

# Social Sustainability – Concepts and Benchmarks

The original [full study](#)<sup>1</sup> reviews different concepts of social sustainability, ways to benchmark or measure it and analyses how social sustainability is integrated into EU policymaking and Member State practice.

## Background

'Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (World Commission for Environment and Development, 1987).

The idea of sustainable development as a policy aim was first defined in 1987 by the Brundtland Commission when it was tasked by the UN General Assembly to develop a 'global agenda for change'. Sustainable development is generally considered to be comprised of three pillars: environmental sustainability, economic sustainability and social sustainability.

Enshrined in the EU Treaty, sustainable development is a core EU objective. The EU helped shape the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which places the three pillars on an equal footing via 17 development goals (see figure below). Commission President Ursula von der Leyen identified the implementation of the UN SDGs as the cornerstone of the EU's overarching long-term economic model to follow the current Europe 2020 strategy. Indeed, cross-cutting challenges



in Europe will require an integrated policy response. These include, amongst others: increasing inter-generational inequality, climate change and diminishing resources, migration towards developed countries, demographic change, skills shortages and mismatch, territorial disparities between and within EU Member States.

While social goals have received more attention in EU policy-making over the past decade, the concept of 'social sustainability' is still not frequently used and its role in the sustainable development debate remains unclear. Therefore, the present study aims at clarifying how this pillar of sustainable development might fit into the European policy debate.

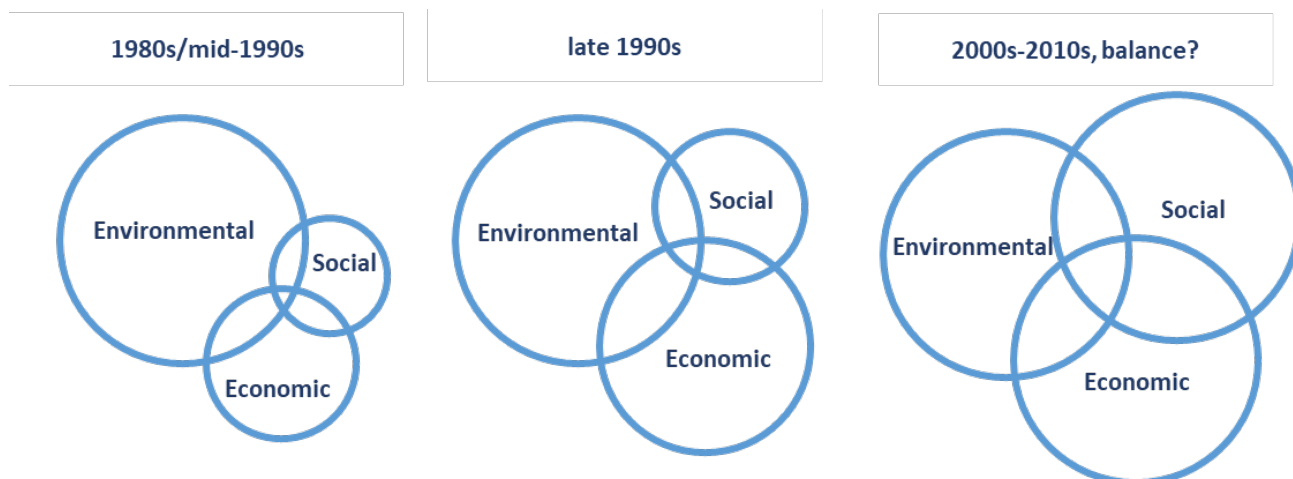
## Key findings

There are multiple definitions of social sustainability – most include the main substantive aspects of social development, such as access to basic needs, fair distribution of income, good working conditions and decent wages, equality of rights, access to social and health services and to education, and social cohesion and inclusion. Inter-generational equity and the relationship between social development, environmental protection and economic growth are also key elements.

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Various indicator systems have been developed to measure progress towards the UN SDGs, including an 100-indicator EU sustainable development indicator set (SDIS) that is used to track Member State progress. Around half of these indicators feed into measuring the social dimension. There remains however a lack of clear targets per indicator and no systematic way of assessing interrelationships between social development and the other dimensions of sustainability.



Social objectives have gained importance in the EU, as evidenced by the adoption of the European Pillar of Social Rights in 2017 and its upcoming Action Plan. Elements of social sustainability - as distinct from social policy - are becoming more visible in EU policy. At the end of 2019 the European Commission published its European Green Deal, a blueprint for a sustainable economy founded on the concept of a socially just transition. A revamping of Europe's main economic and fiscal policy coordination process, the European Semester, seems to have pulled sustainability into the heart of this process, with its Annual Sustainable Growth Survey and the inclusion of SDGs in Country Reports. The Better Regulation Agenda that guides the EU policy cycle also uses elements of social sustainability in policy impact assessment. The EU funds directly target social issues, and more strategic targeting of funds in the future MFF may inspire a more integrated approach.

In sum, the study finds that EU policies remain sectorally-focused: there is significant emphasis on social issues, but limited evidence of policies or policy processes that target sustainability overall. In light of the global and EU commitments to sustainability, the study proposes recommendations for how social sustainability might be better implemented in EU policymaking, a few of which are listed below:

- A comprehensive EU strategic framework on sustainability could be developed that would allow for political buy-in across institutions and stakeholders, as well as funding programmes, guidance and monitoring mechanisms, policy design and evaluation. It could include a definition, targets and would foster coordination among policies, such that 'sectoral' policies would be designed to contribute towards achievement of all three pillars of sustainability;
- An EU working definition of sustainable social development should focus on the question of how social development could support environmental and economic sustainability and vice versa;
- The numerous social sustainability indicators could be used to design composite indices reflecting the link between social sustainability and the other two pillars;
- Multidimensional benchmarking could use composite indicators and targets defined within an overall EU strategic approach to sustainability.

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/648782/IPOL\\_STU\(2020\)648782\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/648782/IPOL_STU(2020)648782_EN.pdf).

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