**The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Paris Climate Agreement**

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**1. Introduction – the SDGs and the Paris Agreement**

## The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted at the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Summit in New York in September 2015 as the centrepiece of its comprehensive "2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development"; the Paris Agreement was reached three months later. The implementation of both will remain a major global priority until the target date of 2030.

## The SDGs are the blueprint for the next generation. They are a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity. The SDGs build on the 9 Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), but they are now global in nature, universally applicable and interlinked – all countries must share responsibility in achieving them. They are already leading to a new way of global working – broader, more participative and more consultative: more than 90 countries have sought the assistance of others, notably the EU, to help meet them.

### The SDGs also go far further than the MDGs in that they specifically identify the tools, or "means of implementation" for meeting all the 17 SDGs through their 169 specifically identified targets. The annual [High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development](https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/hlpf) acts as the central UN platform for their follow-up and review.

## The importance of the SDGs was greatly enhanced by the Paris Agreement on climate change (COP 21)[[1]](#footnote-1), which entered into force in 2016. The SDGs are deeply interwoven with the Paris Agreement: at least 13 SDGs refer to climate change.

### The Paris Agreement is the world’s first comprehensive climate agreement. If the SDGs are the blueprint for the next generation, this is the blueprint for the future of the planet. It is generally accepted that an increase in global average temperature in excess of 2°C above pre-industrial levels would have catastrophic effects. This would include rising sea levels and major changes in weather patterns, leading to excessive flooding in some areas, and excessive drought in others, accompanied by major shortages in food production as the global population is notably increasing. This would lead in turn to mass migrations on a scale not seen for at least 800 years, and a concomitant level in rising chaos, wars, disease, hunger and starvation, and wider displacement. Many of those countries most likely to be affected would be least able to manage the changes.

### The accepted long-term goal is to restrict the increase in global average temperature to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels. However, the latest scientific thinking, as outlined in the IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) report prepared for COP24 held in Katowice in December 2018, shows that an increase of even 1.5°C would have grave consequences. Against that there is widespread concern that current targets and commitments could even lead to a 3°C increase.

### A key object for the next milestone UN climate summit due in September 2020 must be to obtain commitments to limit any increase to 1.5° C or less.

### As the British naturalist, Sir David Attenborough, stated at COP24: “if we don’t take action, the collapse of our civilisations and the extinction of much of the natural world is on the horizon”. However, there remain a large number of people around the world who do not believe that there is a serious threat, including the US President.

## The Paris Agreement is part of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). It covers mitigation of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, adaptation and finance. 195 countries have signed the Agreement and 185 are already party to it.

### Under the Agreement, countries have committed to increase their overall ability to adapt to adverse impacts of climate change and foster both climate resilience and low GHG development, and to make ‘financial flows’ consistent with this goal, provided that this does not threaten food production.

### These commitments include the so-called 20/20/20 targets, namely reduction of greenhouse gas emissions by 20%, the increase of renewables to 20% of consumption, and an increase of energy efficiency to save up to 20% in energy consumption. Countries have also undertaken to reach "global peaking of greenhouse gas emissions as soon as possible".

### Each country must determine, plan, and regularly report on the contribution that it is undertaking to mitigate global warming, although there is no mechanism to force any country to set a specific target by a specific date. Each new target set is expected however to achieve more than previous targets.

## Considerable uncertainty has been caused by the US Administration's stated intention to withdraw from the Agreement and by what effects this could have in practice. The earliest effective date for that under the Agreement is November 2020, shortly before the end of the President’s current term of office. Nevertheless, the US Administration has already started to put into effect policy changes that are contrary to the Agreement.

## This uncertainty opens the way for the EU and PR China together to assume global leadership in ensuring that both the SDGs and the Paris Agreement remain top priorities, building on the strong interest in these agreements shown by most other major and growing economies. To date however many fast-emerging economies have yet to make any other notable efforts to help those countries further behind in their development, without which progress will be poor.

# **Sustainability and the ‘circular economy’**

## The adoption of the SDGs and the Paris Agreement are the latest culmination in and manifestation of the growing global awareness – gradually built over many decades - of the need for greater sustainability, that the world’s resources are finite and that waste needs to be minimised.

