



European Economic and Social Committee | Comité économique et social européen

PERIOD

2023

2025

ACTIVITY REPORT

SUSTAINABLE

DEVELOPMENT

OBSERVATORY (SDO)

**DIRECTORATE B3 – LEGISLATIVE
WORK**

PRESIDENT: MAURIZIO REALE

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Introduction

As the 2023-2025 term of office is coming to an end, it is time to reflect on our activities and review the progress made on our priorities during this period.

The SDO was the first EU body fully dedicated to sustainable development, and it continues to be a unique hub for discussing sustainability in Europe and beyond. As we pursued our journey towards a more sustainable future, I was pleased to see that the SDO’s work programme served as a roadmap for promoting and monitoring sustainable development across various sectors and policy areas.

My commitment from the first meeting has been to ensure a realistic and non-ideological approach in all our initiatives. One of the primary objectives of the SDO under my mandate was to enhance policy coherence and integration, ensuring that sustainability considerations are systematically integrated across various policy domains in a balanced and pragmatic way. I believe that we have successfully managed to achieve this objective through the many events and activities outlined in this report, also thanks to the close and harmonious cooperation with the SDO Vice-Presidents and Members.

As the SDO is part of the NAT section, our work was closely aligned with that of the section, making good use of synergies throughout the term of office. We also worked closely with the Permanent Study Group on Sustainable Food Systems and the Ad Hoc Group on COP to promote complementarity between the various structures.

Through our work, activities and events, we were able to keep the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) high on the agenda of the Committee and the other institutions. We also managed to promote a more cross-cutting approach with other policy areas in the NAT section and beyond, for example by organising debates on water and trade. By fostering dialogue and collaboration across different stakeholders, the SDO was able once again to harness the collective expertise and perspectives necessary for effective policies, respecting the specificities of the real economy to ensure that the goals are indeed achievable.

Although the more recent challenges we faced with the new geopolitical order have overshadowed our daily lives, it remains clear that the triple planetary crisis persists; this is why we stress the importance of maintaining or even strengthening our ambitious commitment to the objectives of the Agenda 2030 and the SDGs in order to achieve a sustainable, just and all-inclusive transition.

Maurizio Reale

President of the Sustainable Development Observatory

Activities and main findings

The SDO objective to **accelerate the implementation of SDGs** was at the core of our work. In particular, the SDO priorities for the 2023-2025 period were summarised in six specific areas: Sustainable and just economies, Sustainable food systems and healthy nutrition, Energy decarbonisation with universal access, Urban and peri-urban development, Human well-being and capabilities and Global dimension. These were based on the ‘Six Transformations’¹ that offer a more practical and comprehensive framework as entry points to hold broad discussions with stakeholders and favour synergies across areas of work.

By embracing these transformations, the SDO provided a convening and unique space for bringing together relevant civil society actors involved in the implementation and follow-up on SDGs at EU level. The EESC has concrete experience in facilitating such exchanges and empowering civil society. It is through such concerted efforts that we can achieve meaningful and lasting progress towards a more sustainable future with thriving businesses, a prosperous society and a healthy planet.

In particular, the SDO focused on these specific areas of work during the 2023-2025 mandate and carried out the following activities:

1. Sustainable food systems and healthy nutrition

- **Public debate on ‘[Sustainable food systems as a driver for the implementation of the SDGs](#)’** (17/11/2023), held jointly with the Permanent Study Group on Sustainable Food Systems. The event was closely linked to SDG2 on Zero Hunger and focused on the need for a systems approach to food policy. It brought together members of the two EESC bodies and representatives from the European Commission and other stakeholders from the agri-food chain. The aim was to explore how sustainable food systems can contribute to achieving the SDGs by providing concrete examples and best practices, but also identifying the associated challenges. Food supply chain actors were asked to present concrete initiatives from the ground that they are already undertaking towards more sustainability (e.g. more sustainable agricultural practices, food labelling, packaging and packaging waste); identify the challenges to continue and scale up these initiatives, and provide recommendations for the then planned Sustainable Food Systems Framework.
- **Workshop to discuss the preliminary findings and the survey related to the study prepared by the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) for the EESC on ‘[Sustainable food systems as a driver for the implementation of the SDGs: taking stock of SDG 2 and future perspectives](#)’** (15/10/2024). The final study calls above all for more effective multistakeholder engagement mechanisms at the EU and Member States’ level to define long-term pathways and specific policies to advance the sustainability of agri-food systems in

