

Opinion on the Implementation of SDGs

- **At the request of the Belgian Minister of Foreign Affairs and European Affairs, Didier Reynders (in a letter of 20 January 2015) and the Belgian Minister of Energy, Environment and Sustainable Development, Marie Christine Marghem (in a letter of 14 April 2015) based on a decision by the Council of Ministers on 24 July 2015.**
 - **Approved by the AGM of 23 October 2015, with the exception of the Employers' Group, which voted against (see Appendix 1).**
 - **The Dutch language version of this opinion constitutes the original text.**
-

This opinion was prepared by the International Relations and Sustainable Development Strategies Working Group. The Employers' Group was not involved in the drawing up of this opinion.

1. Background

- [a] The UN Sustainable Development Summit¹ was held in New York on 25-27 September. It was here that the heads of state and government leaders adopted *Transforming our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*².
- [b] The Summit agreement is essentially a series of SDGs.³ It includes 17 SDGs and 169 targets.⁴
- [c] The *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* comprises 5 sections: a Preamble, a Declaration, a summary of Sustainable Development Goals and Targets, a chapter on 'Means of Implementation and the Global Partnership', as well as a 'Follow-up and Review' chapter.
- [d] Belgium already has a legal framework for its sustainable development policy, which forms an excellent basis on which to develop a framework for implementing these SDGs.⁵
- [e] The joint question by ministers Reynders and Marghem concerns the implementation of the SDG agreement at both Belgian and international level. Related issues which were previously agreed in New York are summarised in the 'Follow-up and Review' chapter
- [f] The recommendations in this opinion are addressed to the government as a whole and more specifically to Ministers Reynders, Marghem and De Croo, and the Prime Minister, Michel.

2. Opinion

2.1. Guarantees for a Coherent Policy

- [1] The Council believes that the SDG proposals and targets are on the whole reasonably balanced. Overall they offer an excellent opportunity to breathe new life into sustainable development at both national and international level. In order for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to result in genuine transformation and therefore prevent the continuation of non-sustainable models, the Council requests that the principles of respecting planetary limits and reducing inequality be explicitly addressed when implementing the SDG framework. In this respect, the principle of "leaving no one behind" is crucial.

¹ See [this page](#).

² The text of the [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#).

³ SDGs = Sustainable Development Goals. The SDGs follow on from the Millennium Development Goals.

⁴ The [17 SDGs and 169 targets](#).

⁵ In the spirit of Article 74f of the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*.

- [2] The council wishes to emphasise that the implementation of SDGs and other aspects of the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* must in no event result in current policy ambitions being lowered. On the contrary, Belgium must aim far higher in those areas in which it has fallen short of SDG proposals.⁶
- [3] The government as a whole is responsible for constructing a coherent policy. The Council requests that SDGs be integrated into the policies of the various administrations and authorities. Moreover, the Council wishes the principle of political coherence to be rooted in systemic cooperation between federal and regional government, local authorities and communities (and where possible, always working within existing structures and instruments and working on concrete projects) with a view to effective SDG implementation.⁷
- [4] The current focus on Policy Coherence for Development (PCD⁸) should be expanded to encompass policy coherence for sustainable development (SD). It is not enough to examine the impact of Belgian policy on poverty and economic development in developing countries. It must also examine the impact on various aspects of SD (environmental, social and economic) and it must focus equally on countries in both the north and south.
- [5] In this respect, the Council advocates an external evaluation of existing federal instruments for Policy Coherence for Development (PCD) and that it be done during the current parliamentary term.⁹
- [6] It is important that the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* be viewed as a whole. The Council also emphasises that a clear and credible commitment to implementing the agreements set out in the *Addis Ababa Action Agenda (AAAA)*¹⁰ is an essential precondition to the implementation of SDGs in both the north and the south.¹¹ The Council requests that annual policy memoranda to Parliament provide specific updates on the implementation of the AAAA. The Council also invites the government to submit to the follow-up process outlined in the AAAA (an annual forum convened under the auspices of ECOSOC¹² the results of which shall represent a contribution to the HLPF¹³).
- [7] Fair taxation in both north and south is a crucial aspect of SDG financing. The Council invites Belgium to take a proactive approach to ensuring that multilateral international fiscal cooperation agreements, as concluded under the aegis of the G20 and the OECD, also benefit developing countries. In practical terms, this means that:
- Belgium and the international community must place more emphasis on improving the capacities of developing countries' tax authorities;
 - in practice, developing countries may benefit fully from agreements on the automatic exchange of information; and
 - the specific needs and problems of developing countries shall be taken fully into account when implementing G20/OECD principles on imposing effective multinational corporation income taxation (the BEPS action plan¹⁴).