### In the 1960s, the publication in the US of Rachel Carson’s “The Silent Spring” drew attention to the devastating effect that the use of certain pesticides was having on the environment, despite the beneficial effects these may have had in tackling disease and other problems. Heavily polluted rivers and the effects of acid rain in both the developed and developing world further drew attention to widespread global environmental degradation, as did the huge and exponentially increasing amount of waste, both organic and inorganic, including plastics, generated by an increasingly “throw-away” society. Worsening pollution through the uninhibited use and burning of fossil fuels also became a major cause for worldwide concern.

### The two oil crises of the 1970s highlighted the fact that the world’s reserves of oil and other fossil fuels are finite, whilst in the 1980s gaps identified in the world’s ozone layer helped draw attention to increasing atmospheric problems. In Europe important moves were made towards conservation, recycling and reuse, and in 1989 the European chemicals industry launched its Responsible Care programme as manufacturing industry began to accept its share of responsibility for enhanced sustainability.

### The 1989 European Parliamentary elections in turn showed a big increase in the number of Green votes, as deep environmental concern spread throughout communities. The core threat of fundamental climate change itself began to emerge by the turn of the century.

## All this has led to the growth of the concept of a circular economy, both in Europe and in China, as previously discussed by the Round Table. A 'circular economy' has been described as an economic system aimed at minimising waste and making the most of resources. As opposed to the traditional approach of a ‘take, make and dispose’ model of production, the aim of a circular economy is to minimise both resource input and waste and emissions and energy leakage. This can be achieved through a regenerative approach based on long lasting design, maintenance, repair, reuse, re-manufacturing, refurbishing and recycling.

### Many assert that a sustainable world does not mean a drop in the quality of life for consumers, and can be achieved without loss of revenue or extra costs: it is stated that circular business models can be as profitable as linear models, and that consumers can continue to enjoy similar products and services.

## The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) has highlighted its support for a circular economy, especially following the empowerment by COP22 in Marrakech in 2016 of the inclusion and involvement of ‘non-state actors’, and following the adoption by the European Commission (EC) of the EU Action Plan on the Circular Economy. The EESC has urged full engagement by civil society to help ensure that any transition is effective, equitable and just.

### Circular Economy roadmaps and strategies, developed at all governance levels (national, regional, local), help to outline and define what that country, region or city wishes to achieve, and the steps needed to get there. The EESC, which is preparing a new Opinion on the subject, commissioned a study[[2]](#footnote-2) (published in May 2019) to conduct a review of such European roadmaps and strategies, in order to identify common threads, as well as point to the synergies and the potential for greater cooperation and alliance building.

### The EESC and the EC have also, as a joint initiative, launched the European Circular Economy Stakeholder Platform (ECESP). This provides a focal point for circular economy roadmaps and strategies, enabling the sharing of experience and knowledge, and sets out to produce both an adaptable model strategy as well as encouragement for including a broad range of civil society actors as stakeholders in any transition. It aims to include every stage of strategy and roadmap development – from design and conception, to implementation and monitoring progress.

## Most of these European roadmaps and strategies are comprehensive, addressing the transition from a linear to a circular model on value chain stages such as production, consumption, waste management, secondary raw materials, innovation and investment.

### Activities are often specifically referenced as designed to meet the Paris Agreement or to help realise the SDGs, as well as to address global challenges such as resource scarcity and the limitations of current economic models for the sustainable management of resources within acceptable environmental and social boundaries.

### The SDGs and the Paris Agreement appear to be a powerful driving force behind most such initiatives, which are also empowered by active EU support and encouragement.

### There is often a thematic focus linked to the territorial aspects of a particular locality, region or EU Member State. For example, in Extremadura in Spain, the conservation of land for pasture is a key component for the region's long term economic performance; the Finnish national strategy has a strong focus on forestry.

### Those strategies that emphasise inclusiveness take a full value chain approach within a given sector, such as manufacturing, agriculture, food or water management. This helps identify key stakeholders in the transition to a circular economy, and can include horizontal topics that can be grouped into technical, product-focused, network-focused or those based on territorial development.

### Many include a broad role for stakeholders in order to encourage participation and involvement in any transition, whilst those that are more sector-focused tend to have a more restricted base of relevant stakeholders. The most common form of strategy so far is one that is all-encompassing – incorporating multiple sectorial loops and encouraging partnerships.

# **SDGs, the Paris Agreement and the key role of trade and investment**

## A core element of the EU – China Strategic Partnership is our significant trading partnership, which has been growing exponentially over many years. Trade and investment will need to play a core role if the SDGs and the Paris Agreement are to be fully realised. This will be particularly so with trade in industrial goods and in agriculture, where the SDGs are more directly relevant. Trade is specifically mentioned in 9 SDGs (but just once in the MDGs[[3]](#footnote-3)).

