

Europe towards the 2030 Agenda and beyond: the viewpoint of the Belgian youth

Another, more sustainable Europe is possible

As the preamble of the 2030 Agenda shows, sustainable development is about taking '*bold and transformative steps which are urgently needed to shift the world onto a sustainable and resilient path*'. As young people we firmly believe this Agenda is a unique and timely opportunity for Europe to **reinvent itself** in order to become the Europe it is supposed to be: an **agent of change** truly in line with the values it embodies and the expectations and concerns of its citizens, inspiring other parts of the world to go on a journey to become better versions of themselves.

We envision a Europe with prosperous cities in which people love to live, in which **nature** has taken back its rightful place in public space, with **smart mobility** and strong communities. A carbon-free Europe with industries working solely on the basis of **renewable energies**, ensuring clean air for all and reducing significantly mortality rates due to preventable diseases. A Europe in which quality **healthcare** services and quality **lifelong learning** opportunities are accessible for everyone. A Europe in which all citizens make responsible, **informed choices** in their daily lives because they have learned from a very young age how to live sustainable lives and how to make positive contributions to society. A Europe in which all generations cohabit peacefully. A Europe in which children only hear about 'nuclear energy', 'fossil fuels' or 'homelessness' in history books.

As far as the economy is concerned, we wish to see a Europe that has understood the potential of **empowering women and girls** and that therefore takes the necessary steps to make sure all in society have equal chances through **quality education**, the introduction of a **minimum wage** for everyone and the elimination of the **gender pay gap**. We also firmly believe Europe could become a place where **circular economy** has become the norm and 'planned obsolescence' is a thing of the past because the whole system would no longer be driven by a profit-oriented logic. The formidable technological progress humanity has made would be put to good use by providing quality services available for rental rather than disposable products.

Moreover, we believe another labour market is possible: rather than a system encouraging workers to work endless hours to be able to afford an expensive lifestyle, we believe it would be more beneficial for society to make sure **everyone has a job** – which may require to support specific sectors and/or create new jobs in an innovative way - but still has sufficient free time on the side to devote to equally important things: raising children (for both mothers *and* fathers), spending time outdoors **reconnecting with nature**, **growing** part of their **food**, etc.

Regarding decision-making processes, we envision a Europe that has been able to come up with **innovative participation** and **consultation mechanisms** in order to become better in line with its democratic ideals. In this new system, all generations and all stakeholders in society are able to **make their voices heard** in a fair and balanced manner and actively participate and influence the processes. Their sense of **European identity** is significantly strengthened because they feel included and listened too.

As far as the international perspective is concerned we envision a Europe that has taken up the role of **forerunner**, not to be the best, but to give examples of **good practices**. This new Europe would have partly given up its Eurocentrism and be genuinely **open for different lifestyles**. Paternalistic reflexes will belong to the past. Europe will have embraced the true meaning of '**reducing inequalities** between countries', supporting developing countries in every possible way, in a constructive, inclusive and sustainable manner. That means that Europe and European citizens will have accepted to share our planetary resources in a fair way and that globalization will serve as a mean to **strengthen partnerships**, not to exploit existing inequalities.

What obstacles stand in the way of the transformative Agenda?

Of course, a number of challenges need to be dealt with in order to be able to implement the vision of a Sustainable Europe described in the first section of this essay.

Democratic deficit

Europe really needs to work on democracy. Democracy is one of the **central values** of the European Union, but the EU institutions in itself are not democratic enough. Many people do not feel connected to the European project. Euroscepticism is born out of a **lack of transparency and information**. As young optimists, we believe in a unified Europe, in strong collaboration, but people like us do not see what is happening at the European level. If even the President of the European Commission claims the European Parliament is 'ridiculous', clearly something is wrong. This democratic deficit needs to be solved as soon as possible.

One of the other problems that are part of this democratic deficit is the power of the big companies. Their **lobbying** activities have a huge impact on **European governance**. The big companies spend thousands of euros to influence policymakers through formal and informal contacts and no one has a clear view of the impact of these activities. Even the involved policymakers are not sufficiently aware. This of course undermines democracy. If big companies are so much more present and visible for European policymakers than the man in the street, this man in the street risks to be forgotten and the public interest is not served as it should. Because to be clear: the **interests of the big companies** are in many cases not in the public interest, especially when you look at their long-term consequences, even if they claim to be.

Some claim the **complexity** of the European **decision-making architecture** and the great number of actors and power levels involved is one of the reasons why Europe is not moving fast enough in the transition for a more sustainable future. This may be true to some extent because it may lead in some instances to less ambitious commitments because compromises need to be found between many actors. This does not serve the image of Europe in the eyes of its citizens. As mentioned above the 2030 Agenda could be a timely **opportunity to re-evaluate** this architecture to make it more **efficient, inclusive and participative**.

Lack of awareness and bottom-up support for change

This is not an issue relevant only for Europe but we feel like it is a recurring one in many European Member States, which leads to non-negligible consequences.

As is well known in political science and other fields, it is easier to accept to remain the way you are and not receive something new than have to lose some of your resources. It is therefore a normal reaction for individuals to **fear to lose the comfort** they have been enjoying when others try to convince them to use resources in a more modest way. One also needs to acknowledge that currently in many European Member States the **sustainable choices are not the easiest or most 'attractive' ones**. Despite this, a growing number of people are embracing sustainable habits.

We believe that we need to take the necessary steps to make everyone around Europe **aware of the global challenges** and of the **urgency to take action**. We feel like if everyone was **properly aware and informed** about the facts and figures of what is happening and what might happen in the future if we do not act today, a lot more people would **get over their discomfort**, embrace sustainable lifestyles and get involved to make their voices heard and push for change. It would in turn be easier for Europe to implement the 2030 Agenda because its decisions and policies in that regard would be more popular.

