

16.07.2024      Recommendations

# Building Blocks for a Sustainable Future in the European Union

Joint recommendations from the German  
Council for Sustainable Development and the  
Sustainable Development Solutions Network  
Germany

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## Recommended citation:

German Council for Sustainable Development / Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) Germany (2024): Building Blocks for a Sustainable Future in the European Union.

## I. Initial position and basic principles – Europe in search of the right solutions

The recent European election campaign was shaped by security policy challenges from Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine, economic and financial consequences of the Covid pandemic, migration issues and the controversies around the European Green Deal – including climate, mobility and industrial policy. The result of the European elections has revealed that many citizens voted for extreme, primarily right-wing parties, which did not play a big part in the formation of a majority coalition in the European Parliament in the last legislative period. This can be seen as quite widespread dissatisfaction with the current political situation and the prevailing political powers responsible – at the national and/or European level. This trend applies to both the EU as a whole and to countries like Germany, France, Belgium and the Netherlands. In other member states, extremist parties also suffered losses. But according to the Eurobarometer surveys carried out in the run-up to the European elections, sustainability issues such as the struggle against poverty and efforts towards social cohesion, public health, support for the economy and the creation of new jobs, not to mention climate action, continued to be the topics that EU citizens wanted to top the agenda in the election campaign.<sup>1</sup>

In the coming months, therefore, the members of the newly elected parliament, the future members of the European Commission under the now reelected Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and the governments of the member states on the Council of Ministers will be jostling for the right concepts to effectively tackle the political challenges not only within the EU but also on a global level and to win greater support for the values and goals of the European agreements. This calls for innovative ideas based on trusted scientific findings that have the potential to successfully address the key political challenges.

As part of a dialogue of the scientific advisory boards<sup>2</sup> on 14 February 2024, representatives of the German Council for Sustainable Development (RNE) and of SDSN Germany<sup>3</sup> initiated an expert exchange with representatives of other advisory boards to the federal government. This gave rise to recommendations developed for members of the newly elected European Parliament, members of the future European Commission and members of government on the European Council and the Council of the European Union. The recommendations centre around eleven topic areas that, we believe, are especially important for developing a

<sup>1</sup> See EP Spring 2024 Survey: Use your vote – Countdown to the European elections. Report, p. 6, <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3272> (as at: 3 July 2024).

<sup>2</sup> The dialogue of advisory boards is coordinated by the Science Platform Sustainability 2030 (wpm2030) and the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) Germany.

<sup>3</sup> Also involving the Sustainable Finance Committee.

shared plan for Europe in the coming legislative period that will take us to the end of the decade and beyond.

The EU has absolutely demonstrated a capacity to act in the most recent crises facing it. In the context of the European Green Deal, in handling the Covid-19 pandemic and in response to the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, it worked jointly to get important measures and new instruments off the ground; and the EU institutions can build on these. Nonetheless, the European election campaign, the election result and the current political discussions have shown that the European project of a continent of peace, democracy, security, prosperity and sustainable development is under pressure. From our point of view, the goals of the European Union can only be realised if there is a convincing and deliverable medium- to long-term concept that is supported by a broad majority of political powers and people in the EU. Europe must prove itself, both internally and to the outside world:

- Within the EU, we need to strengthen the rule of law, democracy and societal participation as well as social justice and economic prosperity within our planetary boundaries.
- Externally, the task is to cement and preferably expand Europe's place in the world and its contribution to a peaceful, cooperative international order geared towards sustainable development.

### Europe's chance and its responsibility in the world

In recent years, the EU, with broad political majorities in the European Parliament and the Council of Ministers, has set its sights on becoming climate-neutral by 2050, protecting biodiversity and building a sustainable, circular economy. In 2015, with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Paris agreement, the EU and its member states committed at a global level to an ambitious European contribution to achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the 1.5-degree climate protection target. Other international agreements, such as the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework in 2022, followed.

The SDGs and the international agreements offer a political framework that looks at ecological, social and economic concerns as a whole. However, the EU, but also the international community, are not yet on their way to reaching the goals. This was revealed, for example, by the first voluntary review of the SDGs by the EU in 2023<sup>4</sup> as well as the SDG mid-term review by the European Parliament<sup>5</sup>. Furthermore, in November 2023 the European Parliament enacted proposals to amend the EU treaties which will also help advance the implementation of the

<sup>4</sup> See [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_23\\_3801](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_3801) (as at: 3 July 2024).

<sup>5</sup> See European Parliament resolution of 15 June 2023 on the implementation and delivery of the Sustainable Development Goals. European Parliament Resolution 2023/2010(INI): [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2023-0250\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2023-0250_EN.html) (3 July 2024).