### To meet the SDGs and the Paris Agreement undertakings will have profound effects on world trade. They will need to be placed at the heart of all future trade policy, practices and negotiations. UNCTAD estimate that to achieve the SDG targets an extra USD 2.5 **trillion** will have to be found annually, much of it from the private sector. As Roberto Azevedo, the WTO Director General, has previously pointed out, the MDGs have already shown the "transformative potential of trade"[[4]](#footnote-4).

## As the 2015 WTO Nairobi Ministerial Declaration spelt out, international trade has a role to play towards ‘achieving sustainable, robust and balanced growth for all’[[5]](#footnote-5). It stressed the important part the WTO has to play in achieving the SDGs, which in turn would become far more difficult without an effective multilateral trade mechanism.

### The impact on climate change of trade and investment is also important. Negotiations for a plurilateral Environmental Goods Agreement (EGA) promised an important step in integrating climate change with multilateral trade policy - further multilateral action is still necessary to promote greater consistency.

## Trade in agriculture has a particularly important role to play, critically so for the realisation of SDGs 2 (Hunger/Food Security), 12 (Sustainable consumption/ production) and 15 (Land Degradation).

### It also has an essential role to play in meeting Goals 1 (Poverty/Undernutrition), 8 (Inclusive, sustainable economic growth), 9 (Infrastructure), 10 (Reduced Inequalities), 13 (Climate change), 3 (Well-being), 5 (Gender equality) and 7 (Energy). It will need too to be in full synergy with other forms of action, including development.

## The EC produced its Communication "Next Steps for a Sustainable European Future: European Union action for sustainability” in November 2016[[6]](#footnote-6), which set out to integrate the SDGs fully "in the European policy framework and current Commission priorities", as indeed it is bound to do under the Lisbon Treaty[[7]](#footnote-7). It stated the SDGs "will be a cross-cutting dimension" for the EU's global trading strategy. In turn, the EESC recommended the EU undertake a full impact assessment on its likely effects.

## The EESC believes that the EU is uniquely placed to drive the SDG agenda forward:

* it carries weight as one of the world's leading exporters and importers,
* it has proven ability to play an effective bridging role between developed and developing countries,
* it is no longer seen to be primarily defensive on agriculture,
* it has a proven sustained interest in trade and development and
* it has the ability as shown in Nairobi to produce fresh and balanced thinking.

# **Encouraging greater EU – PR China cooperation**

## In advance of the 21st EU – China summit, the European Commission issued a document “EU – China – A Strategic outlook” in March 2019. This emphasised that “the EU's and China's shared commitments and interest in global sustainable development and the 2030 Agenda present opportunities for closer cooperation, including in third countries”.

### This continued: “There is a real need to partner up and deliver the significant resources needed to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. Given China’s significant investment in partner countries, it should increase its engagement as an Official Development Assistance donor and a partner in multilateral fora. In this respect, we should establish a dialogue, seek synergies and engage further to maintain momentum on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals in third countries”.

## The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) offers a unique opportunity for such EU – PR China cooperation. The Round Table has already examined the SDGs at three of its last four meetings, with the last two specifically looking at the connection between the SDGs and the BRI.

### The 2017 Joint Statement of the Round Table "emphasises that the implementation of BRI should contribute to the realisation of the UN 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals and the implementation of the Paris Agreement on Climate Change". The EESC believes it important that a formal connection be made here.

### The 2018 Joint Statement further added that "with respect to important infrastructure initiatives, that as important trade and investment partners, the EU and the PRC should continue to align the development and implementation of major initiatives, and deepen cooperation in trade, investment facilitation, e-commerce, connectivity, infrastructure, IT, energy, people-to-people contacts and other fields". Authorities on both sides, it added, should "ensure all joint initiatives and projects are fiscally and environmentally sustainable, and thus, contribute to the achievement of the SDGs". The statement underlined that "both the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement highlight the outstanding needs for global infrastructure, and finds that all SDGs need to be taken into consideration in the context of the BRI and the Euro-Asian Connectivity Strategy".

### The 2018 Round Table concluded: "that, for major projects to be beneficial to both sides, they need to deliver mutual benefit and to be transparent, interoperable, reciprocal and sustainable, based on consultation, contribution and shared benefits".

