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**Article**

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# Implementing Sustainable Development Goals within the COVID-19 Pandemic Future Challenges for the 2030 Agenda

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## Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has severely changed the world economy and jeopardized the implementation of Sustainable Development Goals on a large scale. Progress in meeting the goals of the 2030 Agenda has been significantly disrupted and stalled, undermining previous efforts of governments and nations. Furthermore, the economic slowdown of the global economy as an effect of COVID-19 has not improved the situation of climate change. The side effects of the pandemic are serious in every sphere of life, especially in the exacerbation of existing social inequalities, which results in threatening the achievements of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The aim of this article is to present the current status of SDG implementation with reference to the 2030 Agenda. Furthermore, it will examine the impact of COVID-19 on the progress of SDGs on a global scale, focusing mainly on the statistics from the *Sustainable Development Report 2021*. The purpose of the study is also to describe the results of the analysis that examines the major effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on European countries, including Central and Eastern European Countries (CEECs), in terms of the implementation of SDGs. The study is limited to the context of Goal 1 (No poverty), Goal 2 (Zero hunger) and Goal 3 (Good health and well-being). Another purpose, recognized as the added value of the research, is to identify the main challenges related to sustainable development while implementing the SDGs in the CEECs. Finally, the author investigates the post-COVID priorities and pandemic strategic response plans.

The research methods include an analysis of available documentary and literary sources on the topics in question, based on the development of relevant statistical surveys, and the deductive approach, to draw conclusions from the reports of international organizations. The research was



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based on the global indicator framework, which includes 231 unique indicators that monitored the stage and progress of the SDGs' implementation. Global SDG Indicators Data Platform (SDG Indicators Database) was the source of data.

**Keywords:** sustainable development, sustainable development goals, Agenda 2030, poverty, food security, social inclusion

**JEL:** A1, A12, B55, F18, O13, O18, Q01, Q13, Q17, Q18, Q56

## Introduction

All 193 Member States of the United Nations (UN) adopted 17 goals for sustainable development in 2015. Fulfilling 'Sustainable Development Goals' (SDGs) was connected with maintaining economic growth in connection with reducing poverty. Further issues raised by the SDGs within the Agenda 2030 were a response to social needs, including quality education, good health and wellbeing, gender equality, and decent job opportunities (Meschede 2020). The third type of SDG refers to environment protection, mitigating climate change, the life on land and below the water, and the care of green areas (forests). Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, a study on the progress towards SDGs in 2019 (Sachs et al. 2019) revealed that 'No country is on track for achieving all 17 goals with major performance gaps even in the top countries on SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), SDG 13 (Climate Action), SDG 14 (Life Below Water) and SDG 15 (Life on Land). Income and wealth inequalities, as well as gaps in health and education outcomes by population groups also remain important policy challenges in developing and developed countries alike.'

The major issues of concern were actions on climate (SDG 13) and maintaining biodiversity (SDGs 14 and 15). Food production and quality, as well as land use, were at risk of not meeting consumers' expectations. There are areas where some progress has been recorded (human development indicators, including poverty), but the path of progress was insufficient to reach the 2030 targets. According to the Human Development Report 2019 (United Nations Development Programme 2019, p. 3), 'A new generation of severe inequalities in human development is emerging, even if many of the unresolved inequalities of the 20<sup>th</sup> century are declining. Under the shadow of the climate crisis and sweeping technological change, inequalities in human development are taking new forms in the 21<sup>st</sup> century'. Witnessing the lack of progress on the main goals, the disregard for matters such as world peace, a healthy and vibrant society, technological development, and acceptance of cultural diversity also came into question in the difficult times of the pandemic.

Nowadays, the global effectiveness of implementing SDGs is at a critical moment in history as it has been disturbed by intense efforts to reduce the consequences of the pandemic and prevent more fatalities. The pandemic threatens the progress made in alleviating

poverty and socio-economic development over the last two decades, and it casts a shadow over the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development – in particular, the commitment ‘not to leave anyone behind’ (Abidoye et al. 2021). According to the “Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals” (United Nations 2021a) report by the UN Secretary General, in 2020, over 100 million people were pushed back into poverty and hunger, an equivalent of 255 million full-time jobs were lost, and an additional 101 million children and youth fell below the minimum reading proficiency level. Global unemployment is rising sharply, and with the withdrawal of subsidies and guarantees of social assistance, the number of people who are unemployed will continue to grow. The UN predicts that as a result of the COVID-19 crisis, global human development, expressed as the Human Development Index (HDI), a measure of the level of education, health, and life in individual countries, will drop for the first time since measurements began, i.e., from 1990 (United Nations Development Programme 2020). The almost two years of the global pandemic brought millions of deaths. All the recovery efforts were insufficient and misdirected towards achieving sustainable development. The crisis we are facing now squanders all the achievements of human development, extending the transition to a greener, fair and inclusive economy, and throwing progress on the SDGs even further off track (United Nations 2021b).

The article aims to ascertain the main SDG principles within the 2030 Agenda. The second section of the article is dedicated to understanding and defining the background of the concept of sustainable development. It will cover the evolution of SDGs with the addition to the Millennium Development Goals and the 2030 Agenda. It will also identify the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the implementation of SDGs and explain the key provisions of the actions taken by international organizations over the period examined. Furthermore, it will present statics from the Sustainable Development Index 2021, focusing on the progress toward SDGs 1-3 (No poverty, Zero hunger, Good health and well-being). Finally, the article indicates the remedial measures and actions needed to overcome the situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, especially mitigating poverty and hunger. The article presents considerations on society’s good health and wellbeing at a time when all efforts towards achieving global health security have been disturbed.

## **The background of the concept of Sustainable Development regarding Sustainable Development Goals and implementing the 2030 Agenda. Main SDG targets (SDG 1, SDG 2, SDG 3)**

### **The concept of Sustainable Development**

Sustainable development as a concept should be perceived in a very broad context, including various spheres of human activity (economy, social issues, environment). Currently, sustainable development, as one of the main subjects of economic and ecological research, is undertaken mainly by ecological economics, energy analysis, environmental economics, and other related disciplines (Jeżowski 2000, p. 57). Due to its extensive nature, there are numerous definitions of the term ‘sustainable development’.

Referring to the most common definition from the Brundtland Report “Our Common Future” from 1987, sustainable development is defined as the ‘Path of human progress that fulfills the needs and aspirations of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.’ It is a generalized concept and essentially means meeting the needs and aspirations of today’s generation in a way that does not limit the ability to meet the needs of future generations (Estes 1993). This definition clearly indicates that the economic and civilization development of the current generation should not take place at the expense of depleting non-renewable resources and environmental degradation for the benefit of the next generations, and thus the right to further development (Murphy 2012, pp. 15–29).

The principle of sustainable development calls for a declaration of actions undertaken by national governments to save the natural environment for future generations. That statement refers to one of the cardinal principles of the “Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union” (Art. 11 Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, p. 53) – the principle of integrating the objectives and requirements of environmental protection into policies, strategies and activities in other areas of state activity. It underlines the need to identify and assess potential environmental effects in advance, within the framework specified by the applicable legal regulations, consulting these issues with interested communities, organizations and individuals, and adopting appropriate measures and solutions to eliminate environmental risks or reduce them to an acceptable minimum.

