

Summary for Policy-Makers: SDGs implementation issues and opportunities in Lithuania

The Sustainable Development Goals: Global Lithuania

The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a framework of 17 universal goals to mobilise international efforts to combat poverty, all types of inequalities, and climate change – both globally and locally. 17 SDGs range from ensuring quality education (SDG 4) to responsible consumption and production (SDG 12) to conserving life on land (SDG 15). SDGs consist of 169 targets and over 230 indicators, aiming to comprehensively address the three dimensions of sustainability – Environment, Society and Economy. One of the key qualities of the SDGs is their integrated approach to development, specifically emphasised at the target level. This indicates that to achieve each goal it is important to examine the synergies – as well as trade-offs – with the other areas of intervention. The overall objective is to advance globally on all 17 SDGs.

Hence, the alignment of the SDGs with national policies paves a way to a more holistic approach to planning and management, and promotes synergies and partnerships across different sectors and stakeholders (both in national strategic planning as well as territorial, spatial planning). It also simultaneously boosts the common understanding of what sustainable development is and what it entails, not only within the public sector but also the wider society. Overall, the SDGs framework provides a harmonized system, which helps to put the focus on the well-being of all, ensuring that no one is left behind, while encouraging the continuity of development and prosperity as well as protection of the planet.

Lithuania has adopted its National Strategy for Sustainable Development in 2003, with later revisions in 2009 and 2011. Furthermore, the vision outlined in the main long-term planning strategies – ‘Lithuania 2030’ and National Development Programme (NDP) 2020 – accentuates the importance of sustainable development. Finally, currently national policy-makers have an ambition to actively integrate the SDGs into planning processes by setting the sustainable development principles as the base for the upcoming new NDP 2030 as well as the new General Plan of the Territory of the Republic of Lithuania.

Table 1 Lithuania's sustainable development priorities and their SDG equivalents

Lithuania's priorities	SDG equivalents
Reducing poverty, social exclusion and income inequalities, promoting employment	SDG 1, SDG 10
Strengthening public health, improving the quality of care and access to health services	SDG 2, SDG 3
Developing innovative economy and smart energy	SDG 7, SDG 8, SDG 9, SDG 12, SDG 13
Promoting high quality education	SDG 4
Strengthening international development cooperation	SDG 17

The added-value of integrating SDGs into Lithuanian national planning

The thematic areas for intervention encompassed by the 17 goals are conventionally accepted within the Lithuanian development discourse. Nonetheless, although specific sustainable development related measures are outlined in national planning or sectoral strategies, the approach to progress tends to be locked within the thematic silos, cutting down on the interdependency between diverse instruments and targets.

For instance, today social exclusion and socio-economic inequalities within Lithuania remain some of the most pressing issues. Assigned to individual authorities to address, these issues often lack a systematic (cause and effect) outlook. The application of the SDGs framework to national planning thus emphasises and prioritises thematically diverse yet interlinked measures for a thorough improvement of particular issues. It introduces different points of perspective (e.g. gender and workforce equality, access to sanitation, public spaces and transportation, natural resources, health services, education, etc.) while targeting the same issue, in this case, social exclusion and socio-economic inequalities.

The same filter could be applied to the other thematic SDG priorities currently outlined by Lithuania (Table 1), ensuring a more integrated process.

Lithuania's main achievements in sustainable development

Regarding its journey towards sustainable development, Lithuania has shown manifold positive results within the priority areas for development (Table 1), established considering its national interests and local contexts. The Lithuanian government has initiated several executive reforms regarding the pension system, increasing support for young families and creating new opportunities for employment. For example, Lithuania is becoming a hub for young entrepreneurs to pursue their innovative (and often socially-conscious) start-up ideas. Additionally, the integrated healthcare services are being developed with a greater attention towards improving accessibility and quality.

High quality education for children, youth and adults is another national priority. Here, Lithuania is leading in the EU with regards to the proportion of the population obtaining secondary and tertiary education. Reforms are being planned to ensure further improvement in the quality and accessibility of education for all.

In 2016 renewable energy contributed 26 percent of all energy consumed in Lithuania and is thus an important component in improving the country's energy independence. Also, Lithuania has been performing well on international environmental indices, yet with the globally growing threats of climate change, pollution, habitat and biodiversity loss, it is important that the protection and restoration of nature, whose health is key to human well-being, receives even more attention.

