



THE COMMON AGRICULTURAL POLICY AND THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS: TWO TRAINS TRAVELLING IN OPPOSITE DIRECTIONS

BACKGROUND

The European Union is in the centre of a wide-ranging debate over its future. Even if the headlines are dominated by topics such as migration, security and the future of the eurozone, the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) of the EU is also due for reform. The CAP is one of the European Community's oldest policies and at nearly 40 % of the EU budget, it accounts for the lion's share of EU funding. On 1 June 2018, European Commissioner for Agriculture Phil Hogan put forth [his plans](#) for the new CAP over the financial period from 2021 to 2027. The outcome of this political reform process will shape agricultural policy in Europe over the next decade.

Although reform is sorely needed, EU politicians seem to be lost in settling on a common course for the future. One key guiding framework for the debate is already available: the United Nations' global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which set out a broad range of objectives for 2030. The European Union has committed to achieving these goals, which do provide the potential to serve as a guiding principle in the



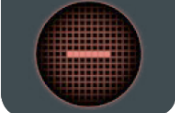
discussion about the Unions' future. More than three years after their adoption by the United Nations in 2015, the process of implementing this extensive agenda at EU level remains largely neglected. As a first step the European Commission announced a reflection paper explaining how it would like to work towards the 17 global goals at EU level. The real challenge though lies in ensuring that the paper has an impact beyond the 'sustainable development community'. Harmonisation with existing political processes is indispensable. In particular, Goal 2 'End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture' clearly requires us to put the EU's Common Agricultural Policy to the test as well. These objectives can only be approached by re-aligning agricultural policy with all sustainable development goals. The EU is faced with the task of harmonising different policies, identifying and addressing trade-offs between individual goals and fleshing out the implementation process with adapted solutions.

ENVIRONMENTAL GROUPS CONDUCT CAP FITNESS CHECK

Fitness checks are a common tool that the European Commission uses to examine the effectiveness of policy measures. For the CAP, the European Commission and most Member States have thus far rejected an examination of this kind. Leading European environmental groups were unwilling to accept this situation any longer and in 2017 published their own study inspired by the criteria that the European Commission itself defines for its fitness checks. This marks the first time in its 50-year history that EU agricultural policy has been subjected to a thorough examination of its own policy objectives. The groups also compiled findings on policy efficiency and effectiveness. One of the broadest assessment criteria is meeting the global sustainable development goals.

Figure 1: Analysis of the impact of European agricultural policy on environmental SDGs

Environmental SDGs

| | | | |
|--------------------------------------|---|-----------------|---|
| 6. Clean Water and Sanitation |  | Water pollution | Targeted instruments exist, reductions in pollution in old MS, but overall progress is slow. |
| 13. Climate Action |  | GHG emissions | No CAP instruments to deal with main sources of GHG emissions. Inclusion in AECM is marginal to needs. Global footprint especially from feedstock imports not addressed. |
| 15. Life on Land |  | Biodiversity | Some local successes of targeted instruments; Greening ineffective. CAP as a whole insufficient to reverse overall biodiversity decline, partly supported by CAP subsidies. |

Source: [CAP fitness check](#), p.220

The results are clear: as the biggest line item in the EU budget, the CAP is highly inefficient and largely harmful to the environment. Instead of being dedicated to increasing sustainability, combating climate change and hunger, the current subsidy system contributes towards irreparable damage to our natural resources: soil, water, air and biodiversity. The current trajectory and targets of the CAP paint a stark contrast with the objectives formulated in the SDGs. Yet the proposals made public so far offer little hope that the gross disparity will be resolved over the next decade, or even that harmonisation is on the horizon.

SDGS AND THE CAP: CLAIMS AND REALITY

The SDGs could offer legitimate grounds for evaluating the CAP reform proposal for the period after 2020 in order to do justice to the massive implications and lock-in effects that recent agricultural policy decisions will have on the next decade. It is interesting that the European Commission explicitly refers to the SDGs and lists specific contributions of the CAP to almost all SDGs. However, the Commission does not go any further in applying the SDGs as a guiding framework for the CAP, but instead the reform proposals fundamentally lack any qualitative analysis towards achieving the 2030-goals.


Figure 2: Contribution of the CAP to the SDGs



Source: European Commission communication: [The Future of Food and Farming](#)

When it comes to the SDGs, we see that within various European policy areas the SDGs are being mentioned or referred to without any corresponding evaluation of the impact that these policy areas have on achieving these goals. This conflict or lack of a coherent policy strategy appears particularly serious within EU agricultural policy. This lack of foresight will severely derail SDG implementation at the European level for years to come especially since the European Commission has so far neglected to propose a clear implementation plan for the 2030 Agenda and its own sustainability policy. By doing so the Commission has left the actual implementation of the SDGs to the free interpretation of the individual policy departments. First publications on the future design of the CAP highlight the need for an overarching examination of European policy strategies in the context of international obligations. The widespread attitude of 'We are already sustainability champions!' puts the European Union on track for failing to deliver on its own goals.