⁶ For further information, see: [Sustainable Development Goals: Are the rich countries ready?](#)

⁷ To this end, see the proposals in 2.2.

⁸ PCD = Policy Coherence for Development.

⁹ See also the [Peer Review du CAD 2015](#) for Belgium.

¹⁰ The AAAA came out of the third international *Financing for Development* conference and was adopted by the UN General Assembly of 27 July 2015.

¹¹ Article 63 of the text of the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable development* explicitly states that the AAAA "is an integral part of the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*".

¹² See: AAAA, Art. 132.

¹³ The [High-Level Political Forum](#) (HLPF).

¹⁴ Regarding [BEPS](#), at the OECD.

- [8] The Council proposes that the DGD and the FPS Finances, both of which have international fiscal policy competencies and expertise, step up their collaboration in terms of both bilateral development on cooperation and Belgium's position in the relevant multilateral forums.
- [9] The *UN Sustainable Development Summit* in September was the second of three major international summits (after the *Financing for Development* conference). The Council requests that the Belgian government take all possible measures to ensure the success of the third of these conferences, namely the COP 21 climate change conference in Paris. The success of COP 21 will to a large extent determine that of the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*.
- [10] Currently civil society organisations and individuals are undertaking various actions which might be seen as putting the SDG project into daily practice, both in Belgium and around the world. For this reason they deserve the recognition and support of the authorities. The introduction of the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* explicitly gives them an active role in the implementation, follow-up and evaluation of this agenda. To this end, the Council requests that the requisite tools be developed and that existing tools be optimised.

2.2. Implementation in Belgium

2.2.1. SDGs and their Interpretation

- [11] Within the framework of this opinion and the scheduled timeframe of this opinion, it is not possible for the Council to give a detailed response on how the various SDGs might be put into practice. As things stand, various Council members¹⁵ already have quite firm views on the matter. The Council wishes to participate in the implementation of SDGs in our country and awaits any possible requests for opinions on specific SDGs.

2.2.2. Global Policy for Executing SDGs in Belgium by 2030

- [12] The Council hopes that in 2016, the federal government will be able to present a global SDG policy programme which has the support of government members across the board.¹⁶ This being the case, the indicators (to be confirmed) for the 169 targets need to be translated in a sufficiently ambitious manner into the Belgian system. The aim of the plan is to get clear assurance from politicians as to how exactly the SDG's will be implemented. (The Council insists that when implementing the relevant policies, the point of departure be existing institutions and instruments as well as legal regulations. Belgium already has a legal framework devised for sustainable development policy, which makes an excellent basis on which to develop a framework for SDG implementation). Each year, this plan will be translated into a number of policy memoranda which are submitted to Parliament. The Council works on the basis that it may submit an opinion on this policy programme during preparation. This policy programme should address the following questions (suggested responses can be found in subsequent sections of this opinion):
- How will the political aims of the SDGs be transposed into the federal political framework? How will the analysis of the current legal framework be organised? If appropriate, how and when will the current policy framework be adapted?
 - How will the work and the action of SD law stakeholders be adapted in the light of SDG implementation? How will current SD law instruments be used in the SDG implementation process? How will financing work?
 - Will this require institutional changes or additional agreements?
 - What changes will be made to the work of the various administrations?

¹⁵ For example a group of 36 civil society organisations published [a series of recommendations](#).

¹⁶ Similarly, the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, unveiled Germany's global policy programme for implementing SDGs.

- How will cooperation with the regions and communities be organised?
- How will the (integrated) implementation of the SDGs be documented?
- How will consultation with civil society be organised?
- How will communication with the public be organised?

2.2.3. Federal SD Strategy

[13] The Council requires that the federal sustainable development strategy (as stipulated in the relevant sustainable development legislation of 1997) be updated and improved in accordance with the new SDG framework. According to the Council, this implies that it would be advisable to continue the excellent work already carried out by various legal bodies (the IFDD, the SD Task Force and the CIDD) and other relevant authorities.