SDGs in the EU<sup>6</sup>. At the same time, at the United Nations' *Summit of the Future* in September 2024, the heads of state and government are set to vote on reforms that would allow accelerated delivery of the SDGs. The EU member states and the EU must position themselves here on some substantial reforms, such as reforms of international economic and financial institutions, the development of a global debt and taxation regime, improved governance of technologies and, not least, beefing up international development and climate financing by some margin.

### EU contributions to achieving the SDGs

If the world is to achieve the SDGs, the Paris climate targets, the goals of the Kunming-Montreal Biodiversity Framework and many other international agreements, the contributions of the EU and the member states to their implementation are crucial. The European Economic Area not only has global clout for itself, but European regulations also influence the behaviour of state and economic actors worldwide. Yet at the same time this regulatory power of the EU is increasingly coming under fire from our international partners in particular. In light of growing geopolitical and geoeconomic tensions, therefore, the EU should now set a clear example to show that it is more committed than ever to the central issues of humanity, especially as embodied in the SDGs and the international climate targets, as well as to a cooperative world order, and that it will systematically tailor its own actions, both internally and externally, towards this vision and coordinate better with its international partners.

In doing so, it is of central importance to resolve conflicting goals and avoid unintentional effects in other regions. A crucial step in this direction is to reinforce sustainability aspects in the EU's trade and investment agreements. In the process, the EU must listen more closely to the voices of its trade partners when drafting and implementing European regulations which impact global value chains.

The challenges in the realm of sustainable development and climate protection are of a global nature and, as such, call for global solutions. In this area, in recognition of its own responsibility in international cooperation, the EU should lead by example. It should be a strong advocate for and champion of respect for international law and should broaden its commitment to a fair and inclusive, rule-based multilateral order.

The interdependencies between changes within the EU and its relations with its southern and eastern neighbours, not to mention its global partners, must also be reflected in its international partnerships. These partnerships should be developed such that all partners have voices and means, also with regard to political initiatives and developments in the EU that are relevant for them. At the same time the EU should meet its global financial obligations in the context of

<sup>6</sup> See Proposals of the European Parliament for the Amendment of the Treaties. Resolution of 22 November 2023 (2022/2051(INL)): [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2023-0427\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2023-0427_EN.pdf) (as at: 3 July 2024).

sustainable development including climate protection, as well as considerably expanding its institutional role in the global financial architecture and driving the reform of multilateral development banks into transformation banks.

### Expansion policy as a key pillar

Sustainable development must also be the guiding theme of EU expansion policy, which brings European nations together in a joint political and economic project. The expansion policy has turned out to be one of the most successful instruments for advancing political, economic and social reform as well as consolidating peace, stability and democracy. At the same time, it strengthens the EU's position at the international level. But, in parallel with new expansions, which also increase the heterogeneity of the EU, there is a need for structural reform – especially in terms of the EU's institutions and financial relationships – so that an expanded European Union still has the capacity to act.

### A foundation of social justice and participation

Growing socioeconomic inequality, discrimination and alienation between different social groups threaten to undermine many of Europe's achievements. Marginalisation of groups can fuel doubts in democratic principles. The work of the EU should consequently focus on the ambition to enable social justice, equality of opportunities and participation for everyone living in the EU.

What's more, politicians at the national and the EU level are jointly responsible for leading discussions around far-reaching social change in a constructive, objective and solution-focused manner in order to avoid division and encourage social cohesion.

With regard to the necessary sustainability transformation, citizens expect the EU and the governments of the member states to implement tangible measures for fairly structuring the transition to sustainability. The necessary changes will also lead to costs in the short and medium term that will differ depending on the sector, region or population group. This being the case, it must be ensured that the transformation is just and inclusive. In particular, people with lower incomes or assets should face less pressure if higher costs come their way as a result of environmental and sustainability policy. Policymakers must therefore make the kind of decisions that consider the impacts of the transformation processes on the different groups in our societies and balance them out.

### Fit for the future: Looking to the thirties of the 21st century

The decisions taken today will have long-term implications for both Europe and our planet as well as our societies. As such, it is important to look beyond the term of office of the new European Parliament and the next European Commission

and into the 2030s and make sure that EU policy is fit for the future from both a social and an environmental perspective.

In the next five years, the European Parliament, the European Commission and the member states will not only have to redouble their efforts towards reaching the SDGs; they should also get involved in developing the global goals beyond 2030, e.g. as part of the UN's next SDG summit due in 2027. The EU should agree early on to play a committed and ambitious part in this process and build global alliances for this purpose.

### Setting the course for key topics

The authors of this paper call upon the members of the newly elected European Parliament and of the federal government as well as all other governments in their roles on the Council of the EU and the European Council to include the above-mentioned principles in the negotiations on the future programme and to involve the members of the new European Commission.