Sustainable development has been one of the main goals of EU policy for many years. In 2001, leaders of the European Union (EU) adopted the document “A Sustainable Europe for a better world: A Sustainable Development Strategy for the European Union”, updated in 2006 under the name “The EU’s Renewed Sustainable Development Strategy – SDS”. The document included new challenges and set a long-term vision of the De-

velopment Policy, in which elements such as economic development, social cohesion and environmental protection go hand in hand and complement each other. Under the slogan “Our Will to Accomplish Sustainable Development,” the concept has been defined as follows:

Sustainable development means that the needs of the present generation should be met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It is an overarching objective of the European Union set out in the Treaty, governing all the Union’s policies and activities. It is about safeguarding the earth’s capacity to support life in all its diversity and is based on the principles of democracy, gender equality, solidarity, the rule of law and respect for fundamental rights, including freedom and equal opportunities for all. It aims at the continuous improvement of the quality of life and well-being on Earth for present and future generations. To that end it promotes a dynamic economy with full employment and a high level of education, health protection, social and territorial cohesion and environmental protection in a peaceful and secure world, respecting cultural diversity (Council of the European Union 2006, p. 2).

In 2010, the European Union approved the document “EUROPE 2020 – Strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth “, replacing The Lisbon Strategy of 2000. The strategy identified the following interrelated priorities for the future development of Europe (European Commission 2010):

- smart growth – developing an economy based on knowledge and innovation,
- sustainable development – supporting an economy that uses resources more efficiently and is more environmentally friendly and more competitive,
- inclusive growth – fostering a high-tech economy,
- an employment level that ensures social and territorial cohesion.

## The 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals

Moving on with the considerations on the implementation of sustainable development, in 2015, the UN adopted 17 SDGs within Agenda 2030, thus making an effort to alleviate poverty, protect Earth, and ensure prosperity for all (United Nations 2021c). The document ‘Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development’ adopted by the UN is an action program of unprecedented scope and importance, defining a model of sustainable development at the global level. Its framework goes far beyond the previously pursued Millennium Development Goals, adopted in 2000. In line with the 2030 Agenda, the contemporary modernization effort should focus on erad-

icating poverty in all its manifestations while pursuing a number of economic, social and environmental goals (Ministerstwo Rozwoju i Technologii 2021).

The process of setting new development goals (SDGs) was initiated during the UN Conference on Sustainable Development, which took place in June 2012 in Rio de Janeiro, to complete the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals and to formulate an agenda for further global development after 2015 (post-2015 Development Agenda). The new SDGs were agreed upon in nearly three years of multilateral negotiations with governments, the private sector, academia, and civil society. An Open Working Group – a platform established for this task – defined 17 SDGs and 169 related tasks that reflect the three dimensions of sustainable development: economic, social, and environmental. The assumption is that efforts to achieve the goals require activity and maintaining progress simultaneously at these three levels and in an integrated manner (Bettelli 2021). The first six SDGs strengthen and expand specific targets from the Millennium Development Goals. In addition, goals 7–10 broaden the scope of the Millennium Development Goals Agenda and identify the root causes of poverty and inequality, as well as the interconnections between the economic, social, and environmental pillars of sustainable development. Goals 11–15 aim to measure human impact on the environment and how this affects social and economic development. The last two goals create a conducive environment to achieve sustainable development.

SDG	Title
1	No poverty
2	Zero hunger
3	Good health and well-being
4	Quality education
5	Gender equality
6	Clean water and sanitation
7	Affordable and clean energy
8	Decent work and economic growth
9	Industry, innovation and infrastructure
10	Reduced inequalities
11	Sustainable cities and communities
12	Responsible consumption and production
13	Climate action
14	Life below water
15	Life on land
16	Peace, justice and strong institutions
17	Partnerships for the goals

Picture 1. United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals

Source: United Nations Development Programme (2015).

The 2030 Agenda was finally adopted by 193 UN member states at the UN General Assembly in New York in September 2015. The Agenda also includes the UN's Addis Ababa Action Agenda (outcome document of the Third International Conference on Financing for Development: *Addis Ababa Action Agenda*), adopted at the 3<sup>rd</sup> International Development Financing Conference in July 2015. It sets out the financial resources needed to implement the 2030 Agenda, including national resources, private funding sources and official development assistance (ODA). The *Addis Ababa Action Agenda* and the 2030 Agenda jointly established a "Technology Facilitation Mechanism" (TFM) to support SDG implementation through multi-stakeholder collaboration and partnerships, sharing of experiences, best practices, policy advice, and all the necessary information (United Nations Division For Sustainable Development Goals 2015).



Picture 2. Logo of United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals

Source: United Nations in China (2015).

Another integral part of the 2030 Agenda is the Paris Agreement, which underlines the impact of climate change on human and environmental health. SDG 13 (climate change) is in the eye of actions supervised by the UN Conference on Climate Change (UNFCCC). The principal goal of the Paris Agreement is to limit global warming to well below 2 degrees Celsius compared to pre-industrial levels. The Paris Agreement works on a 5-year cycle of increasingly ambitious climate actions carried out by countries. Nevertheless, without the necessary actions to reduce greenhouse emissions, the world is unlikely to achieve the 2030 Agenda (United Nations Climate Change 2015).



## **Main targets of Sustainable Development Goals (Goal 1, Goal 2 and Goal 3)**

According to the UN policy, the 17 goals represent the promotion of sustainable development in all its manifestations, i.e., environmental, economic, and social dimensions (Halvorsen 2017, pp. 13–36). In contrast to the approach of concentrating only on development in developing economies, the 2030 Agenda addresses the need for action in all countries. Each goal is supplemented with concrete targets and priorities. As mentioned before, the targets are in line with the measurable indicators, which total 169 targets and more than 200 indicators. The article focuses on the first three SDGs (SDG 1, SDG2, SDG 3). To understand the idea of these goals, it is vital to outline their major targets. The reason for selecting such SDGs is mainly due to the obvious linkages between environmental quality, human health, and wellbeing. Another factor when choosing the first three SDGs is that the COVID–19 pandemic has dramatically influenced the implementation of those goals, which will be demonstrated by presenting relevant statistics.

## **Goals of selected SDGs, according to the UN's 2030 Agenda (United Nations Development Programme 2015)**

### **Sustainable Development Goal 1 (No poverty)**

- By 2030, reduce at least by half the proportion of men, women and children of all ages living in poverty in all its dimensions according to national definitions.
- Implement nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all, including floors, and by 2030 achieve substantial coverage of the poor and the vulnerable.
- By 2030, ensure that all men and women, in particular the poor and the vulnerable, have equal rights to economic resources, as well as access to basic services, ownership and control over land and other forms of property, inheritance, natural resources, appropriate new technology and financial services, including microfinance.
- By 2030, build the resilience of the poor and those in vulnerable situations and reduce their exposure and vulnerability to climate-related extreme events and other economic, social and environmental shocks and disasters.
- Ensure significant mobilization of resources from a variety of sources, including through enhanced development cooperation, in order to provide adequate and predictable means for developing countries, in particular least developed countries, to implement programs and policies to end poverty in all its dimensions.
- Create sound policy frameworks at the national, regional and international levels, based on pro-poor and gender-sensitive development strategies, to support accelerated investment in poverty eradication actions.