- The planned follow-up and implementation work for the long-term federal vision on sustainable development must be restructured to take account of the SDG framework.
- The federal SD plan should, as a global policy instrument, be re-evaluated in accordance with the implementation of SDGs by the various federal authorities. Where at all possible, this should also apply to the federal plan which is currently being prepared and which should have been redrafted.
- From this point of view, it would be helpful for the various authorities to draw up a map of SDGs within their policy areas. Within this context, the role of the CIDD and the SD divisions is essential.
- SDG implementation should be covered in the various authorities' administrative contracts¹⁷.
- The federal report mission should be adapted such that it also serves as an intermediate evaluation tool to determine the way in which the SDG framework will be integrated into federal policy. The report will thus provide an important contribution (at least at federal level) to the national-level integrated report on SDG implementation, as proposed later on.
- The considerable work already carried out by the Task Force and others as part of indicator development will need to be redirected and consolidated in order to enable follow-up to the SDG framework.
- The legally imposed delivery deadlines for items such as the plan or the report will, where at all possible, need to be brought in line with the SDG follow-up schedule such that it will work in conjunction with the UN and the EU.
- Work relating to the 'beyond GDP' indicators must also be used within the framework of SDG implementation.¹⁸
- In this context, consultation with stakeholders must be guaranteed, as required by law.

[14] The Council wishes to see a clear distribution of competencies throughout federal government for the implementation of SDGs. This distribution must guarantee that SDGs apply to federal policy right across the board, and ensure that the various policy areas and the various appropriate authorities are all equally included in this implementation.

[15] The Council invites the government to investigate whether the RIA (Regulatory Impact Analysis tool)¹⁹ is an appropriate tool for the efficient implementation of SDGs into federal policy. The Council also requires, as stipulated by law²⁰, that each year the government draw up a report indicating to what extent the RIA has been used and whether its use in this instance gave rise to the possible adaptation of a decision, in the light of SDGs. Moreover, the Council requests the lifting of the

¹⁷ See: [administration contract](#).

¹⁸ See [30].

¹⁹ The [AIR](#).

²⁰ See Art. 7 the Belgian [Law containing various provisions regarding administrative simplification](#) (21/12/2013).

exception²¹ for the regulatory impact analysis for draft legislation relating to the acceptance of international treaties and agreements.

2.2.4. National SD Strategy

- [16] The Council requests that the inter-ministerial conference on sustainable development reach an agreement on a national strategy for sustainable development.
- This must include a series of agreements between federal government, the regions and the communities, in order to ensure an integrated implementation of the SDG framework in which the various different policy areas shall be consolidated.
 - The Council recommends that an analysis be carried out of any possible current “grey areas” in policy level cooperation, grey areas which might potentially complicate the integrated implementation of SDGs. This analysis could then lead to the drawing up of a step-by-step plan for any possible additional or new agreements between policy areas, if possible without the need for a new cooperation agreement.

2.2.5. Reporting on SDG Implementation and Civil Society Involvement.

- [17] The Council wishes to play a key role in monitoring the implementation of SDGs in our country.
- [18] As such, it requests that an annual or biennial report be published on SDG implementation in our country. It also requests that a single integrated report be drawn up at federal and regional policy level. The *Institut interfédéral de Statistique* (Interfederal Institute of Statistics), which is due to be operational as of January 2016, will coordinate the collection of data whilst drawing up a report (in conjunction with this, the Institute will receive support from the Federal Planning Bureau).
- [19] The Council requests that a mandatory opinion be submitted by civil society on the subject of this report. At federal level, the FRDO is the council best qualified to draw up this opinion (even though the preference was not for an integrated federal + regional + community report).
- [20] The Council requests that an initial report of this kind be produced by the end of 2016. As a number of international agreements are to be signed off in 2016 as part of the HLPF, and as it will take time to make the necessary changes to the way that the various relevant authorities and services work, this initial report will essentially be a “road map” setting out what needs to be done to rapidly create a completely separate report in time for the next edition.
- [21] The Council also requests that this report be automatically presented to Parliament.

2.2.6. Communications Strategy

- [22] The Council invites the government to prepare a global communications strategy and to add it to its policy programme with a view to supporting all aspects of SDG implementation in our country, to proactively inform the public about the political role of SDGs in our country, and to involve them in this process. The policy programme must come up with propositions in which the public can play a role in the evaluation and adaptation of SDG applications in Belgium.

