

Sustainable Development Goals

2030 UN Agenda: Implementation, Monitoring and Reporting by the Belgian Authorities (Preparedness Review)

By endorsing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in 2015, the United Nations (UN) set 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) around five key areas (People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace and Partnership) and three dimensions (social, economic and environmental). The SDGs are subdivided into 169 associated targets addressing almost all aspects of society (www.sdg.be). The European Commission and the EU Council endorsed the 2030 Agenda as well. The European Union's statistical office EUROSTAT monitors the goals and targets using the EU SDG indicator set.

The governments in Belgium are required at each level (federal, community and regional) to make a political commitment to SDGs. Although they are free to devise their own policies autonomously, consultation and coordination are essential since 133 out of the 169 targets fall within their shared competences. Besides, each government must first identify to what extent political actions have already been taken in order to achieve the goals and targets and then determine whether further action is required.

SDGs are a priority of the INTOSAI 2017-2022 Strategic Plan – INTOSAI being the International Organisation of Supreme Audit Institutions (SAIs). The SAIs have pledged to determine to what extent their national authorities have prepared for SDG implementation and have been conducting so-called “preparedness reviews” to this end.

In its preparedness review of Belgium, the Belgian Court of Audit examined how the various governments expressly commit and organise themselves regarding the 2030 Agenda. It checked whether they have developed an adequate system to implement SDGs and monitor and report on their progress. It focused on coordination within and between governments but did not examine the actual results of the sustainable development policy. The INTOSAI seven-step-model provided the framework for the audit. In more detail, the Court examined whether the authorities:

1. made a strong commitment to achieve SDGs;
2. involved the public and relevant stakeholders in the process;
3. clearly distributed the various responsibilities and the corresponding resources;
4. ensured sufficient mutual coordination;
5. have specific strategic plans providing clear objectives;
6. duly prepared their policies;
7. developed a system to monitor and report on SDG achievement.

The Interministerial Conference on Sustainable Development (ICSD) acts as a consultation body for national coordination which must enable the country to meet its international commitments related to the 2030 UN Agenda. In 2017, the ICSD drew up the national strategy for sustainable development that was supposed to lay the foundations for a consistent approach to the strategic

lines of sustainable development in Belgium. The ICSD contributed to the preparation of the first National Voluntary Review (NVR) submitted to the UN in 2017. However, the ICSD has no longer met since the end of 2017. The national strategy it drew up in 2017, does not include any specific objectives and its cooperation projects mainly focus on processes without setting any quantified objectives. The second evaluation report on the national strategy due in March 2019 has not yet been drafted.

The SDG policy is monitored by means of indicators. An initial snapshot of the progress made in the implementation of the policy has already been taken for 34 indicators. In 2018, the Interfederal Statistical Institute (ISI) expanded this set of indicators and collected data for 82 indicators. Since February 2020, the data for 32 indicators have been disaggregated by region.

Since they are autonomous, the various governments have been meeting their political commitment to the 2030 Agenda in different ways. Most of them have drawn up strategic plans for sustainable development and carried out actions to involve citizens and stakeholders. Coordination within the same level of government is also organised in different ways, both in terms of policy steering and coordination by the administrations. While budgets do include resources related by nature to SDGs, it is rather exceptional to find an explicit reference to the 2030 Agenda. Differences can also be observed in the policy preparation process: most governments have indeed assessed the sustainable development policy in order to draft their strategic plans but only the Federal State and the Flemish Government have relied on a comparison with the 17 SDGs.

Governments have also developed the SDG monitoring indicators each in their own way. A benchmark and quantified objectives are often lacking, while the indicators are not clearly related to government programmes or actions from the SDG strategic plans. Mostly, the reports on SDGs merely state the actions implemented without evaluating them against the SDGs.

The Court recommends that the ICSD resume its coordination role. The ICSD should also ensure international reporting is continued through an adapted NVR based on the 2030 Agenda and containing updated and quantified objectives. In order to monitor the sustainable development policy, the ISI should develop indicators covering all SDG aspects. Those indicators should be based on a sample large enough to allow them to be disaggregated by region.

The Court also makes recommendations to governments of all levels. These need to see the new national strategy as a common vision for their strategic plans and other political commitments to sustainable development. They should translate the global SDGs into concrete objectives focusing on their own level, and associate them with the necessary strategic measures. The authorities should set target values for the indicators.

Furthermore, the Court advocates better planning for both policy preparation and involvement of citizens and stakeholders. Strategic plans and measures should be coordinated and monitored more explicitly so as to guarantee regular reporting to the parliaments. The authorities should make clear what are the responsibilities of each public actor and determine how many resources are necessary to achieve the objectives.

Monitoring and reporting bodies should ensure that the indicators used by the authorities in order to monitor the SDG implementation progress are in line with the list of indicators drawn up

by the ISI. The authorities' indicators must be sufficiently measurable using target values and, if possible, be related to the actual measures or projects.

Finally, the reports on sustainable development policy, the communication and timing should enable a coordination of the results at national level in preparation for the next NVR.