## **Sustainable Development Goal 2 (Zero hunger)**

### **(UN Sustainable Development Goals Knowledge Platform 2021)**

- By 2030, end all forms of malnutrition, including achieving by 2025 the internationally agreed targets on stunting and wasting in children under 5 years of age, and address the nutritional needs of adolescent girls, pregnant and lactating women and older persons.
- By 2030, double the agricultural productivity and incomes of small-scale food producers, in particular women, indigenous peoples, family farmers, pastoralists and fishers, including through secure and equal access to land, other productive resources and inputs, knowledge, financial services, markets and opportunities for value addition and non-farm employment.
- By 2030, ensure sustainable food production systems and implement resilient agricultural practices that increase productivity and production, that help maintain ecosystems, that strengthen capacity for adaptation to climate change, extreme weather, drought, flooding and other disasters, and that progressively improve land and soil quality.
- By 2020, maintain the genetic diversity of seeds, cultivated plants and farmed and domesticated animals and their related wild species, including through soundly managed and diversified seed and plant banks at the national, regional and international levels, and promote access to and fair and equitable sharing of benefits arising from the utilization of genetic resources and associated traditional knowledge, as internationally agreed.
- Increase investment, including through enhanced international cooperation, in rural infrastructure, agricultural research and extension services, technology development and plant and livestock gene banks in order to enhance agricultural productive capacity in developing countries, in particular least developed countries.
- Correct and prevent trade restrictions and distortions in world agricultural markets, including through the parallel elimination of all forms of agricultural export subsidies and all export measures with equivalent effect, in accordance with the mandate of the Doha Development Round.
- Adopt measures to ensure the proper functioning of food commodity markets and their derivatives and facilitate timely access to market information, including on food reserves, in order to help limit extreme food price volatility.

### **Sustainable Development Goal 3 (Good health and well-being)** **(UN Sustainable Development Goals Knowledge Platform 2021)**

- By 2030, reduce the global maternal mortality ratio to less than 70 per 100,000 live births.
- By 2030, end preventable deaths of newborns and children under 5 years of age, with all countries aiming to reduce neonatal mortality to at least as low as 12 per 1,000 live births and under-5 mortality to at least as low as 25 per 1,000 live births.
- By 2030, end the epidemics of AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria and neglected tropical diseases and combat hepatitis, water-borne diseases and other communicable diseases.
- By 2030, reduce by one-third premature mortality from non-communicable diseases through prevention and treatment and promote mental health and wellbeing.
- Strengthen the prevention and treatment of substance abuse, including narcotic drug abuse and harmful use of alcohol.
- By 2020, halve the number of global deaths and injuries from road traffic accidents.
- By 2030, ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health-care services, including for family planning, information and education, and the integration of reproductive health into national strategies and programs.
- Achieve universal health coverage, including financial risk protection, access to quality essential health-care services and access to safe, effective, quality and affordable essential medicines and vaccines for all.
- By 2030, substantially reduce the number of deaths and illnesses from hazardous chemicals and air, water and soil pollution and contamination.
- Strengthen the implementation of the World Health Organization Framework Convention on Tobacco Control in all countries, as appropriate.
- Support the research and development of vaccines and medicines for the communicable and non-communicable diseases that primarily affect developing countries, provide access to affordable essential medicines and vaccines, in accordance with the Doha Declaration on the TRIPS Agreement and Public Health, which affirms the right of developing countries to use to the full the provisions in the Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights regarding flexibilities to protect public health, and, in particular, provide access to medicines for all.
- Substantially increase health financing and the recruitment, development, training and retention of the health workforce in developing countries, especially in least developed countries and small island developing states.
- Strengthen the capacity of all countries, in particular developing countries, for early warning, risk reduction and management of national and global health risks.

## Comparative analysis of the COVID-19 pandemic's Impact on the implementation of selected Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 1, SDG 2, SDG 3)

### Main findings of the Sustainable Development Report 2021

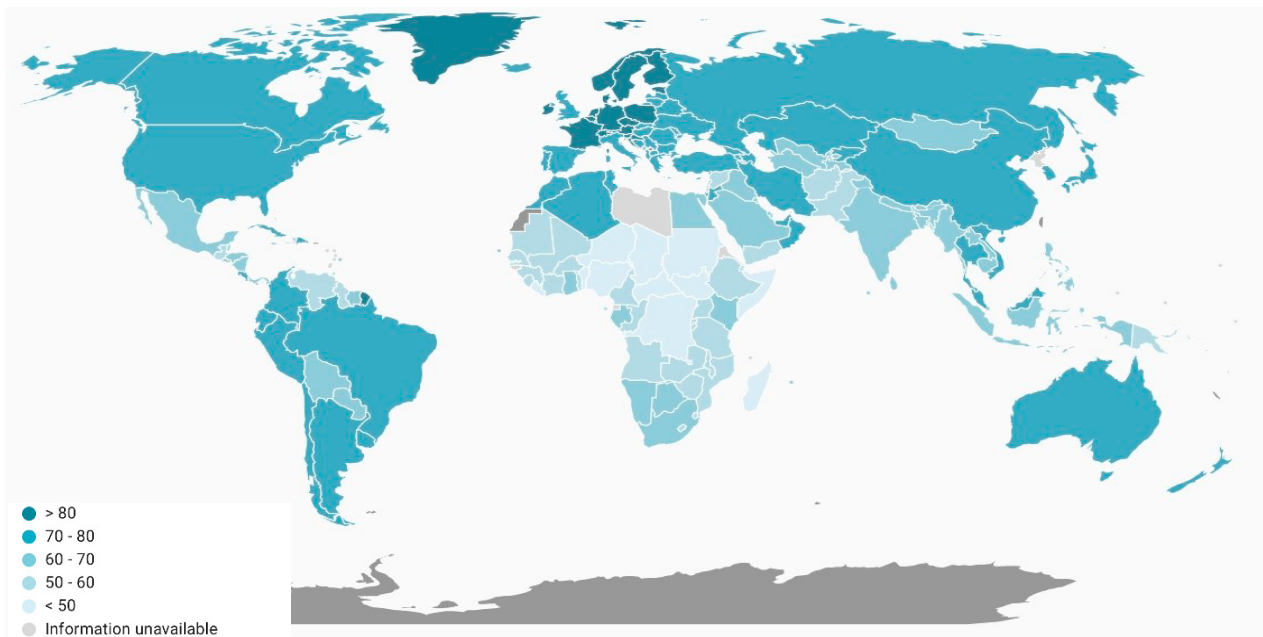
The ministerial declaration of the 2020 United Nations High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development recognized that “the poorest people and those living under difficult conditions are ignored in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda”. It was also pointed out that “these are the people most affected by the COVID-19 crisis” (United Nations Economic and Social Council 2020). Furthermore, it was confirmed that the “programme 2030 Agenda should be our joint action plan, aimed at better responsiveness and reconstruction”.