¹ These include [The World in 2050 \(TWI2050, 2018\)](#), [Sachs et al. \(2019\)](#), and the [UN independent group of scientists](#), appointed by the Secretary-General (2019).

Europe. It also emphasises the importance of concerted international action and demand-side measures, including incentives to move toward healthier diets, to achieve simultaneously several SDGs related to agri-food systems, climate mitigation and biodiversity.

2. Sustainable and just economies

- **Public debate on ‘[Advancing SDGs through Sustainable and Just Economic Transformation](#)’** (11/3/2024) centred on the role of businesses and economic systems in driving sustainable development and implementing the SDGs. The debate was organised in collaboration with the European Semester Group and in the context of the then-upcoming European elections, urging the incoming European Commission and European Parliament to adopt a comprehensive strategy on the SDGs. One of the conclusions of the debate was that business and civil society organisations can promote adoption of sustainable practices throughout value chains, promote responsible consumption and production, and support initiatives that address economic and social inequalities. Key speakers included Enrico Giovannini (Scientific Director from ASviS), Laurent Bontoux (Joint Research Centre) and members of civil society such as SMEUnited, ITUC, EEB and YFJ.

3. Urban and peri-urban development

- **Public debate on ‘[Circular economy and bioeconomy to support sustainable agri-food systems for a sustainable rural/urban development in the EU](#)’** (15/10/2024), held jointly with the Permanent Study Group on Sustainable Food Systems. The event aimed to explore how circular economy and bioeconomy can drive sustainable agri-food systems development across both rural and urban areas in the EU, through the presentation of innovative approaches that support the balanced development of rural and urban communities. The debate brought together a wide range of stakeholders, including policymakers, civil society organisations and practitioners, to discuss how circular bioeconomy can address pressing challenges such as rural depopulation, economic inequalities and climate change; and how governance and partnerships can leverage the development of innovative approaches in rural areas. This event was part of the 6th Rural Pact Debate organised by the EESC, reflecting its strong commitment to a balanced and sustainable approach to rural and urban development in the EU.

4. Global dimension

- As part of its continuing efforts to enhance our international ambition and cooperation, the SDO supported the EESC’s outreach to international events such as the High-Level Political Forum and the Summit of the Future in New York, as well as the United Nations Climate Change Conference, specifically by including members of the SDO in the Ad Hoc Group on COP.

- **Debate on [‘Next steps for SDGs after HLPF 2023’](#)** (13/9/2023) including high-level speakers from the UN (such as Camilla Brückner, Director of the UN/UNDP Office in Brussels and Representative of the UN System in the EU), the Commission and the outgoing Spanish presidency of the EU. Civil society organisations representing SMEs, trade unions, NGOs and youth had the opportunity to discuss with SDO members how to foster more meaningful engagement in SDG implementation at the EU level.
- Internal meeting (6/3/2025) on the **relationship between global sustainability and trade agreements**, with a focus on reciprocity and responsible resource use, as well as the importance of communication of climate change and media coverage. Speakers included IEEP, Greenpeace, Quota Climat and Klima Vor Acht. The first debate highlighted the importance of sustainable trade agreements especially in light of the evolving political context and growing pressure on democratic processes, further contributing to the strategic discussions within EESC bodies including the sub-group on geopolitical order and EESC ad hoc group on COP. The subsequent discussion on communication and media coverage was especially timely, as the spread of disinformation continues to undermine and jeopardise collective efforts to combat climate change.
- Public debate **[‘Trade and sustainability: Reciprocity in agri-food systems for a fair green transition’](#)** (21/5/2025). Through panel discussions, EESC members, representatives of the European institutions and of civil society exchanged views on the role of reciprocity in achieving a fair green transition. In particular, panellists provided different perspectives in ensuring fairness, reciprocity and sustainability in trade and examined how a trade policy based on fairness and common standards can effectively support the EU’s sustainability ambitions. We need to ensure true reciprocity of standards and carefully consider spillover effects when it comes to trade agreements, especially in an increasingly competitive and open global context.