In the following, we present concrete recommendations on 11 key political topic areas, alongside social challenges (equity, integration, circular economy and consumer behaviour), environment-related challenges (pollutants, biodiversity and climate) and the big turnarounds towards sustainability (energy, building, mobility and food system transitions) – as building blocks for a sustainable future in the EU:

1. Strengthen societal cohesion and social justice
2. Enable safe escape routes and migration as well as good integration
3. Invest in a clean and circular economy and regional development
4. Create the framework conditions for sustainable consumer behaviour
5. Enable living in a pollution-free environment
6. Preserve and restore biodiversity
7. Go beyond the climate targets for 2030 and set ambitious new targets for 2040
8. Provide clean, affordable and secure energy
9. Support energy- and resource-efficient building and renovation
10. Accelerate the transition to sustainable and intelligent mobility
11. Create a fair, healthy and eco-friendly food system

### For the German Council for Sustainable Development

Reiner Hoffmann, Chair of the German Council for Sustainable Development

Gunda Röstel, Deputy Chair of the German Council for Sustainable Development

Prof. Dr. Mark Lawrence, Member of the German Council for Sustainable Development

**For SDSN Germany**

Prof. Dr. Anna-Katharina Hornidge, Director of the German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS) and Chair of the Steering Committee of SDSN Germany

Prof. Dr. Gesine Schwan, founder and President of the Berlin Governance Platform and Chair of the Steering Committee of SDSN Germany



## II. Eleven recommendations for a sustainable future in the European Union

In the following recommendations, we first consider the underlying social challenges (topics 1–4), followed by the necessary environmental conditions for sustainable development (5–7) and finally the sector-specific transitions (energy, building, mobility and agriculture (8–11)) that are crucial for achieving the social and ecological conditions necessary for sustainability and for which the EU plays a significant role in the development of policies and regulations.

### 1. Strengthen societal cohesion and social justice

Societal cohesion and social justice in the European Union are under pressure. A political and economic order that is no longer sufficiently associated with social justice is a threat to democracy, acceptance of the European integration project and the willingness to help shape and support change in times of great challenges and crises. Citizens must be included in developing the transformation. Territorial cohesion and engagement for equal living conditions, especially in the context of demographic change, must be expedited in order to develop accepted solutions and level out social hardship in the member states.

Young people play a vital role in the future of the European Union. In our view, their active participation and integration in European processes are hugely important. It is crucial that the voices of the youth are heard in political decision-making process, as they bring fresh perspectives and innovative ideas that can help resolve Europe's present and future challenges. Especially in times of ageing populations in Europe, it is important that those who will be impacted the longest and therefore the hardest by the current decisions and course chosen can play an active part.

#### Recommendations:

- The EU member states should be able to make better use of EU funding programmes like the European Social Fund to support people who are particularly affected by the consequences of the transition – e.g. by providing upskilling and qualification measures and boosting social infrastructure.
- The EU itself should better leverage its options for meeting all forms of discrimination, racism and hate crime head-on, preventively, politically and legally – e.g. through the EU Fundamental Rights Agency and as part of the EU Anti-racism Action Plan 2020–2025.

- To promote the exchange of ideas and information, specific meeting spaces and spaces for civil-society dialogue should be created.
- Proposals for EU measures, their potential effects as well as social opportunities and risks for different sections of the population should be communicated transparently to facilitate open discourse. This includes dialogue with citizens and civil-society organisations on European topics at the European, national and local levels as well as factoring their concerns into EU decisions.
- The EU offers numerous programmes and initiatives, such as Erasmus+, which give young people the opportunity to gain international experience, broaden their skills and educational horizons and develop intercultural expertise. These measures not only boost the personal and professional development of young people, but also strengthen cohesion and understanding within the Union; as such, they should be further expanded and supported.
- Furthermore, important European participation processes should be sure to include youth representatives moving forward.

## 2. Enable safe escape routes and migration as well as good integration

Europe relies on immigration to cover its labour requirements. This situation calls for more legal immigration routes for skilled and unskilled workers, accompanied by a more welcoming culture and equal access for migrants to core areas of communal life. The aim is for regulated, fair and rights-based migration, which also looks at the interests of the migrants and their countries of origin.

At the same time, Europe has a legal and humanitarian responsibility to refugees. In light of numerous trouble spots around the world, not to mention advancing climate change, the EU and Germany must continue to be prepared for persistently high refugee flows and have corresponding absorption capacities available. In implementing the EU's new Pact on Migration and Asylum, member states must comply with constitutional standards as well as human and refugee rights law.

The topic of migration should also play a key role in climate foreign policy and development policy. The EU should help people to stay in their home countries or regions, by, among other things, providing humanitarian aid locally and in first countries of asylum and supporting measures for climate adaptation and economic development.