2.2.7. Partnerships and the Role of the Public and Civil Society

- [23] As part of SDG implementation, there is a major role to be played by partnerships between the authorities and non-governmental players (society, businesses, etc.). Nevertheless, such a partnership is supplementary and shall in no way replace public responsibility (the drawing up of a

²¹ See Art. 8 of the Belgian [Law containing various provisions regarding administrative simplification](#) (15/12/2013)

regulatory framework, for example, in the form of restrictive environmental targets and the provision of public monies helping to enforce civil rights). In practical terms, the Council requests that the federal government draw up a clear step-by-step plan (the aforementioned global policy) in consultation with civil society in order to implement SDG's in our country, and one which includes a definition of its own role (regulations, policy objectives, financing, etc.). Partnerships may be formed on this basis, but not vice versa. The existing support framework for sustainable development partnerships does not yet meet these requirements.

[24] Members of the Council are ready to assume responsibility for putting the draft *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* into practice on the basis of the observation that their actions complement the role of the administration. Consequently, they are initially awaiting the aforementioned SDG programme and will then consider what supporting role they might play in implementing SDGs in our country. Agreements could then be set out in an official charter. The CFDD may also have a role to play here.

2.3. Implementation at International Level

[25] The Council wishes COORMULTI SD to remain the primary platform for cooperation between federal and regional policy areas in order to conclude agreements on the positions taken by Belgium regarding future international implementation of the SDG framework. The Council requests that a sufficiently large delegation from the FRDO provide structural assistance at COORMULTI meetings.

[26] The Council requests that the Belgian government exert its influence such that in the short term, steps be taken to ensure there is clarity on SDG follow-up at EU level. During the revision of the various strategies and in particular the EU strategy, which has the greatest influence in effective cross-border policy, the Council wishes this change to be made within the framework of SDG. Whether it be a new European sustainable development strategy (EU SDS) or the successor to the current EU2020 strategy or the European Semester, consideration must be given therein to SDGs. The Council believes that an opinion should be drawn up under the auspices of the creation of a new central EU strategy.

[27] The Council is eagerly anticipating the Global Indicator Framework, due to be ready in March 2016, prepared by the *Inter-Agency and Expert Group on SD Goal Indicators* and awaiting the approval of the *UN Statistical Commission*. Whilst Belgium is not directly involved in the drawing up of these global indicators, the Council would like the process to be subject to monitoring via Eurostat and with EU level involvement. Our country could also encourage the use of the ILO's *Social Security Enquiry Database*²² and the World Bank database *ASPIRE*²³ to strengthen social protection indicators.

[28] The Council invites the Belgian government to play an active role in preparing for the HLPF meeting in summer 2016 (the first after the approval of the SDG framework and the global indicator series) in order to consolidate the role of the HLPF in following up the implementation of SDGs.

[29] The Council wishes the work of Belgium to continue along the lines of the Post-2015 Development Agenda, inter alia the Decent Work Agenda (including the Social Protection Floor²⁴) the fight against inequality (including pay policy) and the importance of gender equality. We would like to see an active international commitment on the part of our country based on ILO international instruments, which takes account of inevitable budgetary adjustments and which heeds the expertise of the relevant authorities.²⁵ With regard to social protection, by 2030: (1) each country should at the very

²² See: [ILO Social Security Inquiry Database](#)

²³ See: [ASPIRE](#)

²⁴ See: [Social Protection Floor](#).

²⁵ In executing SDG 1.3.

least have implemented the *Social Protection Floor* as per *Recommendation 202* for countries which are yet to put in place a social protection system²⁶; (2) each country must ratify the *ILO Social Security (Minimum Standards) Convention No. 102*. This is why, in each country, a clearly defined percentage of national revenue must be set aside for social protection (with schemes for the active population, senior citizens, families with children and income support) with a gradually increasing budget and a strategy aimed at ensuring a dedicated social protection system for all. Attention also needs to be paid to validation of FPS Social Security expertise and it must be ensured that BELINCOSOC²⁷, whose aim is to share our social protection system with others, receives sufficient operating resources to expand its scope of activity, particularly in countries in which the *Social Protection Floor* is yet to be implemented.

