

Which priority for a sustainable development?

Federal report on sustainable development 2019
Analysis and assessment

Executive summary and recommendations

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Task Force on Sustainable Development

Federal Planning Bureau

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Under the *Act of 5 May 1997 on the coordination of federal sustainable development policy*, the Federal Planning Bureau is responsible for, among other tasks, drafting the *Federal report on sustainable development*. The Task Force on Sustainable Development constitutes the group that has, in particular, drawn up the Federal reports since January 1998, under the direction and responsibility of the FPB.

The *Federal report on sustainable development 2019* develops ???. The gathering of data for the Report ended ??? 2019.

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Executive summary and recommendations

Executive summary

Since the UN Conference on Environment and Development held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, Belgium has committed itself to achieving the successive UN goals for a sustainable development, in particular the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), by 2030. The Act of 5 May 1997 *on the coordination of the federal sustainable development policy* specifies the federal sustainable development strategy.

This *Federal Report on Sustainable Development 2019* evaluates the implementation of the federal sustainable development policy since the adoption of these SDGs in 2015.

- The assessment of 51 indicators monitoring the SDGs shows that these goals will not be achieved if current trends continue (chapter 1).
- In accordance with the federal sustainable development strategy, several missions have been assigned to federal public services. Many of these missions have been achieved. However, the government is barely implementing the existing provisions concerning sustainable development (chapter 2).
- Evaluating the impact on all SDGs of policy measures under development allows the strengthening of policy coherence and a more effective contribution to the achievement of the SDGs (chapter 3).

This Report of the Federal Planning Bureau (FPB) is published under the Act of 5 May 1997. In accordance with that law, the Report is published in two parts. The first part is a status report on and an evaluation of the current situation and of the sustainable development policy. This is done in this Report. The second part develops a prospective view, presenting alternative sustainable development scenarios to reach the sustainable development objectives set out in the long-term vision. This prospective part will be published in the middle of the 2019-2024 legislative term.

Little progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals

How has Belgium progressed towards sustainable development? With a review of 51 indicators monitoring the SDGs, this report shows that new policies are needed to reach these SDGs by 2030 (chapter 1).

Of these 51 indicators, 22 are linked to a target (a quantified objective with a deadline). If current trends continue, four indicators will reach their target by 2030 (*Research and development*, *Exposure to particulate matter*, *Oil pollution* and *Natura 2000 protected marine area*). The target is not expected to be reached by 2030 for 17 of these 22 indicators. Even if 10 of these 17 indicators move in the right direction, progress is insufficient to meet the target. For one of these 22 indicators with a target, data vary too much to carry out an evaluation.

Among the 29 indicators without a target, 11 are moving towards their goal (for example *Very low work intensity*, *Meat consumption* and *Water consumption*) and 6 are moving away from their goal (for example *Over-indebtedness of households* and *Inactive population due to caring responsibilities*). For the 12 remaining indicators, there is no statistically significant evolution in one or the other direction.

In total, there are fewer favourable evaluations than unfavourable evaluations. The proportion of favourable evaluations is highest in the environmental and economic components (8 out of 16 environmental indicators, 3 out of 7 economic indicators). Among the 5 governance indicators, none is given a favourable evaluation, partly because several indicators are available for very few years and their evolution is subject to much variability. In the social component, there are 4 favourable evaluations out of 23 indicators.

Breaking down these indicators according to some population groups shows that global evolutions are not always homogeneous. If some discrepancies between men and women are decreasing, for example *Gender pay gap*, some significant disparities remain, for example *Premature deaths due to chronic diseases*. Similarly, when indicators are broken down according to income or education level, many disparities remain and some of them are increasing (such as *Daily smokers* and *Inadequate dwelling* in the case of income and *Adult obesity* and *Unemployment rate* for education). Breaking down indicators according to age shows that the situation of young people is in general less favourable than that of the elderly (for example *Risk of poverty* and *Risk of poverty or social exclusion*).

The 2019 Assessment includes the 34 indicators of the 2017 Review and 17 new ones. Most of the 34 indicators used in both assessments are given the same evaluation in 2019 as in 2017. This is not surprising since the evaluation is made on the long-term trends. Only 7 indicators are given a different evaluation. In 5 cases, this is due to the evolution of the indicator in the last two years. In the other two cases, the different evaluation is attributable to a change in the evaluation method.