The successful admission and integration of skilled and unskilled immigrant workers and their families as well as vulnerable groups relies very much on the support of the local economy and civil society. Corresponding structures, especially at the municipal level, should be valued politically and given targeted support. At the same time, the EU and its member states are under enormous pressure to act if they want their populations to accept or welcome this policy. Yet the solution does not lie in renationalisation, but instead should be sought in effectively controlling migration and demonstrating European cooperation and

solidarity on issues of asylum; prompt integration of immigrants and the aforementioned focus on social justice are likewise key when it comes to acceptance.

### Recommendations:

- In the process of implementing the new Common European Asylum System, effective access to protection and independent legal advice should be opened up for refugees; furthermore, decent accommodation should be guaranteed and comprehensive human rights monitoring should be established at the EU's external borders.<sup>7</sup>
- The solidarity mechanism must be put to good use; corresponding pledges by member states should be called in based on the planned monitoring.
- In the interests of solidarity and a fair distribution of responsibility when it comes to international protection for refugees, the EU resettlement framework should be used to increase resettlement quotas.
- Cooperation with third countries should be intensified, for instance through migration agreements with the EU. These should provide for mutual interests and deal with different aspects of migration together, such as return obligations and the opening of regular access routes.
- In view of demographic developments and labour-market needs, the member states – with support from the EU and in partnership with countries of origin – should continue to refine migration routes, in terms of both quality and quantity, for the purpose of employment as well as training and development.
- With regard to the challenges posed by climate change, the EU and the member states should road-test innovative migration-policy instruments. Examples could include a “climate passport” for cases of (impending) loss of territory, a “climate card” for quota-based humanitarian admission or a “climate working visa” as an adjustment strategy in the field of labour migration.<sup>8</sup>
- Finally, the Global Compact for Migration and the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) should be integrated into the EU's migration and refugee policy as orientation guidance. They should also be considered in setting the direction beyond the 2030 Agenda, in order to ensure a coordinated and solidarity-driven approach to global migration and refugee questions.

<sup>7</sup> See Expert Council on Integration and Migration, [Continuity or paradigm shift? Integration and migration policy in recent years](#), SVR Annual Report Summary 2024, p. 57ff.

<sup>8</sup> See German Advisory Council on Global Change (WBGU), [Just & In-Time Climate Policy: Four Initiatives for a Fair Transformation](#), 2018, p. 24ff as well as the Expert Council on Integration and Migration, [Climate change and migration: What we know about the connection and what options there are for action](#), SVR Annual Report Summary 2023, p. 115ff.

### 3. Invest in a clean and circular economy

As part of its Green Deal, the EU defined a set of initiatives to maintain the global competitiveness of its economy and advance sustainable development. A core aspect is the promotion of a circular and emission-free economy along with regional development that aims to reduce its environmental footprint and put the brakes on climate change. The deal also recognises that only a resilient and future-proof economy will be able to compete on a global scale, attract capital and create jobs.

In this context the financial sector plays an instrumental role in the transition to a sustainable economy. A sustainable financial market provides capital in particular for investments in resilient, renewable and future-proof technologies and processes. In recent years the EU Commission has developed a whole host of new regulations for businesses in the financial and real economies to promote transparency, standard-setting and comparability and to direct capital into sustainable and resilient sectors of the economy.

The new EU Commission will have to critically evaluate the current financial regulations in order to review their socio-ecological impact and cost-benefit relevance. This process must ensure that the regulations meet the needs of both society and the environment and effectively support financing the transition.

At the same time the EU Commission has at its disposal a varied body of regional policies, which can be the springboard for clean and circular-oriented spatial development and should be realigned accordingly.

#### Recommendations:

- The *Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM)*, the *Raw Material Act* and the *Net-Zero Industry Act* should be implemented as quickly as possible to speed up the transition to a climate-neutral economy, enable sustainable and transparent access to raw materials and guarantee a ramp-up of transformation technologies. The dialogue around effective and equitable implementation of these measures should be continued with the EU's international partners.
- In keeping with the proposals of special reporter Enrico Letta, the EU should review its subsidy regulations to ensure it remains competitive with other economic regions. It should be possible to better support small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) so that they can do their bit for sustainability, for example by introducing an EU-wide mechanism for state subsidies.
- The idea of a circular economy must be supported by expanding eco-design requirements and the right to repair to include additional product

