

Europe's contribution to the SDGs via Sustainable Agriculture

The need to better account for 'spillover' effects in other countries

Overview

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set an ambitious programme for the world to achieve by 2030. The European Union presents itself as a forerunner in achieving these, but the adequacy of current EU responses and appraisal of progress has been questioned. In this briefing we highlight how actions designed to support the SDGs within the EU may have detrimental consequences outside Europe. We illustrate this through the example of sustainable agriculture, which contributes to several SDGs. The Societal Metabolism Analysis at the heart of the MAGIC approach highlights that different agricultural practices vary in their impacts beyond the EU: these impacts should be considered when defining and deciding how to achieve sustainable agriculture. To better understand – and plan – Europe's contributions to the UN Agenda 2030, we must better account for such effects.

Why do we need further consideration of the SDGs in Europe?

The European Union has a long history of supporting Sustainable Development and was instrumental in the UN's formulation and adoption of the SDGs in 2015^[1]. The SDGs were then incorporated within the work plan for the European Commission, who in November 2016 published a Communication on "Next steps for a sustainable European future". This stated the EU's commitment to the SDGs and announced initiatives such as a Multi-Stakeholder Platform. Further communications since then include lists of existing EU actions that support the SDGs^[2] and an overview of how the SDGs are supported beyond the EU via its development policy^[3]. Importantly, 99 indicators (SDIs) have been agreed for appraising progress within Europe^[4]: so far these show mostly positive progress.

However, some commentators have suggested that so far Europe's response has been inadequate^[5]. For example, despite Agenda 2030 posing a "huge challenge"^[6] there is still no explicit comprehensive strategy for how Europe aims to achieve the SDGs. Simply relying on the existing policy mix and instruments may be insufficient. A particular concern is Europe's agricultural policy, which has recently been highlighted for giving insufficient support to the SDGs^[7]. This briefing therefore focuses on the topic of sustainable agriculture. A key issue warranting further attention is the concept of 'spillover', the idea that initiatives intended to support the SDGs within Europe may cause inadvertent adverse consequences outside the EU.

The Sustainable Development Goals

The UN SDGs – or Agenda 2030 – set a comprehensive and ambitious programme for the world to achieve by 2030^[1]. There are 17 Goals, which are recognised to be interconnected. Each goal has 5 or more specific targets: 169 in total.

For example, SDG2 "End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture" is a multi-faceted goal with 8 targets that affect many other goals such as SDG1 and SDG12.

The SDGs reflect a future world that is socially, environmentally, and economically sustainable, for the benefit of all people and countries across the world. This differs from previous programmes such as the Millennium Development Goals, which were focused on developing countries.

Achieving Agenda 2030 is an obligation on individual member states but has also been adopted & endorsed at the European Union level ^[2].



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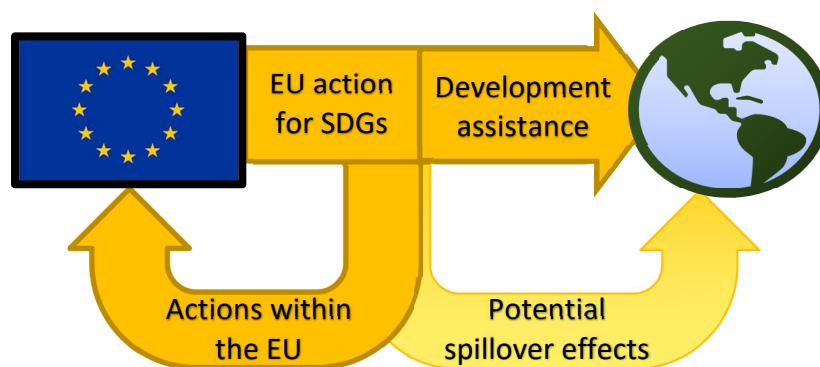


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Why do 'spillover' effects matter?

- Spillover effects are visualised below. Related terms are 'externalisation' and 'transboundary effects'^[6] referring to the idea of unintended and indirect consequences. This draws specific attention to consequences for outside of Europe. Europe has listed many actions to achieve the SDGs but so far their potential spillover effects have received little attention. For example, spillover effects are not considered by the SDIs used in monitoring the EU's progress to SDGs.
- Work from MAGIC^[8] and others^[e.g.9] has highlighted how EU agriculture depends on flows of agricultural products, such as soya feed for European livestock. Decisions to change agricultural practices – e.g. to reduce the intensity of farming within Europe – could inadvertently increase imports of products that have negative environmental consequences such as deforestation in Latin America.
- This highlights the importance of considering how we define and measure sustainable agriculture. If we take action to improve sustainability of European farming systems, yet appraise farming systems only in these terms, we may overlook spillover effects beyond Europe. There can be no sustainability, food security or societal well-being, if actions within the EU lead to declining natural resource stocks or other negative impacts beyond the EU.



Key messages

- To achieve the SDGs, attention is needed to how interventions targeted within the EU affect – and are affected by – non-EU states. For sustainable agriculture, this may affect definitions and metrics in use, and could be used to improve how agricultural policy supports the SDGs both within and beyond the EU.
- To understand progress towards sustainable agriculture, use methods like societal metabolism that highlight consequences across the complex 'nexus' of environmental, social and economic systems. This can appraise flows of natural, technological and human resources across nested and interlinked systems depend on, with potential to illustrate the distributional effects across space and demographic groups.
- Given that the Eurostat indicator set of SDIs at present focuses only on trends within the EU, to assess spillover effects we need additional indicators (e.g. perhaps the ratio of imports to total food supply).
- Overall, our findings reinforce current calls for strategy that provides a comprehensive overview of how EU can support the achievement of the SDGs.

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