

BELGIUM

Implementing the 2030 Agenda: Will Belgium Step Up Its Efforts?

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In September 2015, Belgium declared that the 2030 Agenda will give a new élan for Belgian global engagement, calling for human rights, LGBT rights, women's rights, decent work and the power of digitalization, concluding that Belgium was ready to implement the agenda. However, by referring mainly to international cooperation, it was not clear if Belgium accepted the challenge to also change its national policy in order to reach the 2030 Agenda. A national strategy framework is to be established by September 2016 involving all levels of government, under the auspices of the Inter-Ministerial Conference for Sustainable Development (IMCSD), which is best suited to ensure a coherent strategy among the three regions and the federal government. Nevertheless, midway into the first year of implementation, the policy actions needed remain distant. Belgium should have had a head start, since a 1997 law on the coordination of the federal policy on sustainable development authorizes the federal government to set out a plan that takes into account the long-term vision of sustainable development and international commitments taken to realize it.

The SDGs are the result of a political negotiation and are not always as ambitious as needed. Yet the achievement of these goals would be a crucial step forward. It is important that Belgium meet the challenges of this universal 2030 Agenda through an integrated, overarching strategy.

In September 2015 world leaders adopted a new sustainability agenda with 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), ranging from poverty reduction, access to education, water, progress on gender equality, sustainable consumption and production, climate change, inequality and peace. The 2030 Agenda is an international political response to the global pressure on

the economic, ecological and social system. In other words, by 2030, world leaders promised a more just, sustainable and peaceful world. It is a leading policy agenda for the UN Member States and should serve as a political reference point. Also Belgium committed to achieve this agenda.

During the UN General Assembly session at which the 2030 Agenda was agreed, the Belgian Prime Minister stated that this new agenda will give a new élan for Belgian global engagement. It is "time to act" he firmly said. "Our goal must be to meet the needs of present generations without compromising those of the future." He called the SDGs "a compass for the next 15 years". The Prime Minister pleaded for human rights, LGBT rights, women's rights, decent work and the power of digitalization, concluding that Belgium was ready to implement the new agenda.¹ Although by mainly referring to the importance of international cooperation, it was not clear if Belgium accepted the challenge to also change its national policy in order to reach the 2030 Agenda.

More clarity was given by Vice Prime Minister De Croo during the High-Level Thematic Debate on Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. He did not only state that Belgium is ready for change, but also stressed that governments hold a special responsibility. And agreed that without political commitment the 2030 Agenda would be an empty box. He announced that a framework for a national strategy for implementing and integrating the SDGs in all Belgian policies would be established by September 2016. All levels of

¹ <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/20873belgium.pdf>

government, from the federal level to regional governments to local authorities, will be involved in setting up the national strategy.² The Inter-Ministerial Conference for Sustainable Development (IMCSD) has the mandate to ensure this strategy. The three regions and the federal government have each their own strategies and policy to advance sustainable development. Cooperation, especially for a theme such as sustainable development - is essential. The IMCSD is composed of ministers responsible for sustainable development. It is therefore the best placed to come up with a coherent strategy.

So far, so good. We cannot say that nothing has happened in Belgium. Nevertheless, midway into the first year of implementing the SDGs, the policy actions needed remain distant, unlikely to start until 2017. As civil society we are concerned about this slow pace. Belgium should have had a head start. Already in 1997, Parliament passed a law on the coordination of the federal policy on sustainable development. This states that the federal government should set out a sustainable development plan that takes into account the long-term vision of sustainable development and related international commitments. The 2030 Agenda can easily be integrated into this action plan. Unfortunately we have not yet seen this plan which should cover concrete measures. The Government can and must seize the international agreement on the SDGs to adjust the preliminary draft plan and integrate the SDG framework. Instead of using this head start, governments at all levels in Belgium and many local authorities are coming up with their own initiatives and plans, each one more ambitious than the last. But most of these plans are just non-binding promises. The announced national strategy hopefully will overcome the political blockage of the federal plan and brings clarity in the many initiatives so they can have maximum impact where it is needed the most.

