



**EMBARGOED UNTIL February 25, 2026, 6:00 PM CET**

## **Europe’s Global Role at a Turning Point**

*New SDSN Report Warns that Stagnant Progress, Declining Political Commitment, and Geopolitical Pressures Threaten Europe’s Global SDG Leadership*

**Paris, France (February 26, 2026)** — The *Europe Sustainable Development Report 2026* (ESDR 2026), a new report released today by the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN), shows that progress on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has stalled in Europe, with stagnation or even reversal on some environmental and socio-economic targets, and declining political prioritization of the SDGs within EU leadership.

Now in its seventh edition, the ESDR provides the most comprehensive assessment of Europe’s performance on the 17 SDGs, covering 41 countries, including all EU Member States, Candidate Countries, European Free Trade Association (EFTA) countries, and the United Kingdom. Notably, the report reveals that while some European countries continue to lead globally in achieving the SDGs, there are important variations in SDG performance across European countries. Currently, no European country has fully achieved or is on track to achieve all 17 SDGs. Europe faces major challenges on key environmental indicators, including international spillovers, but also in implementing the “Leave-No-One-Behind” principle of the SDGs, with a reversal in progress across several European countries on socio-economic indicators, including material deprivation. The report also highlights a decline in SDG prioritization within EU policymaking.

This year’s ESDR is accompanied by a foreword highlighting the importance of EU leadership in reaffirming commitment to the SDGs by Ambassador David Donoghue, former Permanent Representative to the UN for Ireland and Co-facilitator of the SDGs and 2030 Agenda. Additional experts provided contributions outlining concrete pathways to sustainability, including a review of European National Energy and Climate Plans (NECPs) to 2050, estimates of fair levels of greenhouse gas emissions (GHG) emissions from agriculture for the EU, and an analysis of 29 bioeconomy strategies at national, regional, and EU levels.

“At a time when the United States is openly challenging the SDGs and UN-based multilateralism, Europe must assert an independent foreign policy—one rooted in peace, partnership, and sustainable development in a multipolar world,” **said Guillaume Lafortune, Vice President of the SDSN and Lead Author.** “With the EU currently shaping its 2028–2034 long-term budget, this is a pivotal moment for Europe to demonstrate leadership, both domestically and on the global stage. By harnessing the strength of its internal market and mobilizing investments in green and digital technologies, the EU can reaffirm its commitment to the SDGs and build new alliances. The SDGs remain our most powerful framework for securing a future that is just, peaceful, and sustainable.”

The Europe Sustainable Development Report 2026 is accessible [here](#). The websites and data visualization links will be available once the embargo is lifted on February 25, 2026, at 6:00 pm CET.

**Data Visualization:** <https://eu-dashboards.sdgindex.org/>

**Citation Details:** Lafortune, Guillaume and Grayson Fuller (E.d) (2026). Europe Sustainable Development Report 2026: SDG Pathways to 2030 and Mid-Century. Paris: SDSN and Dublin: Dublin University Press.

"With less than five years remaining until 2030, Europe cannot afford complacency. The latest Europe Sustainable Development Report makes it clear that progress on the SDGs is uneven, and, in some areas, even reversing," said **Stoyan Tchoukanov, EESC NAT President**. "Amid growing geopolitical instability and increasing social and environmental pressures, the 2030 Agenda must remain our guiding compass. The SDGs offer a vital framework to enhance policy coherence, rebuild trust in multilateralism, and renew political ownership at both EU and national levels. As the voice of organised civil society, the EESC will continue to advocate for greater ambition, stronger accountability, and concrete, measurable delivery."

This year's ESDR 2026 highlights five key findings:

**SDG progress has stalled in Europe, including in high-performing countries, with major environmental challenges and a reversal in progress on key socio-economic targets.**

The ESDR 2026 documents a clear stagnation in SDG progress across the European Union. Despite high overall rankings for many European countries, progress has stalled on average, and the pace of convergence in SDG outcomes across European countries is slow. EU Candidate Countries score, on average, more than 11 points below the EU average on the Europe SDG Index, highlighting the need for a stronger convergence framework and policies.

The report's *Leave-No-One-Behind Index* (LNOB), which includes 35 indicators and features a new measure of income-based gaps in exposure to pollution and environmental problems, also shows growing material deprivation in several high-performing countries, including Finland, Sweden, and Germany, since 2021. Northern Europe, EFTA member countries, and Western Europe perform above the EU average on the LNOB Index, while persistent within-country inequalities remain pronounced in the Baltic States, Central and Eastern Europe, and Candidate Countries.