Across the EU, the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed and exacerbated existing inequalities. Thus it has a major impact on achieving the EU's Sustainable Development No. 10 (SDG 10) target, the premise of which is to reduce inequalities, as well as many other initiatives related to the SDG. While the virus has affected the lifestyle of all people, all societies and their underlying economies, it has also aggravated inequalities in terms of opportunities, income, health care, and social security around the world. The poorer strata of our society have experienced many deficiencies and inequalities. These people have unequal access to high-quality healthcare and other essential services, are exposed to disease, poor housing and overcrowding, inadequate working conditions, a high level of air pollution, insufficient sanitation and water supply, and a lack of access to high-quality education (Bubola, Fisher 2020). Dr. David Nabarro, Special Representative UN Secretary General for COVID, concluded: ‘Whether we like it or not, COVID is a disease of poverty, powerlessness, inequities and injustice – a disease of the disadvantaged – and gets entrenched in the poorest communities. We can only get rid of COVID if we respond together’ (Global Call to Action Against Poverty 2021).

As the considerations of the article are limited to a comparative analysis of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the implementation of the first three SDGs, it is vital to outline the latest findings and statistics regarding selected areas, i.e., No poverty, Zero hunger, and Good health and well-being.

One of the best sources of information on SDG implementation is the Sustainable Development Report and the SDG Index. The Sustainable Development Report (formerly the SDG Index & Dashboards) is a global assessment of countries' progress towards achieving the SDGs. Countries are ranked by their overall score, which measures their total progress towards achieving all 17 SDGs. The score can be interpreted as a percentage of SDG achievement, with a score of 100 indicating that all SDGs have been

achieved. The latest findings of the 2021 Sustainable Development Report revealed that the COVID–19 pandemic is an obstacle to sustainable development worldwide. For the first time since the adoption of the SDGs in 2015, the average global SDG Index in 2020 decreased compared to the previous year: the decline is largely due to the rise in poverty and unemployment rates following the outbreak of the COVID–19 pandemic. The pandemic affected all three dimensions of sustainable development: economic, social and environmental. Suppressing the pandemic through non-pharmaceutical interventions and global access to vaccines must remain the top priority of any government. As long as the pandemic is raging, there can be no sustainable development or economic recovery.



Picture 3. Sustainable Development Report-Overall Score, 2021 (SDR 2021)

Source: Sachs et al. (2021).

Picture 3 shows that low-income countries tend to have lower SDG Index scores. This is partly due to the nature of SDGs, which are largely focused on eradicating extreme poverty and ensuring access to basic services and infrastructure for all (SDGs 1–9). In addition, poorer countries lack adequate infrastructure and mechanisms to manage key environmental challenges addressed by SDGs 12–15. East and South Asia have made more progress on the SDG than any other region, both since 2010 and since the adoption of the goals in 2015. However, the three individual countries that made the most progress on the SDG Index are Bangladesh, Côte d’Ivoire, and Afghanistan. Meanwhile, Venezuela, Tuvalu, and Brazil recorded the greatest declines. At the top of the SDG 2021 Index, the best performers were three Nordic countries: Finland, Sweden and Denmark. All the top 20 countries except for Croatia are OECD countries. However, even OECD countries face major challenges in meeting several of the SDGs.

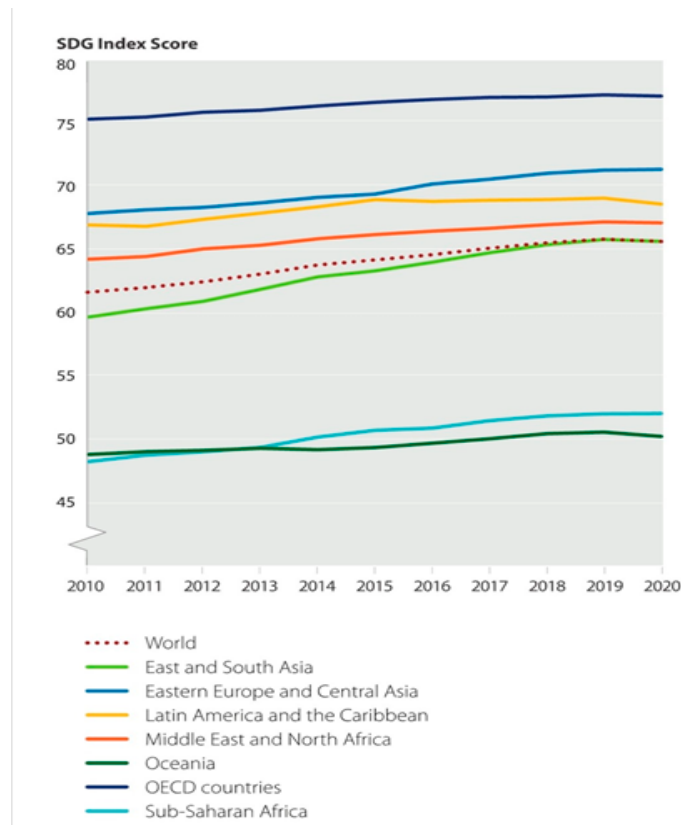


Figure 1. Progress on the SDG Index by region (2010–2020)

Source: Sachs et al. (2021).

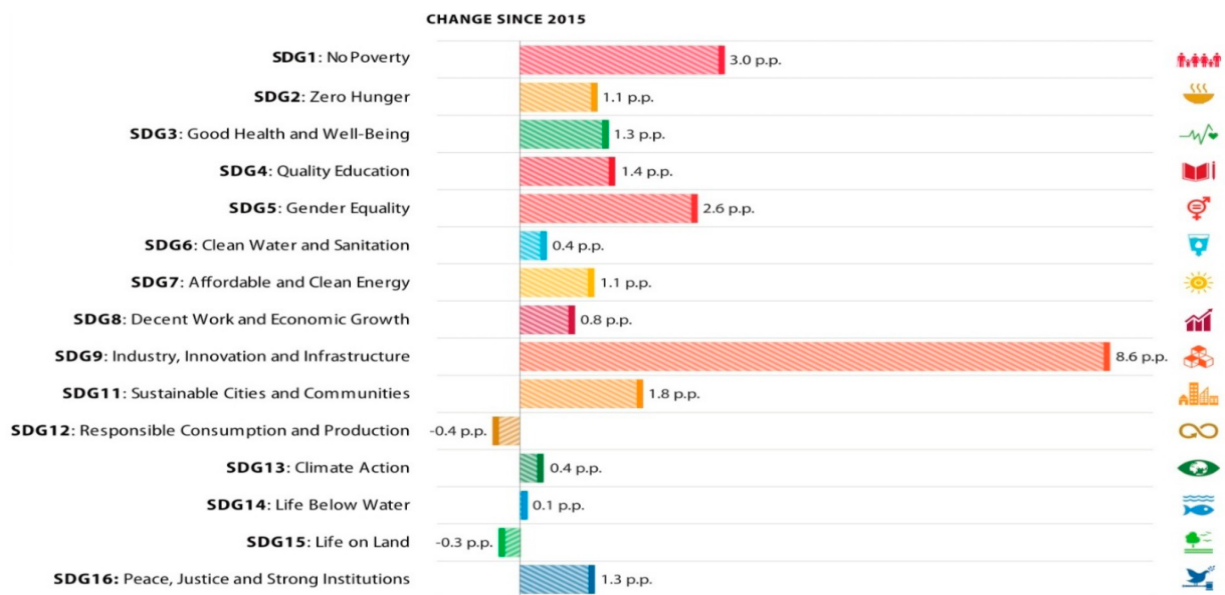


Figure 2. Progress in the world for each SDG since 2015 in percentage points

Source: Sachs et al. (2021).