- groups. Standardisation, too, will help reduce resource consumption and the amount of waste produced.
- Towns and regions should be established as space-based frameworks for the circular economy, cooperation between town and countryside as an instrument of circular spatial development should be expanded and corresponding promotional initiatives enhanced (Circular City, Circular Region, urban-rural partnerships etc.).
  - The areas of sustainable finance and sustainability reporting should be refined under the premise of coherence and effectiveness, so that regulations like the *Sustainable Finance Disclosure Regulation (SFDR)*, which aims to avoid *Principal Adverse Impacts (PAI)*, the *Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD)*, the *European Sustainability Reporting Standards (ESRS)* based on it, and the EU taxonomy can be used efficiently and effectively. This also includes promoting support and standardisation systems for companies, especially SMEs, such as the German Sustainability Code.
  - The EU should develop a coherent and internationally compatible framework for transition plans. Furthermore, the European Markets in Financial Instruments Directive (MiFID II) should be updated such that more private capital flows than before are channelled into sustainable investments.
  - It is crucial that the EU consistently adjusts its support programmes according to their socio-ecological impact and how well they serve the transition; also that the European Central Bank (ECB) takes steps to promote green investments and aligns its monetary policy with the SDGs.

#### 4. Create the framework conditions for sustainable consumer behaviour

To facilitate the transition to a sustainable and resource-efficient economy and spatial development, it is essential to create suitable EU-wide framework conditions for sustainable consumer behaviour. Such behaviour helps to reduce the burden on the environment, lessen our ecological footprint and improve the quality of life in the cities and regions of Europe in the long term.

Information on the ecological and social consequences of certain behaviours and products, along with easy-to-understand labelling of sustainable products and alternative services, can help consumers with their purchase decisions. But information tools alone are not enough. Environmentally friendly consumer behaviour requires suitable offerings and infrastructure, not to mention economic incentives and regulatory instruments as well.

In addition, intelligent regulation of the production side plays a key role, as do fostering innovations and supporting companies to develop sustainable products and services.

### Recommendations:

- Beyond this, tax concessions for sustainable products and services can be introduced to make the purchase and use of sustainable options more attractive.
- The introduction of EU-wide sustainability labels for major product categories can provide consumers with clear information on the environmental impact and social aspects of products and help them to make informed decisions. An ESG (Environmental, Social and Governance) scale for all financial products would help private investors decide which to choose.
- European law should allow for the labelling of products from regional circular economies and from urban-rural partnerships, with targeted support for the development and marketing of such products.
- The data architecture, too, should be geared towards the circular economy and sustainability. If the sustainability impact of products can be compared over their whole lifecycle, this can encourage sustainable action. At the same time, the digital product passport should be part of an overall framework for economic and consumer policy at the European level.
- The EU and its member states should highlight the added value of the circular economy for consumers and businesses in their communication. Consumers can actively co-create the circular economy and should be able to harness individual benefits, such as repair options. Companies should be supported to implement sustainable business models with the digital product passport.
- As part of upgrading the regulatory framework for the platform economy, online marketplaces should be obligated to help consumers make sustainable purchase decisions with a sustainability-oriented platform design (“sustainability by design”), e.g. through information on sustainability aspects of products, corresponding filter options in recommendation systems and a sustainable arrangement for managing returns.

### 5. Enable living in a pollution-free environment

The quest for a pollution-free environment is mission-critical for the health and wellbeing of all life on our planet. In a world under threat from various forms of environmental pollution, it is essential to take action that guarantees a healthy and pollution-free environment for current and future generations. Hence it is vitally important to slash the use of chemicals that can harm people or the environment and the release of pollutants in the EU, and to promote eco-friendly

alternatives. Equally, the EU has the momentous task of tightening environmental pollution limits and ensuring compliance.

In the field of chemicals policy, recent years have seen a number of positive developments that should now be continued. In particular, the EU's action plan "Towards Zero Pollution for Air, Water and Soil" and Chemicals Strategy for Sustainability towards a toxic-free environment have helped raise awareness of the risks of chemicals and initiate measures to reduce their impact. In the following, we propose primarily measures that should be actioned as part of the chemicals regulation REACH. REACH is an important framework for the regulation of chemicals in the EU; its update should aim to boost protection of the environment and human health and at the same time bolster the innovation capacity of European industry.

The proposed measures should likewise strengthen the international competitiveness of European enterprises in their role as global pioneers of low- or zero-pollution business models, for example providers of alternative products. A stable regulatory framework must be created for companies, with interim rules for problematic substances. The red tape they face should be kept in check.

#### Recommendations:

- A core aspect in the regulation of chemicals is to reduce the information deficit around them. If the requisite information on chemicals is lacking, there must be adequate provision for penalties. What's more, it is vitally important to create a central database to allow authorities and the public better access to relevant information.
- In addition, the precautionary and efficient assessment of chemicals must be improved. This requires adequate provision of resources and expertise for independent scientific bodies and authorities, so that they can thoroughly assess the risks posed by chemicals.
- Furthermore, better assessment of the environmental and health risks of chemical mixtures should be enabled. This should be done by establishing, within the scope of REACH, an additional assessment factor that takes a closer look at ecological and health threats from chemical mixtures in the environment.
- Finally, the procedures for restricting the use of chemical substances and substance groups that can harm people or the environment should be simplified within the framework of REACH. To this end, the so-called generic approach should be extended to include further substance groups that are potentially hazardous to health and the environment.
- Per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) should be regulated as a substance group, with the aim of restricting all unnecessary applications of PFAS in order to minimise their far-reaching health and environmental risks.