All 9 indicator assessments published by the Task Force Sustainable Development (TFSD) since 2005 reach similar conclusions. In 2005, the third Federal Report on Sustainable Development included a table with 44 indicators, among which were 10 with a target. Only one of these 10 indicators was given a favourable evaluation (the target will be reached if trends continue). The sixth Report, in 2011, stressed that the progress made since 1992 was not sufficient to meet concrete sustainable development goals on time.

The 51 indicators of this 2019 Assessment are part of the list of indicators monitoring the SDGs proposed by the Interfederal Statistical Institute. This list currently includes the 83 indicators for which data are available on the website indicators.be. This list should be extended progressively in the future.

Partial integration of sustainable development in policy

This Report mainly focuses on the federal level and evaluates how much of the sustainable development strategy resulting from the Act of 5 May 1997 *on the coordination of federal sustainable development policy* has been implemented (chapter 2).

This federal strategy includes a planning and reporting cycle. Although the reporting part proceeded, with the publication of 8 Federal Reports on Sustainable Development (see 2.6), followed by this ninth Report, the publication of Federal Plans for Sustainable Development encountered difficulties (see 2.4). The 2004-2008 Federal Plan was the last one to be adopted.

The absence of a Federal Plan has not paralyzed sustainable development policy. Actors from civil society and public services have played their part and many measures have been carried out around the different components of sustainable development: the fight against poverty, environmental protection, gender equality, etc. But cross-sectoral measures and the strengthening of policy coherence (e.g. action 18 of the 2004-2008 Plan, which was intended to integrate the protection of biological diversity in 4 key sectors: the economy, development cooperation, science policy and transport), which would bring added value to the Plans, are barely present (see 2.4).

The institutions provided for in the federal strategy have been set up. Both Federal Plans for Sustainable Development published in 2000 and 2004 supported the setting-up of new dedicated structures, such as the "sustainable development cells" in every federal public service. These institutions are working well and produce useful results. However, as far as the government is concerned, the existing provisions concerning sustainable development have barely been implemented since the adoption of the SDGs in 2015.

Within the framework of the federal strategy, public services are mainly involved through the work of the Interdepartmental Commission for Sustainable Development (CIDD-ICDO, see 2.8) and the Federal Reports on Sustainable Development (see 2.6). Actions under the CIDD-ICDO pertain to the integration of sustainable development in the internal management of public services, which produced measurable energy and water savings (2.8.1). More generally, the drafting of action plans by CIDD-ICDO to promote the sustainable development of society through the missions of these federal public services has had varied success (2.8.2). This work is supported by the Federal Institute for Sustainable Development, the federal public service in charge of sustainable development within federal public services. This Institute has also continued to grant subsidies for sustainable development (2.10).

Although structures put in place in public services produce useful results, sustainable development does not seem to have been part of the federal government's policy priorities since the adoption of the SDGs in 2015, as shown by the poor implementation of the commitments made in the *Voluntary National Review* submitted to the UN in 2017 (see 2.3), the absence of a new *Federal Plan for Sustainable Development* (see 2.4) and the limited presence of the SDGs and sustainable development concepts in the General Policy Notes (see 2.5), as well as the purely formal implementation of the regulatory impact assessment (see 2.9).

At national level also, sustainable development does not form part of the interfederal cooperation priorities. A national strategy, such as requested by the UN since 1992 and for which a first framework text was drafted in 2005, was published in 2017. This strategy is mainly intended to link the strategies of the different political entities of Belgium, but it lacks ambition. The final text of this strategy is not different from the draft that was considered as insufficient by all nine competent advisory bodies. It includes some proposals for six "*cooperation projects*". The Assessment of indicators shows that goals will not be achieved on a business-as-usual basis and that closer cooperation between the different entities of the country would be useful beyond these six cooperation projects. Moreover, only some proposals announced for the period 2017-2019 have been implemented. Finally, interfederal cooperation on sustainable development within the interministerial conference on sustainable development has been

suspended since the end of 2017. Only a technical working group on sustainable public procurement remains active.

In 2017, Belgium submitted to the UN a first *Voluntary National Review*, intended to demonstrate the ambition of Belgium to meet the SDGs. That report can be seen as the first review (status report) required by the National Strategy. It provides an overview of the policy measures taken to reach the SDGs and puts forward a set of cross-sectoral initiatives. It should be noted that few of them have been implemented so far (in particular the integration of the SDGs in the general policy notes and in parliamentary work, the second review of the National Strategy and the publication of the *Federal Plan for Sustainable Development*).