Main challenges for implementing the SDGs

As noted, given its political reality as a federal state, Belgium has a challenge in bringing together different policy and decision-making levels. There is a risk the complex structure will slow or even stall progress, however. Unfortunately there are some precedents that bolster these concerns. Financing the fight against climate change for example has resulted in six years of disagreement and therefore missed opportunities. It is therefore important to agree on a clear division of labour within the federal and regional governments to implement the SDGs to guarantee a cross-cutting impact and, above all, policies with more impact for sustainable development. The different policy dimensions and different policy departments concerned must be included in the national implementation strategy.

In addition, the strategy should consist of a series of agreements and actions between the federal government and the regions and communities to develop an integrated implementation approach to sustainable development. In practice this means enhanced structural cooperation between the federal government, the regions and communities and local governments. In particular it is essential that the various levels mutually reinforce each other and are complementary in their efforts.

An overarching strategy must address integration and coherence not only between the different governance levels but also between domestic and external affairs. The challenge is to break down the silos that continue to exist between and within different administrations and the sectors they represent. The 2030 Agenda was designed with the purpose of addressing the interlinkages and interdependencies that underpin today's global challenges and therefore calls for a whole-of-government approach which puts the well-being of people and planet first. And not to forget, with sufficient economic and financial means to support them.

Lastly, there is also the question of delegated power upwards, towards the regional and global levels, starting with the EU. A Belgian strategy needs therefore

² <http://www.decree.be/fr/high-level-thematic-debate-achieving-sustainable-development-goals-united-nations-new-york>

to address coherence between the national and EU level and push the EU to be far more ambitious for sustainable development. It is not enough that a Member State puts in place procedures and plans to implement the 2030 Agenda; it should fit in a broader picture. EU has crucial competencies in generating systemic changes. Without trade and investment adjustment, more flexible fiscal policies and adjusted agriculture policies the needed transformation for realizing this new 2030 Agenda will not happen. The EU itself will also need to come up with an overarching strategy in order to guide and stimulate its members to make changes for a more peaceful, prosperous and just world. The EU can ensure that comparative data is gathered from the 28 states, in order to check if progress is even and no one is left behind.

Obstacles to overcoming the challenges for progress

In the more than one-half a year since the 2030 Agenda was agreed, there has been extremely little progress at EU level. The external dimension of implementation is - not surprisingly as the SDGs are based partly in development cooperation – starting to move forward mainly through efforts of the European Commission Development Commissioner Neven Mimica and the EU High Representative for the Union on Foreign Affairs and Security Federica Mogherini. Nonetheless, if the EU and its Member States want to play their part in tackling the severe global challenges we all are confronted with, it must address external and internal policy bottlenecks. The EU should rather sooner than later, adopt an integrated and coherent approach covering the full range of its policies and actions. Such an approach must be set out in an overarching strategy, which should not only guide the work of all the European institutions but also support EU Member States in implementing the 2030 Agenda. If the EU becomes a bottleneck for progress by not playing its role as push factor, it forms an obstacle in ensuring fast and coherent progress at State level. Meaning also for Belgium.

In Belgium we see similar policy bottlenecks as in the European Union. The Minister for Development Cooperation is more communicative and active in addressing the SDGs than are Ministers in charge of domestic policies. An important obstacle could be

ensuring enough cross-government buy-in and commitment. Ministers' capacities should be raised to assess the impact of their policies on sustainability. Above all it is necessary to make sure that mechanism for institutional coordination – new or existing – address and arbitrate on policies that address issues of sustainable development. Putting mechanisms in place is one thing, making sure they work is a different story.

Common goods, common responsibility

Of course the 2030 Agenda is not only a responsibility of the many governments of Belgium. All actors will have to claim their role. Given the openness of the process through which the 2030 Agenda was developed, Belgium should honour this way of working. In other words government officials should involve actors from civil society as well as the private sector in implementing the SDGs.