SDG IMPLEMENTATION IN THE EU: WAITING FOR A TRAIN TO NOWHERE LAND



The European Commission's response to the adoption of the 2030 Agenda may be summarised as too little and too late especially facing the enormous pressure to act. The Commission has not proposed any fundamental overhaul of EU policy because it first felt compelled to implement the [ten priorities from President Juncker](#). Brussels argued that all SDGs had already been integrated into the current targets, policy measures, funding guidelines and other EU measures. They did concede that the SDGs require additional consideration in current and future policy. However, this would essentially be handled using existing tools and increased coordination.

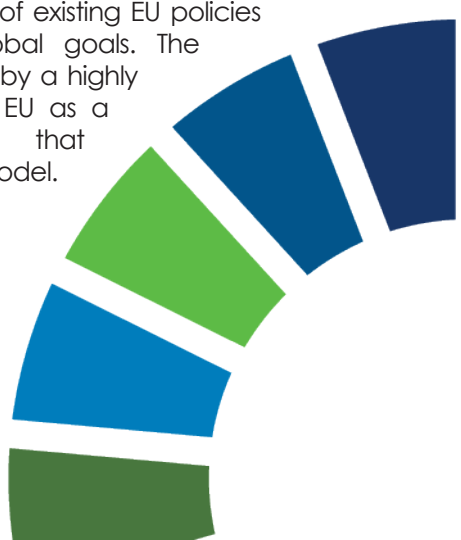
While some EU countries have already begun implementing the SDGs, the EU is not yet out of the starting gate. The European Commission [communication](#) of November 2016 was supposed to provide guidelines for implementing the sustainable development goals. It quickly became clear that the publication was merely a 'repackaging' of existing measures and plans. The paper essentially explained how current European policy already contributes towards the goals and that the priorities of the Commission are naturally in line with these goals. This already clearly shows that the Commission had not planned any new or additional efforts to achieve the SDGs.

Against the backdrop of this apparent inaction, the [European Council](#) and the [European Parliament](#) became active in the summer of 2017. They asked the Commission to set

an ambitious course to meet the goals. Both institutions spoke strongly in favour of assessing current European policy measures with regard to sustainable development and called for the publication of a strategy to implement the SDGs.

In his address to the Council and Parliament in September 2017, European Commission President, Jean-Claude Juncker, committed to submitting a paper entitled 'Towards a sustainable Europe by 2030' in 2018 with a specific implementation roadmap. Additionally, in November 2017 the European statistics division Eurostat published a [monitoring report](#) on EU progress towards implementing the SDGs, based on around 100 indicators. This report received harsh criticism for not depicting actual progress and setbacks in SDG implementation. The selection of indicators was also called into question, in particular the failure to measure the impact of European policy decisions on the rest of the world. Specific targets for 2030 were completely absent from the report, making it impossible to say whether any progress was made.

Subsequently, in January 2019, under the leadership of Vice-President Timmermans, the Commission published its long-awaited [reflection paper](#), intended to sketch out a clear SDG implementation roadmap for Europe. The paper was not very convincing in achieving this aim: the Commission merely presented three implementation scenarios for discussion. At least one of these scenarios proposes a complete policy reorientation for the EU and its Member States around the SDG principles and guidelines. It is sobering yet unsurprising that the report utterly lacked any serious consideration of the adverse impact of existing EU policies on achieving the global goals. The paper was dominated by a highly optimistic view of the EU as a 'sustainability leader' that serves as a global role model.



RECOMMENDATIONS, OR: AN SDG CHECK FOR CAP REFORM

For the current CAP reform process, the commitment to the SDGs results in the following recommendations for action:

- (a) The CAP should not be considered in isolation. Instead, consistency with European trade, climate, energy and development policy must become a guiding principle in its reform process. Only a cross-sector policy approach will enable us to move towards sustainable and climate-resilient agriculture systems.
- (b) In accordance with the approach of 'public money for public services', we need a paradigm shift away from subsidies per hectare and towards targeted support for services relevant to society.
- (c) The SDGs must serve as guidelines for CAP reform. In the reform process, the Commission should indicate which of the 17 SDGs and 169 targets are relevant to European agriculture and food production and adjust them to the European context with quantified targets for 2030. All CAP structures and measures that do not clearly contribute towards the sustainability goals must be removed.
- (d) Development of a sustainability assessment tool: The SDGs can be used to define an indicator system to analyse the necessary steps for reforming the CAP system. In cooperation with civil society, this could create a monitoring model to evaluate sustainable restructuring of European agricultural policy.





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We are 25 NGOs from across Europe working on social issues, supporting farmers, stopping climate change, protecting the environment, defending women's rights, young people, & gender equality, supporting fair trade, development, global justice, & workers' rights.

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