- As the use of secondary raw materials is ramped up as part of a circular economy, the foundations must be laid for pollutants to be removed as efficiently and effectively as possible. But the regulations for pollutant testing of secondary raw materials should be designed such that they favour the use of recyclates over that of primary raw materials.
- The efforts of recent years to further tighten limits for all known air pollutants, especially to align with the WHO recommendations, must continue.

## 6. Preserve and restore biodiversity

Delivering on all 23 targets of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework is critical for the protection of biodiversity and the preservation of our environment. By signing the agreement, the EU committed at an international level to ambitious biodiversity targets as well as comprehensive financing.

Reaching these targets calls for a concentrated effort at the national, European and international levels. The EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 sets out tangible goals and measures to halt the loss of biodiversity and protect Europe's nature. This includes the creation of green corridors, the restoration of nature on agricultural land, promoting eco-agriculture and combating invasive species, and reducing both environmental pollutants and the impact of climate change. The EU needs to actively expedite the delivery of its strategy. This also means increasing its funding and specifically investing in programmes that aim to promote nature reserves, restore degraded ecosystems and support the sustainable use of natural resources.

### Recommendations:

- A crucial step is to invest ten percent of the EU's Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) in nature conservation. This quota – which is already in effect – must also be included in the next MFF. In parallel, a separate financial instrument must be created for nature protection by consolidating all conservation-related funding measures.
- To restore degraded ecosystems on land and sea, the Nature Restoration Law should be swiftly implemented.
- With land-relevant policies, the EU should change course so that its objective of net-zero land consumption can be achieved by 2050. This means transitioning to a mandatory objective for all relevant EU programmes as well as supporting implementation steps from the respective programmes in the countries and regions of the EU.
- Throughout the EU, the protection and restoration of intact ecosystems in their function as natural carbon sinks – as a particularly effective and



cost-efficient measure for climate change mitigation – should be put front and centre in biodiversity and climate protection strategies.

- Furthermore, the ratification and effective implementation of the UN High Seas Treaty, agreed in March 2023, is hugely important for biodiversity protection, specifically in areas beyond national jurisdiction. The EU should fast-track the treaty's ratification and action its measures to protect and preserve biodiversity in our oceans.
- Apart from that, the EU Commission should push the member states harder to effectively implement the Habitats Directive, Birds Directive, Water Framework Directive and Marine Strategy Framework Directive.
- Finally, the EU's financial institutions should support the consideration and measurement of biodiversity targets when it comes to investments and loans (e.g. via the CSRD).

## 7. Go beyond the climate targets for 2030 and set ambitious new targets for 2040

To tackle the pressing challenges of climate change, the EU has defined targets for 2030, including reducing greenhouse gas emissions, expanding renewable energies and enhancing energy efficiency. But in order to achieve the targeted climate-neutral economy and energy supply by 2050, we need to look beyond to the next steps. That is why the EU must now set out ambitious climate targets for 2040 that will both incentivise a swift transition to a climate-neutral economy and, where necessary, specifically regulate it. Furthermore, we need to take concrete measures towards a gradual exit from fossil fuels and promote renewable energies. In the transport and building sectors in particular, as well as in urban and regional development, we need to see redoubled efforts through investment in innovations and technologies that help reach the climate targets and at the same time make the European economy more competitive on the global stage. Plus, we need investment in natural carbon sinks, so we can better understand their contribution to climate protection as well as protecting the environment more generally, and boost it where possible. To achieve the climate targets, almost all socioeconomic scenarios indicate that *carbon dioxide removal (CDR)* in various forms (both abiotic – or non-biological – and biomass-based approaches) must be established on a large scale at the EU level in the coming decades in order to offset unavoidable emissions, such as those produced by agriculture. To enable this in a socially fair and eco-friendly way, we need intensive research and more testing right now as well as societal discussions around prototypes.

Strengthening international cooperation on climate action is imperative. This includes new collaborations in the field of renewable energies, including importing electricity, hydrogen or derivatives into the EU, but also supporting developing countries as they adapt to the consequences of climate change and the transfer to climate-friendly technologies.

