Deal	Deontological ethics	Declaratory
Proposal for a Directive on adequate minimum wages in the European Union.	Social	Deontological ethics	Declaratory

Source: Own study based on EU information [EC, 2021c]

A cursory overview already reveals that there are two common points of these 24 initiatives – Green Deal and COVID-19. Therefore, these 24 initiatives share different foundations and ethical dimensions, as well as actionability v. declaratory dynamics, and their unifying points are the repeatedly and consistently advanced Green Deal along with COVID-19. This is highly surprising because, conventionally, each pivotal strategy should have a foundation and ethical dimension, both of which are projected in its sub-policies and thus the coherency is reinforced [MacGregor Pelikánová & MacGregor, 2021]. It appears that these 24 initiatives are rather an ad hoc reaction than a planned organized action with the same roots.

Moving to the common points, it is impressive that the Green Deal is present directly in 33% of initiatives (8 out 24) and indirectly almost in 50% of initiatives, while COVID-19 is present directly in 25% of initiatives (6 out 24). Occasionally, these two points overlap, i.e. both are present in the same initiative.

The list of 6 initiatives dealing with COVID-19 includes:

- Coordination of a common European response to the COVID-19 outbreak to tackle the health crisis and cushion the impact of this economic hit and ERA vs CORONA;
- Communication on an EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030;
- Package for fair and simple taxation, including Communication on an Action Plan for fair and simple taxation supporting the recovery and Communication on Tax Good Governance in the EU and beyond;
- Communication on stepping up Europe's 2030 climate ambition: Investing in a climate-neutral future for the benefit of our people;
- Communication on a new European Research Area;
- Communication on a Renovation Wave.

This leads to a burning question – how synergetically can the Green Deal and COVID-19 overlap and interact? In particular, are Green Deal measures helpful in fighting against COVID-19 and are measures against COVID-19 supporting the Green Deal? The rhetoric from the European Commission attempts to overlap with a synergetic interaction, but a mere field observation of what is going in the EU argues against it, see e.g. the use of plastic and disinfection, individual packaging, etc. Ultimately, it seems that there is fragmentation and contradiction not only in foundations and ethical dimensions, but also in perspectives and results. Plainly, R&D is instrumental in the COVID-19 battle as well as for the Green Deal, but only this one true common denominator represents the SDG, which is perhaps the most underplayed by the EU [MacGregor Pelikánová, 2019b]. This is extremely worrisome – in the time of the Green Deal and COVID-19, the EU is still dramatically behind SDG9 and the ratio R&D v. GDP is definitely not getting close to the target of 3%. And what about other SDGs?

The EU policy for sustainable development has been closely tied to 17 SDGs, at least pursuant to the very strong wording of the European Commission [MacGregor Pelikánová et al., 2021]. Therefore, it is highly relevant to have an overview about how these SDGs, based

on indices selected by the EU, are met, i.e what progress was made between 2010 and 2018 [EC, 2021d]. Thusly, Eurostat information about these indices is extracted and summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. The overview of SDGs progress in the EU between 2010 and 2018

SDG	Indice	2010	2018
SDG1: No Poverty	% at risk of poverty	23.9%	21.6%
SDG2: Zero Hunger	Agricultural factor	80	120
SDG3: Good Health and Well-being	Life expectancy	76/83	78/84
SDG4: Quality Education	Early leavers	14%	10%
SDG5: Gender Equality	Gender pay gap	16%	14%
SDG6: Clean Water and Sanitation	People living without sanitary facilities	3%	2%
SDG7: Affordable and Clean Energy Action	Primary energy consumption	97%	92%
SDG8: Decent Work and Economic Growth	GDP per capita	EUR 24 900	EUR 27 610
SDG9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure	GDP v. R&D	1.97%	2.18%
SDG10: Reducing Inequality	Disparities in GDP per capita	EUR 24 900	EUR 30 200
SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities	Overcrowding rate	19%	17%
SDG 12: Responsible Consumption and Production	Resource productivity and domestic material consumption	1.7	1.9
SDG13: Climate Action	Greenhouse gas emissions	87.3	79.3
SDG 14: Life Below Water	Surface of marine sites	150k	450k
SDG15: Life on Land, (16) Peace, Justice	Surface of terrestrial sites	760k	764k
SDG16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions	Death rate due to homicide	1/100 000	0.69/100 000
SDG17: Partnerships for the Goals	Official development assistance	0.41	0.43

Source: Own study based on EU information [EC, 2021d]

Manifestly, certain indices look extremely promising (SDG2, SDG4, SDG13, etc.), while others appear far behind expectations (SDG5, SDG9, SDG 17, etc.). In addition, the nature and foundation of certain indices are highly questionable (SDG 14, SDG15, SDG16, etc.).

However, even more importantly, questions emerge whether the 24 EU initiatives and the entire EU policy for sustainable development are so tightly linked to SDGs as advanced by the EU, especially the European Commission. The total fragmentation and lack of common foundations and ethical dimensions, the chronically underfinanced R&D and overplayed Green Deal concerns lead to contradictions [MacGregor Pelikánová et al., 2021]. Additionally, it can be argued that these contradictions became obvious during the crisis' occurrence – COVID-19 [MacGregor Pelikánová&Hála, 2021; D'Adamo & Lupi, 2021]. The EU and EU businesses fell far behind and the R&D in other parts of the world, benefiting by much stronger private and public support, led to results desperately needed by the EU, see the Pfizer, AstraZeneca and Oxford vaccines. Even worse, the re-distribution and re-sharing across the EU leads to many questions about the true European solidarity. Ultimately, actions speak louder than words and even the most developed rhetoric of the European Commission cannot hide the fact that the EU policy for sustainable development is both fragmented and at the crossroads.

Summary, recommendations

The modern EU framework and setting are complex and the EU policy for sustainable development appears, despite (or due to?) the plethora of rhetoric of the European Commission, very puzzling. Highly ambitiously, the EU engaged in three large strategies and their 24 initiatives, which should ultimately lead to the meeting of all 17 Sustainable Development Goals of the UN Agenda 2030.

However, a holistic and heuristic Meta-Analysis reveals differences in the foundations and in their ethical dimensions. The perspectives are not consistent, the entire setting appears fragmented and only two desired results, the Green Deal and battling COVID-19, appear to be the unifying elements. Nevertheless, organically and with respect to contextual teleologism, the simplified Delphi scoring and Eurostat indices about SDGs, even more discrepancies emerge and ultimately the COVID-19 pandemic assists in showing that the EU policy for sustainable development has serious conceptual flaws. Also, that it unrealistically wants

to reconcile hardly reconcilable (COVID-19 and Green Deal) projects while underplaying the winning ticket for both of them (SDG9 - R&D). It is time to become pragmatic and realistic. Without a common foundation, with a discrepancy in the ethical dimension and manipulation in perspectives, a solid policy can hardly be built. Moreover, it is even more illusory to want to overcome a strong fragmentation by artificially tying the desired results together, such as the Green Deal and COVID-19. The EU policy for sustainable development is at the crossroads and COVID-19 is an opportunity to become more consistent, legitimate, effective and efficient. The first step in this direction should be stopping the issuing of dozens of initiatives and communications, and instead to set a clear and commonly acceptable foundation, be realistic and honest. The EU is at least indirectly a co-author of the UN Agenda 2030 and its 17 SDGs, so it needs to take a more serious approach, at least about SDGs, which are critical for the Green Deal and COVID-19.

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