## Progress by the selected SDGs

### Sustainable Development Goal 1 (No poverty)

The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2021 (United Nations 2021b) revealed that the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic reversed much of the progress in poverty reduction, with extreme global poverty rising in 2020 for the first time since the Asian financial crisis in the late 1990s. Even before COVID-19, the world was not on track to meet the goal of ending poverty by 2030, and it will remain out of reach without immediate and meaningful action. The crisis has demonstrated more clearly than ever the importance of disaster readiness and sound social protection systems. While the number of countries adopting disaster risk reduction strategies has increased significantly, and many temporary social protection measures have been introduced in response to the pandemic, much greater efforts are needed on both fronts to protect the most vulnerable. Overall, by 2018, the proportion of people living in extreme poverty worldwide had decreased by 1.4 percentage points since the 2015 SDGs were adopted, from 10% to 8.6% (United Nations Development Programme 2019). However, the rate of reduction had slowed to less than half a percentage point annually between 2015 and 2017, compared with one percentage point annually between 1990 and 2015. Based on historical trends, extreme poverty is projected to decline to 6% by 2030. But COVID-19 triggered a reversal in progress on SDG 1.

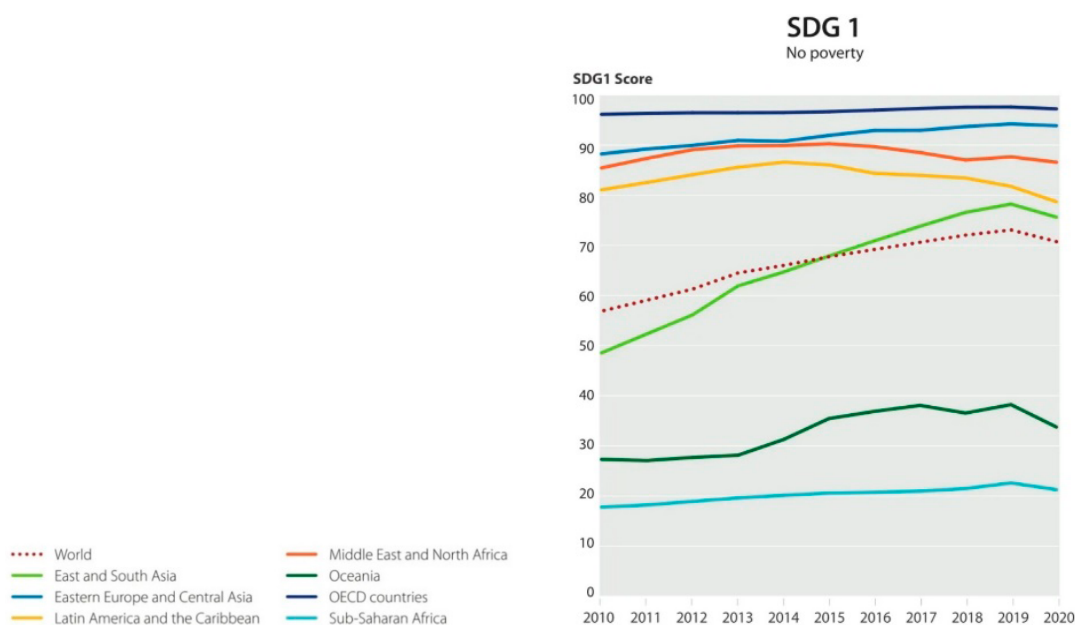
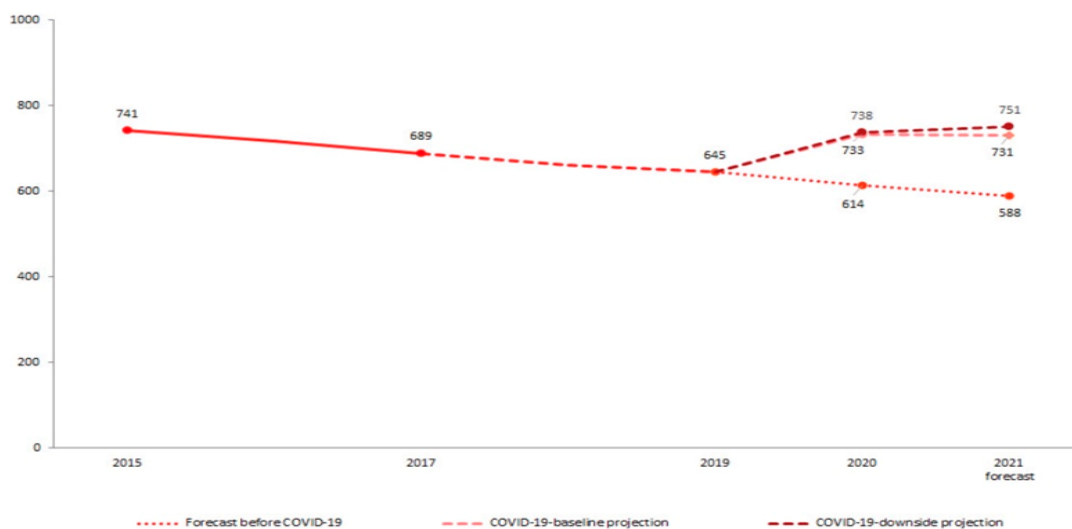


Figure 3. Progress by SDGs and regions (SDG1)

Source: Sachs et al. (2021).

The pandemic has intensified the threats to progress posed by conflict and climate change. Estimates suggest that in 2020, the number of the world’s poor increased by

119–124 million, 60% of whom live in South Asia. The news shows the first increase in the extreme poverty rate since 1998, from 8.4% in 2019 to 9.5% in 2020, undermining the progress made since 2016. The effects of the pandemic will not be short-lived. Based on current projections, the global poverty rate is expected to reach around 600 million people in 2030, without achieving the poverty eradication target.



**Figure 4.** Number of people living below \$1.90 a day, 2015–2017, 2018–2020 nowcast, and forecast before and after COVID-19 (millions)

Source: United Nations (2021b).

The share of the world’s workers living in extreme poverty more than halved between 2010 and 2019 – from 14% to 6.6%. However, the lockdowns and related public health measures due to COVID-19 severely affected the informal economy, where the vast majority of the working poor are employed. The related loss of income threatens to halt global progress in reducing in-work poverty. Poverty at work affects women and young people the most, and the pandemic is likely to aggravate these disparities (United Nations 2021b).

### Sustainable Development Goal 2 (Zero hunger)

Prior to the COVID 19 pandemic, in many parts of the world, progress towards SDG2 and SDG12-SDG15 was too slow. The lack of progress on SDG 2 (Zero hunger) was compounded by the increasing number of people suffering from malnutrition and the increasing share of overweight or obese people. Before the outbreak of the pandemic, 650 million people were hit by hunger, and around 2 billion people suffered from food insecurity – a number that has been rising since 2014 (Food and Agriculture Organization of United Nations 2021). The crisis has brought additional threats to global food and nutrition security. Disruptions to food supply chains and economic downturns have affected food systems



around the world and have threatened people’s access to food, making the goal of eradicating hunger even more distant.