- [30] The Council requests that Belgium give evidence of its commitment to sufficiently sound follow-up and investigation mechanisms to take it up to 2030. The text of the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* is currently too vague and too hypothetical. This is not satisfactory. Consequently, the Council encourages our country to show its strong commitment to making the HLPF meeting in 2016 a success. As the co-founders of the *Group of Friends on Decent Work for Sustainable Development*²⁸, the Council invites Belgium to ensure the correct follow-up of SDG 8, for which the *ILO supervisory system/mechanism*²⁹ seems advisable as a supervisory instrument and which may also serve as a model for the supervision and implementation of other SDGs.
- [31] In the aforementioned report on the implementation of SDGs in our country, the Council would also like to see a report published on Belgium's position in the international institutions and negotiations directly related to the monitoring of agreements for the *2030 Agenda*.
- [32] The Council invites the federal government, in conjunction with the Minister of Development Cooperation, to draw up a concrete action plan to help assist countries in the south to better implement SDGs. This must also ensure particular vigilance with regard to improving their capacity for quality data collection³⁰ and the systemic participation of civil society.
- [33] The Council requests that the government give evidence of its commitment to all initiatives (whether in Belgium or beyond) which are pioneering methods of measuring sustainable and equitable well-being 'beyond GDP'. The SD Task Force has made a valuable contribution to work of this kind in our country.³¹
- [34] The Council invites Belgium to provide evidence of its ongoing commitment towards inclusive implementing of SDGs at international level. The systemic participation of civil society is indispensable at all critical stages to be negotiated by 2030. With regard to the various programmes and projects, it would moreover be appropriate to ensure that the voices of the most disadvantaged and marginalised groups and communities be heard. To this end, the Council is especially keen to highlight the importance of promoting and securing social dialogue. The focus should not only be on the less developed countries (LDC) but also middle income countries and emerging countries.

²⁶ See also the conference organised by Belgium on the post-2015 social protection agenda: [27/04/2015 – Conference on social protection in the UN post-2015 Development Agenda](#).

²⁷ See: [BELINCOSOC](#)

²⁸ See: [Group of Friends on Decent Work for Sustainable Development](#)

²⁹ See: [ILO Supervisory System](#).

³⁰ In executing SDG 17.9 and 17.18.

³¹ In executing SDG 17.19..

Appendix 1 Members with Voting Rights in the General Assembly Who Voted on This Opinion

Group member	Voted FOR	Voted AGAINST	ABSTENTION	TOTAL
President and Vice-Presidents				
Magda Aelvoet	X			
Mathias Bienstman	X			
Mathieu Verjans	X			
<i>Total out of 4 members with voting rights</i>	3			3
NGO for environmental protection				
Sabien Leemans	X			
Christophe Schoune	X			
Sara Van Dyck	X			
<i>Total out of 3 members with voting rights</i>	3			3
NGO for development cooperation				
Rudy De Meyer	X			
Brigitte Gloire	X			
<i>Total out of 3 members with voting rights</i>	2			2
Workers' organisations				
Philippe Cornélis	X			
Nilufer Polat	X			
Sébastien Storme	X			
Daniel Van Daele	X			
<i>Total out of 6 members with voting rights</i>	4			4
Employers' organisations				
Françoise Vantiggelen		X		
<i>Total out of 6 members with voting rights</i>		1		1
Young people's organisations				
Bart Devos	X			
Johanna Mulumba	X			
<i>Total out of 2 members with voting rights</i>	2			2
Total votes out of 24 members with voting rights	14	1	0	15

Appendix 2

Preparatory Meetings for this Opinion

Working group preparatory meetings took place on the 18th and 30th of September 2015.

Appendix 3

Participants involved in preparing this opinion

President

- Dries Lesage (UGent)

FRDO members with voting rights and their representatives

- Thierry Aerts (ABVV-FGTB)
- Antoinette Brouyaux (Associations 21)
- Olivier Beys (WWF)
- Brigitte Gloire (Oxfam Solidarité)
- Renaat Hanssens (ACV-CSC)
- Simon Hemptinne (Conseil de la Jeunesse)
- Wiske Jult (11.11.11)
- Maresa Le Roux (ACLVB-CGSLB)
- Fabienne Sichien (Solidarité mondiale)
- Bart Tierens (11.11.11)
- Benjamin Van Cutsem (CNCD – Operation 11.11.11)

Scientific advisors and guest experts

- Tim Bogaert (Foreign Affairs, M8)
- Christian Ferdinand (FPS Economy)
- Bruno Kestemont (Statistics Belgium)
- Cédric van de Walle (FIDO-IFDD)

Apologies

- Tom Bauler (President of Strategies Working Group)(ULB-IGEAT)
- Steve Braem (AB-REOC/BV-OECO)
- Marlies Casier (Sensoa)
- Valérie Cuvelier (Reynders)
- Cécile De Schoutheete (IEW)
- Bart Devos (Conseil de la Jeunesse flamand)
- Maggi Poppe (Nederlandstalige Vrouwenraad)
- Sophie Sokolowski (Marghem)
- Daniel Van Daele (FGTB)

FRDO Secretaries

- Marc Depoortere
- Koen Moerman
- Jan Mertens