5. **The vital role of water: Safeguarding health, human rights and sustainability**

- Debate on **[Towards a comprehensive water strategy in the context of the climate and biodiversity emergencies](#)** (2/7/2024) was held in cooperation with CCMI. Policymakers, researchers, and stakeholders explored effective responses to the cross-cutting water-related challenges linked to climate, biodiversity and the health of ecosystems and humans, and emphasise the critical importance of adapting to changing hydrological patterns and ensuring water security for all. Through panel discussions, the event highlighted the interconnectedness of water with climate and biodiversity; explored the challenges in specific sectors, such as the agri-food sector; showcased best practices; and fostered collaboration to advance the development of an EU Blue Deal as a new standalone strategic priority for the EU, complementary to and in synergy with the EU Green Deal and the Agenda 2030.

6. **Other cross-cutting issues**

- **Cooperation with the other sections/CCMI and observatories.** Collaboration and cooperation are crucial for a holistic approach to sustainable development. During the mandate, the SDO engaged with various sections/CCMI and observatories within the EESC. This cooperation allowed for the exchange of relevant opinions, expertise and perspectives from different fields, promoting interdisciplinary dialogue and strengthening the overall impact of the SDO. By leveraging the knowledge and insights from various sections, the SDO can provide a more comprehensive and informed analysis, and concrete recommendations on sustainable development issues. In addition to the synergies already highlighted above under each activity, the SDO President was invited to all meetings of the other observatories (and vice versa).
- **Youth engagement:** Recognising the importance of engaging youth in sustainable development efforts, young people were regularly invited in the debates of the SDO.

Appendix I – List of meetings and events

	From 25 April 2023	2024	Until 21 October 2025	Total
Observatory meetings	13/9/2023 17/11/2023 Joint meeting with the Permanent Group on Sustainable Food Systems	11/3/2024 2/7/2024 in cooperation with the Consultative Committee on Industrial Change 15/10/2024 Joint meeting with the Permanent Group on Sustainable Food Systems	6/3/2025 21/5/2025	7
Other meetings	23-25/10/2023 SDO president part of the EESC delegation to the Committee on World Food Security (Rome)	12/3/2024 SDO President meeting with Mr Fotiou, FAO Director for SDGs 5-6/6/2024 SDO President participating in the Conference co-organised with ESDN: Upgrading Europe: Building Transformative Policies to Reach the Sustainable Development Goals 21-23/10/2024 SDO president part of the EESC delegation to the Committee on World Food Security (Rome) 19/11/2024 SDO President meeting the Italian Local Action Group to present the sustainability activities of the EESC and the SDO 10/12/2024 SDO President presenting an update on the work of SDO at the meeting of the Labour Market	13/2/2025 Mr Reale attending NAT-REX event on Voluntary National Reviews on the SDGs ahead of 2025 High Level Political Forum, in collaboration with the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) 27/6/2025 SDO President speaking at a conference on quality and sustainability	9

		Observatory (LMO) 11/12/2024 SDO President meeting Mr Decaro, EP ENVI committee chair with NAT president	(Palermo)	
Events	See details of all public debates/events organised by the SDO in the previous chapter			8