SDGs: a tool for policy coherence

Sustainable development in general and the SDGs in particular provide a useful framework to prepare and implement policy measures. It seems relevant to give priority to measures that are the most beneficial to all SDGs, which are widely accepted societal objectives that Belgium is committed to meeting.

It is therefore necessary to give priority to policy coherence, both between policy measures and with SDGs (OECD, 2018). The 17 SDGs provide a tool to achieve such policy coherence. In many cases, it is indeed possible to assess the impact of policy measures on each SDG, and consequently to give priority to those contributing the most to all SDGs. Two examples are developed in this Report (chapter 3).

The first example is the CO₂ tax. It shows that some modes of applying this tax lead to a globally positive impact. They include the reduction of social security contributions or the allocation of an energy voucher to the households most impacted by this tax. However, some modes have a negative impact on some SDGs. In particular, using the tax revenue to reduce the VAT on electricity clearly has a negative impact, mainly on SDG 7, by increasing energy consumption and by reducing energy efficiency, and on SDG 13, by increasing CO₂ emissions.

Alternatives to company cars are a second example. In this case, this chapter shows that, although their impact is globally positive, it is rather limited. Moreover, a mobility budget would contribute slightly more to the SDGs than a mobility allowance.

Both examples show that this approach makes it possible to evaluate alternatives and consequently to improve policy coherence towards sustainable development.

Recommendations

Facing global challenges such as poverty, inequalities, climate changes and the depletion of biological diversity, all countries in the world have adopted the Sustainable Development Goals, or SDGs. This Report shows that in Belgium, the continuation of current trends does not allow it to meet the SDGs. To implement the commitments made in this respect, this Report recommends that **the next government puts sustainable development high on the agenda.**

The *Voluntary National Review* submitted to the UN in 2017 included some initiatives to enhance the knowledge and integration of the SDGs at the political level. This *Federal Report on Sustainable Development* recommends that they be implemented.

1. **Make the SDGs an integral part of political statements**, such as the Government Policy Statement and the General Policy Notes of the ministers.
2. Organize **parliamentary discussions** on the SDGs. Each Commission of the House of Representatives should integrate in its work the relevant SDGs for its area of competence. As proposed by the *Voluntary National Review*, discussions in plenary meetings should also focus on progress towards the SDGs.

The preparation of new policy measures should also take into account sustainable development.

3. This Report recommends carrying **out a scientific analysis of the impact on all SDGs of policy measures under development** and taking this impact assessment into account in the decision-making process. The **regulatory impact assessment** was designed to this end in 2013 and should be included in the policy-making process from the beginning.
4. As provided in the Act of 5 May 1997 (Moniteur Belge/Belgische Statsblad, 2014), this Report recommends that the next government **adopts within twelve months of its installation a new Federal Plan for Sustainable Development (FPSD)** based on the preliminary draft being finalised by the Interdepartmental Commission for Sustainable Development. This Plan is intended to replace the extended 2004-2008 FPSD, to coordinate the measures of the different public services and implement synergies to meet the SDGs.

The SDGs set targets to be reached by 2030 by all countries in the world, including Belgium. They are formulated globally.

5. This Report recommends that **the SDGs be translated into specific and concrete targets for Belgium**. Already existing visions and strategies for a sustainable development in Belgium, at the federal level (*Long-Term Strategic Vision for Sustainable Development*) as well as in the federated entities, provide useful tools for this purpose.
6. Many indicators have no quantified objective (or target), although the existence of a target makes an assessment of the progress towards the objective more relevant. A recommendation of this Report is to back the translation of the SDGs into the Belgian context **by setting a target for each indicator monitoring the SDGs.**

To achieve these ambitious goals by 2030, and given the division of competences in Belgium, it is necessary to strengthen cooperation between the governments of the different political levels, between policy areas and between the abovementioned governments and other stakeholders. The different entities in our country should **revive the interfederal cooperation on sustainable development**, in particular within the Interministerial Conference on Sustainable Development.

7. Therefore, a recommendation of this Report is to **carry out the measures announced** in the six *cooperation projects* of the federal sustainable development strategy and to **increase the number of these projects**.
8. Another recommendation is to **regularly evaluate the federal sustainable development strategy** and to publish an evaluation report twice during the legislative term, in accordance with that strategy. This Report and the work of the FPB can help towards meeting this recommendation.