To date however, it seems the Minister for Development Cooperation has great expectations from the private sector and pushes some of its own responsibility onto it. The private sector is undeniably a key actor in bringing change in many of the areas of the SDGs. Transforming energy markets, building new production and consumption systems and creating decent jobs are all areas where the private sector can make a difference. Nevertheless it would be a mistake to hand the sector the responsibility but not the accountability. Or even only to include it with regard to financing the new Agenda and its goals.

CSO call for a strong common strategy for sustainable development

Belgium must boldly and coherently implement the whole 2030 Agenda – both internally and externally. Therefore a strong vision is needed, including the crucial principles underpinning the 2030 Agenda, namely:

- A rights based approach and indivisibility of 2030 Agenda for sustainable development;
- Transversally integrate the three pillars of sustainable development in all policies implemented;

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- Inclusiveness: leave no one behind, with specific attention to the effective participation and empowerment of vulnerable groups and women.

In addition a positive dynamic of cooperation inside and outside Belgium is essential. The national sustainable development strategy must engage a Belgian positive dynamic. Within the Inter-Ministerial Conference on Sustainable Development and its working groups, the strategy should be managed in a coordinated and concerted manner in order to facilitate a transition to a more coherent and sustainable society and make policy coherence a political reality. All levels of government must take into account the social, economic and environmental dimension. This means the national sustainable development strategy must be pragmatic and broken down into concrete action steps.

Such a strategy requires ownership by all. A multi-stakeholder approach facilitates the effective participation of all interests in defining the national strategy and modalities of implementation and monitoring.

To ensure an effective implementation strategy, the following should be guaranteed:

- **Transparency** requires:
 - Decisions of the IMCSD must be formalized and published to be accessible to all;
 - Essential regarding the process of preparing the national strategy (including civil society consultation as well as debates in parliaments).
- The effective **participation** of all stakeholders in defining the national strategy and modalities of implementation and monitoring requires:
 - A consultation of relevant federal and regional advisory councils in the preparation phase
 - A joint opinion of the Federal Council for Sustainable Development (FCSO) and other pertinent federal and regional advisory councils on the draft strategy;
 - An annual forum including all stakeholders to discuss the progress of implementation of the national sustainable development strategy.
- Rigorous **monitoring** of the implementation strategy should include:
 - Specifications and conditions are established for tracking and monitoring progress. With clear guidelines for the annual publication of a progress report on the implementation of the strategy;
 - A presentation of the annual report to the federal and regional parliaments;
 - A coordinated budgetary strategy between the various entities to ensure the implementation of policies;
 - Identification of common indicators to a concerted monitoring and evaluation through the publication of an annual report.

Bring out the potential

This new international agreed framework has the potential to bring the necessary changes in economic, ecological and social systems in support of sustainable development. It sends a strong political signal that change is needed. However each political framework has its limitations. The goals and targets should be an accelerator for positive change, not an end point. It targets only the medium term - the horizon in 2030 - while much greater efforts are needed by 2050. The SDGs are the result of a political negotiation, sometimes struggle with ambiguities or inconsistencies and are not always as ambitious as needed. Yet the achievement of these objectives would be a crucial step forward.

As a coordinated network of civil society organizations we enumerated tracks for domestic and external implementation of each SDG for Belgium in a comprehensive report in 2015. Its elaboration involved 35 organizations, focusing in their daily work on domestic or international policies. Also more strategic recommendations were formulated in the hope of

getting a head start in Belgian implementation.³The document provides a starting point for a thorough discussion on the implementation strategy and shows that implementing the SDGs in Belgium is feasible.

We therefore call on Belgium, as a matter of the greatest urgency, to respond with clarity and determination to the challenges of this ambitious universal 2030 Agenda, and to commit to develop an integrated, overarching strategy covering internal and external affairs.

The report "Perspectives to implement the sustainable development goals in Belgium" (in Dutch) is available at <http://www.11.be/wat-doet-11-11-11/item/pistes-voor-de-uitvoering-van-de-duurzame-ontwikkelingsdoelstellingen-in-belgie>

³ <http://www.11.be/wat-doet-11-11-11/item/pistes-voor-de-uitvoering-van-de-duurzame-ontwikkelingsdoelstellingen-in-belgie>