

<https://doi.org/10.52326/csd2023.11>

THE ENVIRONMENT IN A SUSTAINABLE EUROPE

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Abstract: The paper aims to analyze the major necessity to find ways to achieve that development that ensures a stable balance between economic, social and environmental considerations, so that European Union must have an important place in the transition to a healthy environment in a sustainable Europe, in a sustainable world. As a starting point, we have the reality that the European Union is facing persistent environmental challenges and an unprecedented urgency in terms of biodiversity, resource use, climate change and environmental risks to health and well-being, requiring a robust understanding and effective interventions. Measures must be established to reverse current trends, urgent systemic solutions must be found. The analysis carried out demonstrates that the achievement of the objectives of sustainable development cannot be achieved without effective environmental protection policies, which also depend on the existence of a correct taxation in the environmental field. The recent global economic crisis, recording continuous and irreversible damage to the environment, with negative effects, including on human subjects, have demonstrated the capacity and the reduced limits of reaction of the economic system to the instability of the environment. Analyse performed proves, that the solutions we offer to the current must be different from those supported until now, requiring a rethinking of the attention given to them.

Keywords: *challenges, measures, policies, solutions, sustainable development, targets.*

JEL code: *Q01, Q56*

1. Introduction

We are currently facing pressing sustainability challenges, requiring urgent systemic measures and solutions. The major need is to find ways to achieve that development that ensures a stable balance between economic, social and environmental considerations.

Large gaps have been identified between the short - and long-term objectives set by EU policies and the environmental situation, according to reports by the European Environment Agency, requiring a rethinking of the attention given to the implementation of EU and national policies. The solutions we offer to the current environmental and climate challenges must be different from those supported until now, with the aim of ensuring Europe's policies a real support, target - the year 2030, including the trajectories aimed at the 2050 horizon. [4]

In the past 2 years, a series of global scientific reports have been published by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the Intergovernmental Science - Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, the International Resource Panel and the United Nations Environment Programme, all of which argue that the current trajectories - interconnected and linked to our main production and consumption systems - are fundamentally unsustainable. Credible answers must be found and measures put in place to reverse current trends.

If in recent years, important political initiatives have been carried out at the EU level, such as: the circular economy and bioeconomy packages, the climate and energy policies for 2030 and 2050, as well as the future program in the field of research and innovation, the EU initiative on sustainable financing is the first initiative of this type that emphasizes the role of the financial system as an enabling element of the necessary change. [9]

Even if there are and sustained efforts are being made to expand, accelerate, streamline and implement the solutions and innovations - both technological and social - that already exist, it is necessary, at the same time, to carry out new research and development studies, to catalyze behavioral transformations, as well as - as a decisive element - the more active involvement of citizens. It is

recognized that systemic changes cause an unequal distribution of costs and benefits, requiring a solid understanding and effective interventions.

Europe must also play an important role in the global transition to a healthy environment in a sustainable world. The European Green Deal - highlighted by the European Commission as the first priority in the political guidelines for the period 2019-2024 - has the potential to provide an excellent framework for action, making the necessary systemic approaches and innovations possible. The EU has taken on a number of long-term sustainability goals.

Currently, in 2022-2023, the European Union faces persistent environmental challenges and an unprecedented urgency in terms of biodiversity, resource use, climate change and environmental risks to health and well-being, although EU policies in environment and climate have brought substantial benefits in recent decades.

2. Environment and green economies – EU actions

The environmental and sustainability challenges emerging in Europe have their basis in the acceleration of social and economic activities. Europe continues to consume more and more resources, and to support these high levels of consumption, it is also dependent on resources extracted/used from other parts of the world. These realities constitute a profound challenge, both for Europe and for other regions of the world. Europe thus plays an essential role in the setup the current world transformations, and as a consequence many of the effects in Europe, associated with production and consumption systems on the environment, manifest themselves across the borders of the continent, in a global context.

A sustainable Europe will require significant reductions in environmental pressures, requiring changes to a much greater extent than at present.

Policy frameworks have evolved and the European policy framework on the environment is increasingly influenced by ambitious long-term visions and targets. (Table 1)

Table 1: Synthesis of policy objectives/targets

Theme	Trends and outlook		Possibilities of achieving the policy objectives/targets		
	Past trends (10-15 years ago)	Outlook to 2030	2020	2030	2050
Circular economy:					
Efficiency of material resource use	*	**	*		
Circular use of materials	*	**		**	
Waste generation	**	**	**		
Waste management	*	*	**		
Greenhouse gas emissions and reduction efforts	*	**	*	***	***
Energy efficiency	*	**	**	***	***
Renewable energy sources	*	**	*	***	***
Air pollutant emissions	**	**	*	**	
Non-polluting emissions generated by industry	*	**	**		
Clean industrial technologies and processes	*	**	**		
Chemical substance emissions	**	***	***		
Water abstraction and pressures on surface and groundwater	*	**	***		
Sustainable use of the seas	**	**	**		