## As previously noted, the most relevant SDGs concerning the BRI include:

## Goal 6 (Clean water and sanitation),

## Goal 7 (Energy),

## Goal 9 (Infrastructure),

## Goal 8 (Inclusive/ sustainable economic growth, employment and decent work), and

## Goal 14 (Oceans, seas and marine resources).

### Many other SDGs must also be taken into account, notably Goal 5 (Gender Equality), Goal 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), Goal 12 (Sustainable consumption and production), and Goal 15 (Sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, halt and reverse land degradation, halt biodiversity loss).

# **EU – PR China co-operation on Climate Change**

## At the Brussels 21st EU – China Summit, both sides reconfirmed the commitment made at the 20th Summit in July 2018 that climate change will become a “main pillar" of their relationship. The April 2019 Summit Joint Statement underlined the “strong commitment to implement the Paris Agreement” and stressed “the importance of showing resolve on the clean energy transition and of assuming greater leadership on the global environmental agenda”. Both sides agreed to “reinforce their cooperation on green finance in order to harness private capital flows towards a more environmentally sustainable” and therefore carbon-neutral economy, and to work together towards a successful outcome of both the UN climate and SDG summits in September.

### The 20th Summit put climate change at the heart of the EU – China relationship, highlighting the intention to work together to drive the whole climate process forward. It described a series of joint steps, including “triangular” cooperation with developing countries to increase their capacity to combat climate change and build clean energy.

### It also declared that the Paris Agreement was “proof that with shared political will and mutual trust, multilateralism can success in building fair and effective solutions to the most critical global problems of our time”. It called on “all parties” to uphold the Agreement, which of course should include the US.

## COP24, the 2018 UN Climate Change Conference held in Katowice, agreed the rules to implement the Paris Agreement, which is due to come into full force in 2020, when new targets will be set. These set out how governments will measure and report on their emissions cutting efforts, but other issues, such as ways to increase existing commitments or support for poorer countries, were postponed. As already mentioned, the IPCC report shows that an increase of 1.5°C would already have grave consequences, yet current targets could lead to a temperature increase of 3°C.

## China is one of the main brokers of the Paris Agreement, which the EU has welcomed. In advance of COP24, it was notable that China took a leading role in hosting many of the preparatory meetings. This contrasted strongly with some other countries, notably the US and Russia, who refused to give full backing to the IPCC report.

### China however faces as strong a challenge as any country to meet commitments made in Paris. China produces and uses more energy than any other country. It produces more CO2 than the EU and US combined, and more than 60 per cent of China’s power comes from coal.

### China is already the largest investor in renewable energy. It will nevertheless face a far harder task than most in sourcing 20% of its energy needs by 2030 from renewable energy sources and nuclear power. Tripling its share of non-fossil fuels will present a severe challenge if this target is to be met, and China will need major development of its emissions trading scheme. Nevertheless, China has committed to update its national climate pledge on time by 2020 in line with the Paris Agreement.

### The EU has welcomed China as a strategic partner on climate change and the clean energy transition. The “EU – China – A Strategic outlook” underlines that the EU “needs to continue developing a strong relationship with China, given the sheer size of its emissions (around 27 % of the global amount), which continue to rise”. It adds: “our partnership is essential for the success of global climate action, clean energy transition efforts and ocean governance”.

### As part of the Paris Agreement, China pledged to peak its greenhouse gas emissions by 2030. The EU nevertheless is seeking a commitment by China to peak emissions before then. This, it says, would give new impetus to fighting climate change in line with the Paris Agreement and inspire action globally.

### At the same time, the EU points out that China is constructing coal-fired power stations in many countries, notably in Bosnia, which undermines the global goals set out in the Paris Agreement. This matter needs to be addressed.

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1. The Paris Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC COP21). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [Circular economy strategies and roadmaps in Europe: Identifying synergies and the potential for cooperation and alliance building](https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/our-work/publications-other-work/publications/circular-economy-strategies-and-roadmaps-europe-identifying-synergies-and-potential-cooperation-and-alliance-building) (2019) by Spatial Foresight, on behalf of the EESC [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. MDG 8, *Develop a Global Partnership for Development* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. UN Speech, 21.09.2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <https://www.wto.org/english/thewto_e/minist_e/mc10_e/mindecision_e.htm>. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. [SWD(2016) 390 final](http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1481618952890&uri=CELEX:52016SC0390). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Art. 21 (3) TFEU. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)