COVID–19 is expected to exacerbate all forms of malnutrition, especially in children, due to loss of household income, lack of available and inexpensive nutritious food, decreased physical activity, and disruption of basic nutritional services. Even putting aside the effects of COVID–19, an estimated 230 million children suffer from malnutrition. Urgent, short-term action is needed to prevent increasing hunger, and the transformation of food systems is necessary to achieve a healthy and sustainable food future for all (World Health Organization 2021a). According to the World Food Programme report (World Food Programme 2021), more than half of all undernourished people (418 million) live in Asia; over a third (282 million) in Africa; a smaller percentage (60 million) in Latin America and the Caribbean (*Global Hunger Index... 2021*). However, the greatest increase in hunger occurred in Africa, where the estimated prevalence of malnutrition – at 21% of the population – is more than double that of any other region.

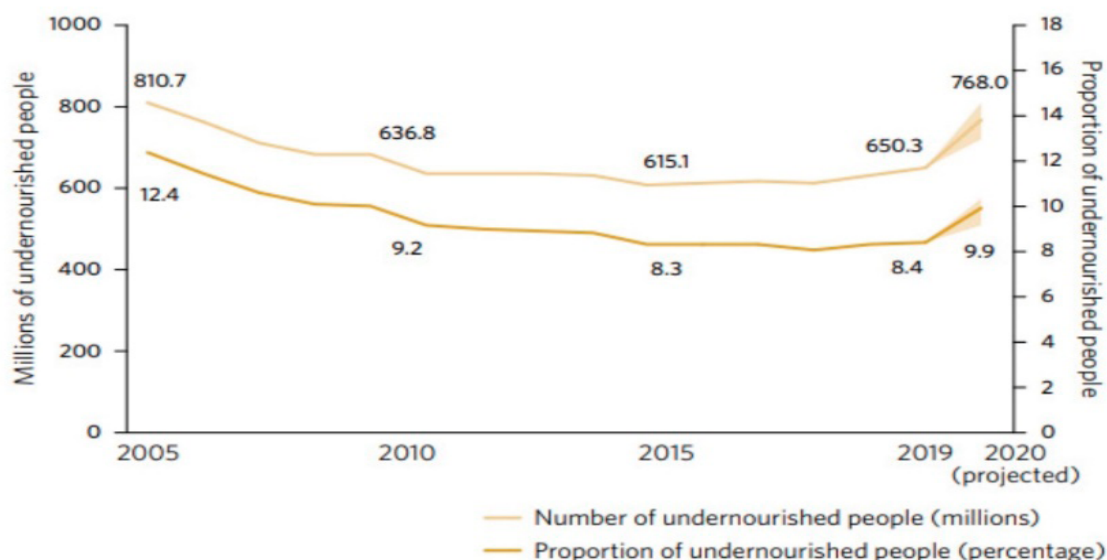


Figure 5. Number and proportion of undernourished people in the world, 2005–2019 (millions and percentage)

Source: United Nations (2021b).

COVID–19 has had a tremendous impact on hunger and food security, caused by food supply chain disruptions, loss of income, increasing social inequalities, changes in the food environment, and price rises. Between 720 and 811 million people worldwide suffered from hunger in 2020, an increase of 161 million from 2019. The incidence of malnutrition increased from 8.4% in 2019 to 9.9% in 2020. Hunger affects 21.0% of the population in Africa, compared with 9.0% in Asia and 9.1% in Latin America and the Caribbean. Reaching a state of food security goes beyond eliminating hunger.

Almost one in three people in the world (2.37 billion) was affected by moderate to severe food insecurity in 2020, an increase of almost 320 million compared to 2019. Such levels outline that people are unable to have a healthy, regular, and balanced diet or that they run out of food and, in the worst-case scenario, do not eat for a day or days. The highest level of food insecurity was found in sub-Saharan Africa (66.2%), while the prevalence grew fastest in Latin America and the Caribbean, from 24.9% in 2014 to 40.9% in 2020. A 10% higher prevalence of moderate to severe food insecurity occurs among women than men in 2020 compared with 6% in 2019.

### **Sustainable Development Goal 3 (Good health and well-being)**

Many health indicators were heading in the right direction before the COVID-19 threat emerged. Maternal and infant health had improved, immunization coverage had increased, and infectious diseases had declined, though not fast enough to meet the 2030 targets. The pandemic halted or reversed health progress and poses a serious threat beyond the disease itself. About 90% of countries still report one or more disruptions to basic health services, and available data from several countries show that the pandemic has shortened life expectancy. No wonder the virus disproportionately affects disadvantaged groups (World Health Organization 2021a). The pandemic has underlined the importance of universal health insurance and multi-sectoral coordination for health preparedness. In addition, to design effective pandemic policy interventions, governments are tasked with improving and strengthening the collection of basic demographic and epidemiological data. COVID-19 has impacted health outcomes and mortality worldwide, and has led to shorter life expectancies, even in many developed countries (World Health Organization 2021b). As of June 2021, the total number of reported deaths from COVID-19 had reached 3.7 million globally. Europe and North America recorded the largest loss, close to 1.7 million, followed by Latin America and the Caribbean, with around 1.2 million, and Central and South Asia with just under half a million (Sachs et al. 2021). COVID-19 can have long-term health effects, including disability due to scarring of the lungs and damage to the heart, as well as mental health problems that can affect people for long periods (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2021). The indiscriminate use of antibiotics during the pandemic could further increase antimicrobial resistance. While it is too early for existing data to reflect this impact, the COVID-19 pandemic threatens to reverse years of progress towards better health worldwide, no matter the place on the map or the state of development.

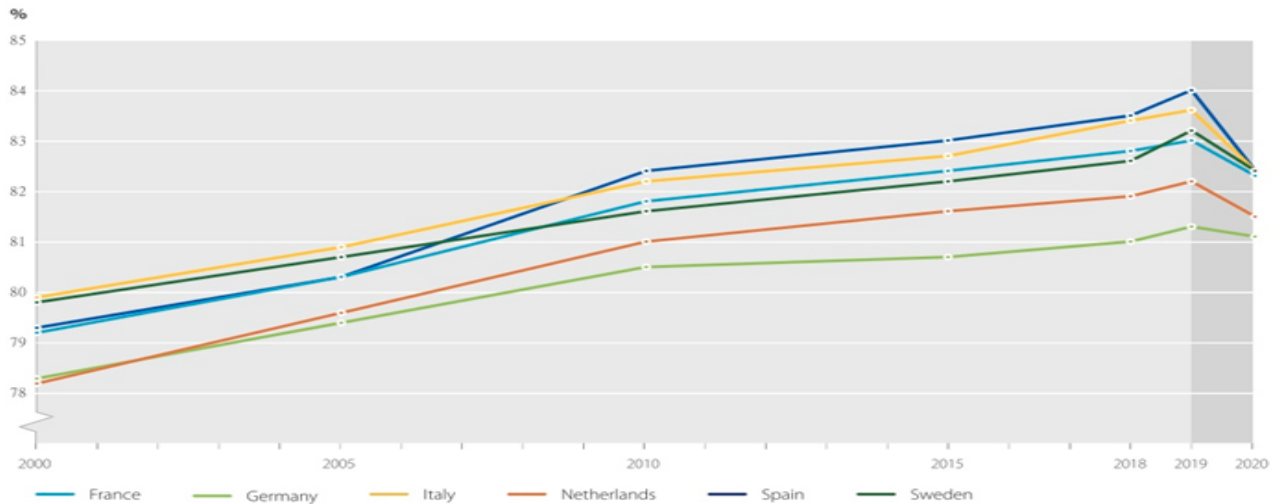


Figure 6. Life expectancy at birth in selected European countries (2000–2020)

Source: Sachs et al. (2021).