Note: Estimated assessment of past trends (10-15 years) and outlook for 2030:

* trends/dominant improvement evolutions, ** trends/ evolutions that form a mixed picture, *** trends/ damage evolutions

Estimated assessment of the possibility of achieving certain policy objectives/targets: * generally on schedule, ** partially on schedule, *** generally not on schedule

Source: European Environment Agency, 2022

One of the most important factors determining the environmental and sustainability challenges that persist in Europe is the fact that they are inextricably linked to economic activities and lifestyles, especially the societal systems that provide basic necessities such as food, energy and mobility.

Interdependence, both within and between societal systems, raises those major obstacles to being able to meet Europe's long-term sustainability goals:

- production and consumption systems - through radical change would cause a disruption in terms of investments, jobs, behaviours, causing resistance from affected industries, regions or consumers.

They show dependencies, such as the use of certain models, as well as the elements - technologies, infrastructures - that have developed together.

- interconnections within systems cause changes to sometimes produce results other than those expected, such as when efficiency improvements lead to cost savings that lead to increased consumption.

Although there are signs of progress in these systems, current trends are not in line with long-term environmental and sustainability goals.

Such transitions are long-term processes, involving numerous uncertainties, conflicts and trade-offs, and which essentially depend on the discovery through innovation of new social practices, new technologies and business models, etc., however, one cannot know beforehand, how they will fit into people's lifestyles and how they will affect sustainability outcomes. [3]

This understanding of systemic change has important implications for decision makers. The perception of the role of government is changing, from that of a "pilot" that has the knowledge and tools to lead society towards sustainability, to that of a facilitator of innovation and transformation at the level of the whole society, having to find ways to amplify the powers of citizens, of communities and companies.

In recent years, the pace of innovation has been rapid, including new technologies, new business models and community initiatives. All these developments are important because they prepare the ground for governments to take policies, investments and interventions to a new level. Europe must seize these opportunities, using all available means to effectively bring about transformative change in the next decade.

Environmental policy tools remain essential, but achieving systemic change will require a much wider policy mix, enabling the spread of new ideas and approaches, and ensuring that structural economic changes lead to beneficial and equitable outcomes, managing risks and the unintended consequences which inevitably accompany systemic changes.

Where is Europe heading?

As a result of the challenges that Europe is facing, it is necessary to strengthen the existing policy instruments, as well as to expand them through new and innovative approaches in terms of legislation and decision-making activity:

- *strengthening the implementation, integration and coherence of existing policies* would ensure that Europe meets its 2030 environmental targets

Both better integration of environmental objectives into sectoral policies and better policy coherence are also essential.

- *positioning the European Union as a world leader in international actions to achieve sustainability*

Environmental and sustainability issues require global responses, Europe cannot meet its sustainability goals alone. [2]

The implementation of the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and active support for its implementation in other regions will be essential for Europe to take the lead in making transitions towards sustainability in a global context.

- *stimulating innovation throughout society*

Expanding different forms of innovation by testing different ways of production and consumption by more and more companies, entrepreneurs, researchers, city administrations and local

communities requires coherent contributions from different policy areas, from research, innovation, sectoral policies and industrial to education, social protection, trade and employment.

- increased investments and reorientation of funds

Governments must harness public resources to invest in innovation and nature-based solutions, make sustainable purchases and support affected sectors and regions.

At the same time, governments have an essential role in involving the financial sector in sustainable investments through the implementation and capitalization of the EU Action Plan on sustainable financing.

- managing risks and ensuring a socially fair transition

The early identification of risks and opportunities arising as a result of technological and societal developments must be combined with flexible approaches based on experimentation, monitoring and learning.

- translating knowledge into action

Papers are needed on systems that generate pressures on the environment, the pathways to sustainability, the initiatives that open up favorable perspectives, and the obstacles to change.

Europe will fulfill its sustainability vision not only by stimulating economic growth, but by managing adverse effects with the help of environmental and social policy instruments.

Sustainability must become the main target of coherent policies and actions. Europe has the unique opportunity to be the world leader in the ability to respond and act on sustainability challenges.

The EU Green Deal - The road to a sustainable economy

Achieving the objectives of sustainable development cannot be achieved without effective policies for the protection of the environment, which also depend on the existence of a correct taxation in the field of the environment, the proposal of feeding the EU budget with revenues that penalize the activities of polluters.