That is where **education** comes into play. We believe education needs to be both of quality and accessible to everyone but also shaping active, responsible, critical citizens with the knowledge and skills to build a sustainable world.

The role of other interests

We have talked above about the role of lobbying activities. One must acknowledge that implementing the 2030 Agenda is not Europe's only task. There is a number of other considerations and interests taken into account when decisions are made: *How to make sure Europe remains a key player in the international arena? How to strengthen Europe's legitimacy in the eyes of its citizens? How to ensure Europe's very existence on the long-term with rising intolerance, inward-looking societies, etc.? How to ensure its economic and energetic viability? How to deal with violent radicalism and the numerous crises around the world?*

We think that sustainable development should not be seen as something you have to do on the side on top of all your other commitments because of the image you project internally and externally or as something that is very costly with low return on investment. We believe that the **2030 Agenda** is so wide-ranging and transformative that it **should be at the heart of everything else**. The other considerations and interests are not necessarily contradictory.

From an economic point of view, it is true that significant investments are needed but the **return on investment will be much higher** than the cost of doing nothing, as numerous studies show. And to make those much needed public investments possible, we must be sure that European rules won't hinder Member States that want to finance investments profitable on the long term and good for our planet. Regarding energy independence, if we invest today in renewable clean energies and **close the chapter of fossil fuels**, we will no longer (or much less) have to rely on others to provide us with the energies we need. Regarding Europe's place in the international arena, the 2030 Agenda provide it with a key opportunity to strengthen its position. We believe Europe should be later remembered as the one of **the first who seized this opportunity** to show leadership in the transition toward a sustainable future and the fight against climate change.

Mahatma Gandhi once said: '**The future depends on what you do today.**' The future of humanity and planet Earth lies in our hands. The global challenges will not wait until we are ready to change. Let us therefore take concrete actions today to implement the ambitious 2030 Agenda to make sure it does not remain a letter of good intentions. Our suggestions are addressed in the next section.

Concrete steps to take today for a sustainable future in Europe

Everyone who wants to have a positive impact on sustainable development needs to start by questioning business as usual, by questioning how he or she is having a negative impact on the social, economic and environmental level. The same goes for Europe as an institution. The first thing to do is to **examine today's legislation and current processes and check if they contribute in a positive way to sustainable development** or if they have a negative impact. The negative impact of course needs to be neutralised and turned around to impact change in a sustainable way. New or future regulations need to go through this **SDG-filter** as well. What is not in line with the SDGs and what does not contribute in a positive way to sustainable development should not be adopted.

As Europe is a very vast and ponderous institution, this **SDG-check** cannot be done by a centralised desk. The appointment of an **SDG-specialist** in every key department could be a solution. At the same time, all the EU-commissioners, parliamentarians, councillors and employees at all levels need to be informed about the Agenda 2030 for sustainable development and

encouraged to make sustainable choices to avoid double work. These internal processes need to be independently followed up and monitored. The alliance of civil society organisations '**SDG-watch**' can take up this role. They must be financially supported and given all the chances to do this important job. Involvement of civil society and citizens is a baseline of the 2030 Agenda. The European Union should encourage member states to **adopt a similar permanent monitoring system**: a sustainability expert in every public service and an independent civil society follow-up.

Very concretely as young people we wonder if Europe's environment policies are strong enough, if the **polluter pays principle** is adopted in a strict enough way. If the Emission Trade System is performant enough to reduce carbon emissions fast enough to be in line with the **Paris Agreement**. We wonder if international trade agreements watch closely enough social, economic and ecological justice. If **imported products** are not produced in a way we would accept them to be in Europe, we should not accept to sell them in Europe. We wonder if Europe's subsidies for example for **agriculture** encourage the best and most nature and people-friendly economy.

For some measures we wonder less. They clearly can help to take steps towards a more sustainable future. Regulations **against tax evasion** need to be taken in order to reallocate the funds in financing Europe's transition. Information exchanges need to be facilitated. Products with **planned obsolescence** need to be banned and **circular economy** and 'performance based consumption' (like the 'pay per lux' principle) need to be facilitated in every possible way. **Subsidies for fossil fuels need to be stopped** immediately and general divestment campaigns need to be supported. **Renewable energy** needs to become the norm and the creation of an energy union needs to be facilitated.

Countries need to be **held accountable**. Eleven countries, including Belgium, still do not respect Europe's environmental policies. We think Europe should encourage those countries to take their responsibilities, if needed with sanctions. **Someone will always bear the consequences of irresponsible behaviour**. In environmental issues, it is often next generations. We cannot accept that. As the popular phrase states: 'business as usual is no longer an option'. The same argument is valid for **Public Development Aid (PDA)**. Member states who do not meet the **0.7% aid target** should be sanctioned since we need to strengthen partnerships and solidarity mechanisms more than ever to make the SDGs a reality.

Finally, we ask for solidarity, Europe needs to support the **green climate fund** as promised and encourage member states to do so too. We also ask for more **humane migration policies**, including **safe and legal channels of migration** and protection for the most vulnerable. All European countries need to help people in need. And those people need to be supported and given all the chances they need to build up a new life.

Naturally to make this kind of ambitious and strong choices for a sustainable Europe a very **broad support from European citizens and the private sector** is needed. We are convinced that a broad support can be created by raising awareness of the comprehensiveness and complexity of world's problems and the radical changes that are needed to find solutions. The 2030 Agenda and the SDGs are a unique tool to raise awareness around sustainability. We thus think Europe should set up a **large-scale information and awareness-raising campaign** or support (for example) SDG watch to do that. This campaign needs to target as many groups as possible. And even if education is not part of Europe's competences, education for sustainable development needs to be supported and encouraged.