## The results of European countries' implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (including Central and Eastern European countries)

At the European Union level, the latest European Commission Annual Sustainable Growth Strategy (ASGS) notes: 'the Recovery and Resilience Facility must guide and build a more sustainable, resilient and fairer Europe for the next generation in line with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals' (European Commission 2020).

The COVID–19 pandemic is an obstacle to sustainable development in Europe and around the world. The global average SDG Index score fell in 2020 for the first time since 2015, when the SDGs were adopted (Sachs et al. 2021). It was mainly due to the rising poverty and unemployment rates, and the average EU27 SDG Index score also slightly decreased compared to 2019. However, this decline in the performance of the EU–27 SDGs was less than that observed in the rest of the world, possibly due to, inter alia, the effectiveness of the automatic stabilizers and strategic economic and social policies.

The fall of the SDG Index score observed in 2020 follows years of progress on SDGs in the EU27 and the rest of Europe. The average EU27 Index score increased by 8.5 percentage points, from 62.9% to 71.4%, between 2000 and 2019. Additionally, the average annual growth rate of the SDG Index score from the adoption of the Global Goals in 2015 to 2019 (0.9%) was higher than the average annual growth rate observed in 2010–2015 (0.6%).

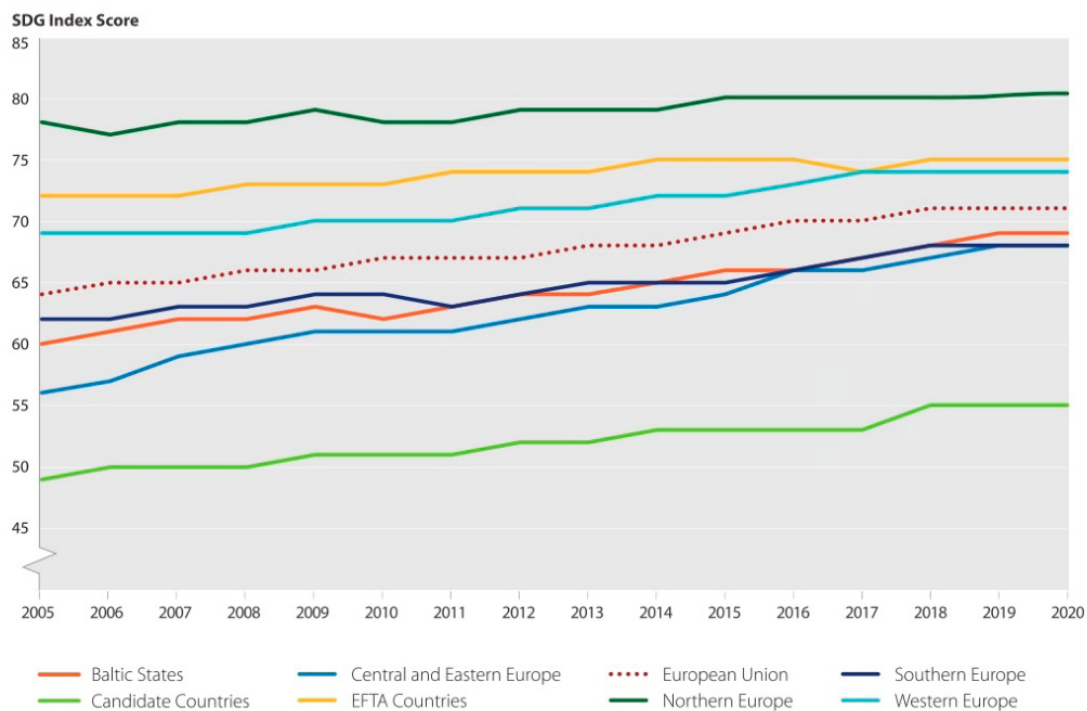


Figure 7. SDG Index Scores, EU27 and European regions, 2005–2020

Source: *Europe Sustainable Development Report 2021* (2021).

There are certain gaps in achieving the SDGs in different European regions and countries. Northern European countries should be recognized as the best performers, with an average SDG Index score of 81% in 2020. Candidate countries are underperforming, with an average score in 2020 of just above 55%, driven in particular by poor achievements on socio-economic goals (SDG 1 and SDGs 3–9) and SDG 16 (Justice, peace and strong institutions). The report reveals that European regions and countries that started out with lower SDG Index scores are progressing faster than those with higher scores; however, the pace of convergence remains slow. The major concern is that at the current rate of growth, candidate countries will not be capable of achieving the results currently held by Northern Europe for another 52 years. Southern Europe will reach this level in 18 years, while it will take 17 years for CEECs to catch up with the rest.

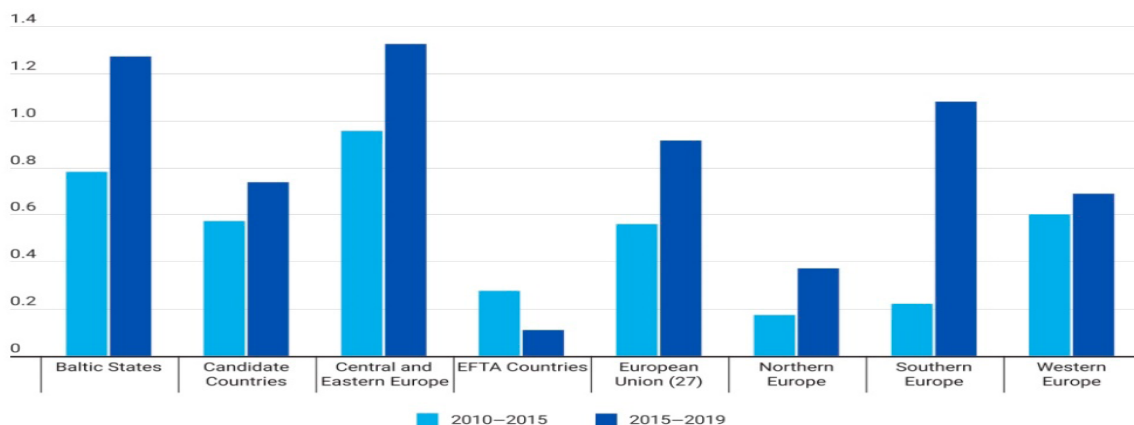


Figure 8. Average annual growth rate of the SDG Index from 2010 to 2015 versus 2015 to 2019 (%)

Source: *Europe Sustainable Development Report 2021* (2021).

## Remedial measures and the UN's system response to COVID-19

It has become obvious that the pandemic was more than a health crisis. It is a socio-economic crisis, a humanitarian crisis, a security crisis, and a human rights crisis. It has affected us as individuals, families, communities, and societies. It has had an impact on every generation, including those not yet born. The crisis has highlighted fragilities within and among nations, as well as in systems for a coordinated global response to shared threats.