### Recommendations:

- The expansion of the EU Emissions Trading Scheme (EU ETS) to transport and heating energy from 2027 and, in the medium term, to agriculture and forestry must be consistently implemented. This should be flanked by compensatory measures at the national level to avoid social hardship for people on lower incomes. The EU should put forward recommendations for such compensation measures.
- It is important to include upstream emissions in the EU ETS to guarantee comprehensive recording and reduction of greenhouse gas emissions along the entire supply chain.
- The regulation on land use, land-use change and forestry (LULUCF) should be implemented and extended to include CDR measures based on biomass to facilitate sustainable management of land and forest areas. A certification system needs to be set up for biomass-based CDR measures to ensure that they are contributing effectively to the long-term removal (on time scales of hundreds of years) of CO<sub>2</sub> from the atmosphere and are acknowledged accordingly.
- A core element of climate-neutral urban and regional development has to be the strategy of *transport-oriented development (ToD)*, which ties new settlement activity in with the rail network, thus reducing emissions from land consumption and mobility. At the same time, approaches involving regional partnerships for sustainable spatial development must be encouraged.
- The creation of closed emission cycles should be promoted to allow carbon reuse and the reduction of emissions within the production systems.
- Research on carbon capture and storage (CCS) as well as carbon capture and utilisation (CCU) exclusively for branches of industry that are especially hard to decarbonise should be stimulated at the EU level. Not only should the technologies for capture and use of CO<sub>2</sub> be developed further and their scope of application be explored, but also the economic aspects and especially social acceptance should be discussed.

### 8. Provide clean, affordable and secure energy

The EU must continue to pursue ambitious targets in the energy policy arena to guarantee a clean, affordable and secure energy supply. The integration of its national energy markets should result in efficient use of raw materials and greater security of energy supplies.

Another key objective is the decarbonisation of the electricity sector. This will require a trebling of renewable energy expansion in all EU member states by 2030 and a doubling of energy efficiency measures.

### Recommendations:

- Implementing the *Trans-European Networks for Energy (TEN-E)* policy is pivotal to the integration and modernisation of the European energy infrastructure. Expanding cross-border energy connections can eliminate shortages, improve security of supply and facilitate the exchange of renewable energy sources.
- Revision of the Energy Taxation Directive is another important step towards creating fair competitive conditions in the energy sector. Harmonising energy tax rates can reduce market distortions and create incentives for eco-friendly energy use.
- Promoting the expansion of renewable energies in the EU and around the world in partnerships is crucial for overcoming the global challenges in the field of climate change and sustainable development. Investing in renewable energies can reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, strengthen local communities and increase energy security.
- Europe's regions as drivers and pioneers in the transformation should support a decentralised, circular-oriented energy transition, and competition for regional innovations in sustainable energy production and supply should be encouraged.
- The expansion of European and international energy and climate partnerships, especially around green hydrogen, is an important approach to underpin the decarbonisation of the energy sector.
- To live and manage our economies within planetary guard rails in the long term and to meet our future energy requirements with renewable energies, we need to see not just energy efficiency and decarbonisation but also a sufficiency strategy that actually reduces the consumption of energy and other resources in absolute terms.

### 9. Support energy- and resource-efficient building and renovation

The revision and adoption of the EU's Energy Performance of Buildings Directive in April 2024 constitutes a major step towards a more sustainable and more climate-friendly future in Europe. Moreover, the EU should systematically pursue the existing target of scaling back land consumption to net zero by 2050. This means that the total area used for housing and transport will not increase further. New utilisation of land should be offset elsewhere, e.g. by unsealing and rewilding.

### Recommendations:

- To improve energy efficiency and support the transition to more sustainable energy systems, it is advisable to speed up the expansion of municipal heating planning and grids, also with EU funding, and to swiftly decarbonise the heat production this requires.
- Also critical are EU-wide emission standards for heating in order to minimise the environmental impact from the operation of heating systems. Setting mandatory emission limits will encourage the use of green heating technologies and improve the air quality in urban areas.
- Over and above this, the implementation of measures towards net-zero land consumption by 2050 is imperative to reduce the negative consequences for people and the environment. These include land recycling to make land reusable, supporting a regional land assembly policy as well as introducing multifunctional land-use concepts, but also reducing the living space per capita through integrated housing and open-space strategies. It should be possible to support such concepts via EU funding programmes.

## 10. Accelerate the transition to sustainable and intelligent mobility

Given the challenges of the transport sector, we recommend that the EU develops a comprehensive framework strategy for transportation policy that integrates measures to support sustainable urban and rural mobility both geographically and across policy areas.

The EU should also work on the concept of a mobility guarantee that is independent of living location. Such a guarantee should be amplified through investment in the regional and cross-border transport and service infrastructure and by leveraging the potential harboured by digitalisation. Greater transparency around the quality of the public transport service outside the cities can help ensure affordable mobility that meets users' preferences and critically support it.