**Nordic countries continue to lead in SDG progress in Europe, but still face major challenges. Some large European countries face declining public trust in governments.**

Finland, Sweden, and Denmark lead the 2026 SDG Index for Europe, and Norway tops the LNOB Index, followed by Iceland and Finland. Yet, the report reveals that all European countries face major difficulties in at least two SDGs, particularly on climate action (SDG 13), biodiversity (SDGs 14 and 15), sustainable consumption and production (SDG 12), and sustainable agriculture (SDG 2). The region tends to perform

best on eliminating poverty (SDG 1), good health and well-being (SDG 3), and clean water and sanitation (SDG 6).

The ESDR also demonstrates that public trust in many national governments is waning. In 2025, fewer than 40% of citizens in countries, such as France, Germany, and the United Kingdom, expressed trust in their governments, complicating sustainable development reform and implementation efforts. Additionally, official development assistance (ODA) declined in most European countries in 2025, with only Norway, Luxembourg, Sweden, and Denmark meeting the 0.7% of GNI target.

**Across the EU, there is a weakening political emphasis on the SDGs, notably within the European Commission.**

Since 2025, references to the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda have largely disappeared from European Commission Work Programmes, and the political guidelines of the second von der Leyen Commission (2024–2029) do not refer to them. This shift likely coincides with the EU’s reprioritization of public spending; progressive dilution of elements of the European Green Deal, including corporate sustainability and agri-food frameworks; and growing geopolitical pressures, including the war in Ukraine and explicit opposition to the SDGs and UN-based multilateralism by the U.S.

To regain its leadership on sustainable development, the European Union should reaffirm the SDGs through a joint declaration by EU institutions; present a second EU-wide Voluntary Review at the UN by 2027; strengthen action to implement the “Leave-No-One-Behind” principle; curb international spillovers; scale up sustainable finance; and articulate a clear vision for a post-2030 global development framework.

**High-income countries across Europe continue to generate a significant global footprint.**

The report’s *International Spillover Index* reveals that for the EU-27, around 40% of GHG emissions are generated abroad through trade or so-called “imported emissions.” This underscores that decarbonizing energy systems domestically must be accompanied by efforts to improve the governance of national and global supply chains, working closely with coalitions of large, medium, and small economies to promote a sustainable international trade system. Additionally, formally integrating the value of natural capital — such as forests, water, and biodiversity — into corporate and national financial reporting is a critical lever to address international spillovers.

**There are science-backed pathways for SDG progress in Europe by 2030 and mid-century.**

European countries’ sustainability agendas should integrate clearer financing strategies, agricultural emissions guidelines based on fairness principles, systemic perspectives, and social and governance dimensions.

Expert contributions to the ESDR by Prof. Phoebe Koundouri and colleagues analyze 35 European Energy Plans and highlight that fragmented, sectoral policies and unclear financing strategies threaten progress. In addition, the SDSN’s Food, Agriculture, Biodiversity, Land, and Energy (FABLE) team

demonstrates how, by establishing clearer agricultural emission guidelines based on fairness principles, governments can allocate higher priority to agriculture in national climate mitigation efforts. Experts from the University of Groningen provide an analysis of 29 bioeconomy strategies at national, regional, and EU levels, revealing that despite growing empirical evidence on interactions between the bioeconomy and SDG progress, European policy strategies have yet to reflect such systemic perspectives.

These analyses underscore that only a systemic, cross-sector approach, supported by scientific tools and driven by shared goals, harmonized timelines, and robust oversight, can deliver an economically efficient, environmentally sustainable, and socially equitable pathway to climate neutrality and the achievement of the SDGs across Europe.

The report was prepared by a group of independent experts at the SDG Transformation Center – a flagship program of the SDSN – in collaboration with the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC). The report is co-designed and co-created by and with civil society in Europe and published by Dublin University Press, with support from the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung European Union. The methodology is based on the global edition of the Sustainable Development Report, which was peer-reviewed by Cambridge University Press and Nature Geoscience and statistically audited in 2019 by the European Commission Joint Research Centre (JRC).

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**About the SDSN:**

The UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) has been operating since 2012 under the auspices of the UN Secretary-General. The SDSN mobilizes global scientific and technological expertise to promote practical solutions for sustainable development, including the implementation of the SDGs and the Paris Climate Agreement. The SDSN aims to accelerate joint learning and promote integrated approaches that address the interconnected economic, social, and environmental challenges confronting the world. One of the SDSN’s flagship initiatives is the SDG Transformation Center, which produces the Sustainable Development Report (SDR) and provides science-based tools and analytics for SDG pathways, policies, and financing. For more information, visit [unsdsn.org](http://unsdsn.org) and [sdgtransformationcenter.org](http://sdgtransformationcenter.org).