The UN's response to COVID-19 and its impact consists of three main components:

1. A large-scale, coordinated and comprehensive response to health, supervised by the World Health Organization (WHO) and its Strategic Preparedness and Response Plan to mobilize all sectors and communities to respond to all threats, control and suppress virus transmission, reduce mortality by providing care to those affected, and develop safe and effective vaccines and drugs that can be delivered on a large scale and available as needed. Part of that response is a new global collaboration – the Access to COVID-19 Tools (ACT) Accelerator – which aims to accelerate the development, production, and fair access to COVID-19 testing, therapies, and vaccines (World Health Organization 2021c).
2. Extensive action to protect lives and livelihoods by addressing the destructive short-term aspects of the socio-economic, humanitarian, and human rights crisis, focusing on those most affected. The main target is to save lives, maintaining access to critical services, corporate solvency, supply chains, strong institutions, pub-

lic service delivery, and human rights in the foreground. This is achieved through immediate humanitarian aid to the most affected population in the most vulnerable 63 countries with life-saving aid under the Global Humanitarian Response Plan (GHRP), as well as support for over 120 countries for an immediate socio-economic response guided by the framework of the UN development system (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs 2021).

3. A transformation process that leads to a better post-COVID-19 future by addressing fundamental weaknesses and identifying opportunities for a transformation towards fairer, equal and resilient societies and economies. Overcoming this crisis should be seen as an opportunity to mitigate the climate crisis, inequalities, exclusion, gaps in social protection systems, and many other injustices that have been revealed and aggravated (United Nations 2020).

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## Conclusion

The 17 SDGs and their associated 169 targets, at the heart of the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, provide a policy framework around the world to eradicate all forms of poverty, combat inequalities, and fight climate change, while ensuring that no one is left behind. The ongoing pandemic and its expected economic, social, and environmental impacts show a clear urgent need to support the 'placement' of the SDGs in order to achieve reconstruction more equitably and avoid future health crises. The SDGs should help economies rebuild and carry out their digital and environmental transformation.

With reference to the comparative analysis of the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on the implementation of selected SDGs (SDG 1, SDG 2, SDG 3), it was revealed that problems of poverty, hunger and good health have been significantly exacerbated by the outbreak of the pandemic. This is the basis for the inference that the effects of a pandemic primarily relate to exposing the deep inequalities in societies and economies with attendant gaps in social protection systems. The ministerial declaration of the high-level segment of the 2020 session of the Economic and Social Council and the 2020 high-level political forum on sustainable development (United Nations Economic and Social Council 2020) reaffirmed that eradicating poverty in all its forms and dimensions, including extreme poverty, is the greatest global challenge and an indispensable requirement for sustainable development, and noted with anxiety that the trend of poverty reduction is being reversed for the first time in decades. To meet this challenge, critical activities oriented towards the linkages between the environment and health are the key. The transition from a reactive to a proactive policy is an answer to mitigate health emergencies, limiting and even preventing crises, which can paralyze economic, political, and physical infrastructure in the near-

est future. The efforts of the UN's System Response to COVID-19 and the remedial measures posed by international collaboration on the transformative change represent a proactive policy aimed at eradicating the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In terms of identifying the main challenges related to sustainable development within the implementation of the SDGs in European countries, including CEECs, the critical issues are:

- Stronger and more comprehensive efforts to reach the environmental goals covered under SDG 2 (Zero hunger and sustainable agriculture) and SDGs 12–15 (Sustainable consumption and production, and climate and biodiversity goals);
- Reducing inequalities within countries means closing the gaps in access to services and development opportunities across different population groups in EU member states and candidate countries, which is covered under SDG 3 (Good health and well-being), SDG 4 (Quality education), and SDG 5 (Gender equality);
- Strategic and target-oriented actions to mitigate the negative effects of international spillovers reflected by disruptions in trade and financial flows, which undermines many EU countries' ability to achieve the SDGs;
- Minimizing persisting differences in SDG performance across Europe, which requires stronger convergence in Europe and better EU leadership (Southern Europe, the Baltic States, and Central and Eastern European countries all still perform below the average of the EU27 SDG Index score).

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## Realizacja celów zrównoważonego rozwoju w dobie pandemii Covid-19. Przyszłe wyzwania dla Agendy 2030

Pandemia COVID-19 poważnie zmieniła światową gospodarkę i zagrażała realizacji Celów Zrównoważonego Rozwoju (SDGs) na dużą skalę. Postęp w realizacji celów Agendy 2030 został znacznie zakłócony i zahamowany, niwecząc wcześniejsze wysiłki rządów i narodów. Według raportu Sekretarza Generalnego ONZ „Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals” w 2020 r. ponad 100 milionów ludzi ponownie doznało ubóstwa i głodu; zlikwidowano 255 milionów pełnoetatowych miejsc pracy; a dodatkowe 101 milionów dzieci i młodzieży spadło poniżej minimalnego poziomu biegłości w czytaniu. Ponadto należy podkreślić, że spowolnienie gospodarcze światowej gospodarki spowodowane pandemią COVID-19 nie poprawiło sytuacji w odniesieniu do zmian klimatycznych. Skutki uboczne pandemii są poważne w każdej sferze życia, zwłaszcza w pogłębianiu się istniejących nierówności społecznych, co z kolei zagraża osiągnięciu SDGs. Celem niniejszego artykułu jest odpowiedź, jakie są obecnie postępy w realizacji Celów Zrównoważonego Rozwoju w odniesieniu do Agendy 2030. Ponadto jest próbą zbadania wpływu COVID-19 na wdrażanie Celów Zrównoważonego Rozwoju w skali globalnej, koncentrując się głównie na statystykach z Sustainable Development Report 2021. Ponadto celem opracowania jest zaprezentowanie wyników analizy mającej na celu zidentyfikowanie najważniejszych skutków pandemii COVID-19 dla krajów europejskich, w tym krajów Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej. Badanie ogranicza się do kontekstu celu 1 (brak ubóstwa), Cel 2 (zero głodu) i cel 3 (dobre

zdrowie i dobre samopoczucie). Kolejnym celem, uznanym za wartość dodaną prowadzonych badań, jest identyfikacja głównych wyzwań związanych ze zrównoważonym rozwojem w ramach realizacji Celów Zrównoważonego Rozwoju w krajach Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej. Na koniec autorka odniesie się do strategicznego planu reakcji na pandemię. Metody badawcze zastosowane w artykule obejmują analizę dostępnych źródeł dokumentalnych i literackich odnoszących się do omawianych zagadnień, opracowanie odpowiednich badań statystycznych oraz zastosowanie podejścia dedukcyjnego w wyciąganiu wniosków z raportów organizacji międzynarodowych. Badanie zostało oparte o globalną ramę wskaźników, która obejmuje 231 unikalnych wskaźników monitorujących etap i postęp realizacji Celów Zrównoważonego Rozwoju (SDGs). Źródłem danych była Globalna Platforma Danych Wskaźników SDG.

**Słowa kluczowe:** zrównoważony rozwój, cele zrównoważonego rozwoju, Agenda 2030, ubóstwo, bezpieczeństwo żywnościowe, włączenie społeczne