### Recommendations:

- Developing cross-border mobility offerings for both local and long-distance transport is key to improving mobility within the EU and simplifying exchange between member states. This could be achieved by creating common standards, harmonising fares and promoting cross-border transport links.
- The EU should support the electrification of the rail network and create incentives for investment in modern, low-emission trains.
- Measures to increase the share of rail cargo to at least 25 percent by 2030 are necessary to reduce congestion on the roads and minimise environmental pollution. This requires investment in the cross-border rail infrastructure and funding for intermodal transport solutions.
- The EU should create incentives for developing a continent-wide network of charging stations in order to reduce range anxiety among electric vehicle users and increase acceptance of electromobility.

## 11. Create a fair, healthy and eco-friendly food system

In view of the pivotal role played by agriculture in tackling numerous environmental crises such as biodiversity loss or climate change, the EU urgently needs to rethink its Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). An eco-friendly agricultural and food system with long-term security can also spark changes in consumer behaviour. Moving forward, the CAP must help people cope with the transition to a sustainable food system in the EU and enable European farmers to do their crucial bit for the EU's climate and biodiversity targets and protect the environment. This transition must not lead to distortions in the global food system. The human rights approach as an overriding principle along with environmental and social standards must be internationally respected when it comes to demand, production and the supply chains. The EU member states must now be guided in their updating of the CAP by the comprehensive and necessary target systems of the Farm to Fork strategy and the biodiversity strategy and translate the objectives formulated there into political action. Both strategies recognise that a healthy society is inextricably linked to a healthy natural world. As well as the necessary convergence processes between the member states, the CAP must also focus considerably more spending on maintaining biodiversity and transforming agriculture.

### Recommendations:

- Public money within the scope of the CAP should now only be spent on the provision of public goods, with refuges for biodiversity, such as field-edge structures and fallow areas, playing a special role.
- To allow the EU's ecosystems to recover, we urgently need a reduction in the use of pesticides, but especially in the negative environmental impact they incur. Building on the ideas of the Farm to Fork strategy, a new proposal for pesticide reduction should be introduced and adopted, possibly with certificate trading for pesticides.
- Agricultural production within the EU should be more sharply focused on supplying the internal market, while exports must be brought into line with the viability of the global agroecological systems. At the same time, the dependence of EU agriculture on imports of soft commodities must be reduced if these can be produced more sustainably within the EU. Similarly, it must be ensured that comparative cost advantages of the poorest countries in the production of agricultural goods and their trade preferences for exports into the EU must not be undermined by European agricultural policy measures.
- Demand for protein animal feed must be covered by expanding EU-wide feed production, although consumers should at the same time be encouraged to consume fewer animal products. A corresponding European protein strategy has been in discussion for decades without success; this

must at long last be resolved and implemented. Policy steps must be taken that allow Europe to become a role model in simultaneously working towards the raising of standards worldwide.

- New technological processes can play a role in the necessary transition to a sustainable food system, provided the precautionary principle is upheld and there is a general benefit for society. We therefore need to see more research funds directed also towards the development of integrated, agroecological and technological approaches.
- Regional strategies and concepts for implementing the Farm to Fork strategy must be promoted, with the existing funding apparatus being systematically enhanced.

### III. Overview of selected position and statements

Guillaume Lafortune, Grayson Fuller, Adolf Kloke-Lesch, Phoebe Kourdouris & Angelo Riccaboni (2024). European Elections, Europe's Future and the SDGs: Europe Sustainable Development Report 2023/24. Paris: SDSN and SDSN Europe, Dublin: Dublin University Press.  
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## About the German Council for Sustainable Development

The German Council for Sustainable Development (RNE) advises the Federal Government on issues of sustainability policy. It acts in this capacity as an independent entity, and since 2001 its members have been appointed every three years by the Federal Government. The Council consists of 15 public figures, comprising individuals from civil society, the business sector, the scientific community and the political arena. It has been chaired since 2023 by Reiner Hoffmann and his deputy, Gunda Röstel. The Council also carries out its own projects aimed at advancing the topic of sustainability in practical terms. In addition, it helps shape topically focused momentum within policy and societal dialogue. The Council is supported in its activities by an administrative office based in Berlin.

## About the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) Germany

Funded by the federal government, the Sustainable Development Solutions Network Germany (SDSN Germany) promotes engagement for sustainable development in Germany, the EU and at the international level. It brings together perspectives from leading German scientific organisations, civil society (science-civil society-policy interface) and business and develops potential solutions for the effective implementation of the 2030 Agenda, its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Paris Agreement.

## Imprint

German Council for Sustainable Development (RNE)  
Office c/o Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit  
(GIZ) GmbH  
Potsdamer Platz 10  
10785 Berlin  
Germany  
↳ [nachhaltigkeitsrat.de](http://nachhaltigkeitsrat.de)

SDSN Germany  
German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS)  
Tulpenfeld 6  
53113 Bonn  
Germany  
↳ [sdsngermany.de](http://sdsngermany.de)