Considering one of the most relevant topics of the moment – The European Green Deal is the EU's road map to reach a sustainable economy. [6] With the aim of making Europe the first continent with zero polluting emissions, EU leaders have launched this ambitious project, undertaken by all member countries. The impact of the economy on biodiversity will thus be reduced, through a modern, competitive and efficient approach from the point of view of the use of resources.

All EU member states have committed to taking measures to make Europe the first climate-neutral continent by 2050. [10] To achieve this goal, they have pledged to reduce emissions by at least 55% by 2030 compared to 1990 levels. [1]

The European Green Deal proposes to place Europe in the position of global leader through an integrated strategy aimed at reaching record targets in the energy, mobility, industry, international trade, economy and finance sectors by 2050.

The European Green Deal strategy aims, among others to:

- the transition to a European Union with zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, the 90% reduction of gas emissions from the transport sector;
- reducing the impact of greenhouse gases by 50% by 2030 compared to the level recorded in 1990;
- support for the European Climate Law that entered into force on July 29, 2021;
- reducing the rate of use of energy from hydrocarbons;
- changing the Energy Efficiency Directive (2023), reduce final energy consumption at EU level by 11.7% in 2030;
- the efficiency of domestic energy consumption;
- the efficiency of public and private buildings;
- implementation of an industrial strategy at the European level;
- establishing new environmental standards for automobiles;
- the "greening" of cities;
- the greening of the agricultural sector;
- increasing the efficiency of the packaging policy.

The absence of coordinated measures that can change the current trend implies a danger for the health of the population; the existence of increasingly polluted air, etc. these representing only some of the externalities that are taking shape as a result of the lack of action on the part of the major actors on the world political-economic market.

In the current year, new legislative initiatives have been adopted, but many of the projects present opposition from industries or member states, among the most important are:

- The Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) and a proposal for this mechanism to provide one of the new own budgetary resources, being a pollution tax that will be applied to companies from third countries in exchange for access to the Single Market. The main objective of this environmental measure is to prevent the relocation of carbon dioxide emissions; it will also encourage partner countries to institute carbon pricing policies to combat climate change. [5]

The CBAM targets imports of products with high carbon dioxide emissions, in full compliance with international trade rules, to prevent EU efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from being neutralized by imports of products manufactured in countries outside EU, where policies to combat climate change are less ambitious than those in the European Union. The mechanism will also be useful to prevent the relocation of production or the import of products with high carbon dioxide emissions. Products from the following sectors will be targeted: cement, aluminum, fertilizers, electricity, iron and steel.

- the new standards for CO₂ emissions of engines that equip passenger cars and light commercial vehicles;

The European Green Deal will mobilize European funds and create the prerequisites for a public and private investment framework that will support an effective transition towards a green, competitive and inclusive economy. [8] The three dimensions of support will be:

- Funding - considers the mobilization of a budget dedicated to environmental actions from the EU budget, private sources and the European Investment Bank.

The financial plan of the Green Deal involves a major investment plan.

- Activation - that dimension that will follow: stimulating the unlocking and redirection of public and private investments, encouraging sustainable investments by public authorities, designing facilities for state aid procedures.

- Practical support - support will be given to public authorities regarding the planning and implementation of sustainable projects.

The solutions that can be seen lately, aim at the proposal to supply the EU budget with revenues that penalize the activities of polluters. The Green Deal has its supporters and those who dispute it, raising the issue of the imbalances that can occur in economies dependent on non-renewable resources.

Financing the Green Deal will ensure its implementation, considering the need to support the transition of areas dependent on non-renewable natural resources and to maintain equity at the level of the member states. This type of initiative emphasizes the role of the financial system as an enabling element of the necessary change.

Even if, at present, there are objections regarding both the resources allocated to the European Green Deal and the fairness of their distribution, the fact that the Green Deal represents only the beginning of changes that must be assumed, equally by all European states, is a certainty. The ultimate goals assumed by the European Green Deal are net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, to decouple economic growth from resource use, so that no person and no place is left behind.

3. Conclusions

Placing the principle of sustainability at the center of European policies reveals the initiative of the European Union to assume the leading position in the formulation of appropriate responses, a position that grounds a solid and trenchant retort addressed to the big global polluters and those who are distrustful of the effects of changes. An aspect that must be taken into account is the action of the big polluting world economies, which may present a pace of adaptation of their environmental policies, totally different in terms of objectives and time horizon compared to European ambitions.

Initiatives are needed on the systems that generate pressures on the environment, identifying and supporting pathways to sustainability, initiatives that open favorable perspectives, and removing obstacles to change.

Europe will fulfill its sustainability vision not only by stimulating economic growth, but by managing adverse effects with the help of environmental and social policy instruments.

Sustainability must become the main target of coherent policies and actions. Europe has the unique chance to be the world leader in showing the ability to respond and act on sustainability challenges

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