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The elephant in the room: the Sustainable Development Goals

Alison Coleman · Monday, September 25th, 2017

It's been two years since the adoption of the [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs). On September 25, 2015 the EU signed on to these aspirational international development targets to create a better, more equal and sustainable future. The SDGs unlike previous development targets, for the first time acknowledged the universality of the problems we face and the need to tackle them together. The Goals also recognised that ensuring justice, stopping illicit financial flows, ending corruption and bribery are critical to achieving sustainable development.

Over the last two years, the EU has made some progress on re-shaping its external policies to reflect the SDGs from the [Global Strategy](#), to the new [Consensus on Development](#), to the recently adopted [European Fund for Sustainable Development](#). It is no surprise that as a successor to the [Millennium Development Goals](#) (MDGs), the SDGs are being taken up quickly by the development and foreign affairs arms of governments – as the MDGs focused solely on developing countries.

However, the universality of the SDGs seems to be causing greater teething problems, with the EU lagging behind in formulating an overarching plan for implementation. To date, there has been a [Communication on Next steps for a sustainable European future](#), which was a compilation of what the EU is already doing but lacked any clear vision or plan for how the EU could achieve the entire 2030 Agenda.

Later this year Eurostat will release the first report on monitoring of the SDGs in an EU context – but this report can hardly be called ambitious as it will only look at 100 targets out of 169. Yet, while it may provide an overview of SDG progress at EU level, it appears that it will fall short in assessing what really matters: the difference that the SDGs can make in the everyday lives of people.

In 2018 the European Commission plans a reflection Paper 'Towards a Sustainable Europe by 2030'. Whether this will include an overarching EU Sustainable Development Strategy that includes both internal and external action, including a plan of implementation, with concrete targets and timelines, seems doubtful.

Looking at Goal 16 ([Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions](#)) the EU has in the past two years actually stepped backwards in its attempts to measure and tackle corruption. This year the EU cancelled plans to release a second [Anti-Corruption report](#) which would have provided a comprehensive overview of the state of corruption in the Member States.

This work will now continue as part of the Commission's annual dialogue with Member States on economic reforms (the "European Semester"), not exactly a universal agenda however as this process only addressed corruption in eight Member States in 2016. The anti-corruption report would have been a better vehicle for the EU to stay ambitious and provide leadership in measuring and tackling corruption.

As we move into the third year of implementation, if the EU is really serious about sustainable development, then it needs to show true leadership, monitor and implement all of the 17 Goals and make Agenda 2030 a reality for all.

This entry was posted on Monday, September 25th, 2017 at 3:23 pm