Finally, Lithuania is increasing its role in international development cooperation, thus contributing to achieving the SDGs globally, too.

Achieving the SDGs: Lithuania's main challenges

As it is declared in the Government Programme 2016-2020, Lithuania seeks to transform its public sector into an example of sustainable management and green transition. This is a direct action by the public sector institutions to contribute to the sustainable development through the following measures: increasing green public procurement, evaluating administrative decisions according to the environmental progress criteria, encouraging efficient use of resources, for example, by achieving high energy efficiency standards at the state-commissioned constructions, generating lesser amounts of waste, etc.

Nonetheless, several challenges regarding the achievement of the SDGs remain, including the lack of awareness about the topic both by the public and decision-makers. Sustainable development is often seen as an isolated concept functioning parallel to the different sectors' developments rather than being a horizontal and integrated approach underlying each policy area.

All the topical areas of the SDGs to an extent are covered within Lithuanian national policy frameworks. While it is not surprising that specific areas have a greater priority, some others, however, tend to be systemically overlooked, especially regarding their cross-sectoral aspects. For example, gender equality¹, sustainable urban development², climate action³, and strong institutions⁴, as well as some specific areas within the particular goals (e.g. lifelong learning⁵ or resilient infrastructure⁶) still lag behind.

¹In this topic, Lithuanian strategic documents focus primarily on domestic violence prevention, whereas the other aspects (discrimination, gender pay gap, women participation in leadership) are not as promoted and monitored.

²The development of Lithuania's cities is still very chaotic and mainly focused on building new physical infrastructure with less attention paid to social and environmental infrastructure and issues (e.g. cultural and natural heritage, the impact of cities on the environment, creation of and access to public spaces and inclusive planning processes).

³Low performance (red rating), see SDG Index 2017

⁴Low performance (red rating), see SDG Index 2017

⁵Only about 6 percent of Lithuanians engage in life-long learning and this number has improved little over the recent years (data from 2012 to 2016).

⁶Resilience remains a new concept in Lithuania, with no mention of it under SDG9 in the VNR, which deals with the topic of infrastructure, meaning that today there is no legislation or legislation project to address this question.

Since the SDGs framework emphasises the interconnectedness among the goals, policy integration and holistic approach is crucial to make substantial progress towards the overall development of Lithuania. This is something that should be further explored and encouraged by the Government, actively including everyone that has a clear stake in the process (private sector, civil society, academia and other communities) both in setting the priorities as well as engaging in achieving the targets.

While the issues covered by the SDGs are already being addressed in national strategic documents, regarding the policy implementation process, many problems remain:

- There is a lack of adequate qualitative tools and measures for implementing the proposed actions on the ground;
- In many cases, the data available is insufficient and/or lacking in quality;
- Lack of consistent attention towards monitoring and evaluation – there is a need for a well-thought out set of indicators, preferably integrated within the national indicator system, to measure the progress towards sustainable development.

Recommendations for more sustainable governance

According to the national strategies and current political debates, Lithuania has an ambition to work towards a sustainable future that is inclusive, resilient to environmental, social and economic threats and puts people and the environment at the core of its progress. However, without identifying and critically examining challenges that need to be overcome, the progress towards a sustainable future is hardly achievable. Hence, several policy and management gaps have been scrutinized, and, if comprehensively addressed, could help increase the pace of achieving truly sustainable development:

- Place individual and societal well-being at the centre of every sustainable development discussion: today, conversely, the focus often remains more on the economic development and the fulfilment of legislative requirements;
- Focus on the synergies among the three dimensions of sustainable development, ensure that any planning considers economic growth, social well-being and environment protection aspects and their development effects on each other;
- Raise awareness and promote a sustainable development agenda within the government, making linkages with existing national strategies and priorities clear to encourage ownership of the SDGs, while also aiming to transform the public sector into a sustainable governance and management example for others;
- In order to reduce regional inequalities, prioritise local implementation of the SDGs while emphasising local circumstances and priorities as well as their interplay with the national politics;
- Encourage partnerships and integration within the different government departments and institutions as well as other stakeholders, and involving society at large, when working to achieve the SDGs and monitoring their progress;
- Re-orient education and learning so that everyone has the opportunity to acquire knowledge, skills, values and attitudes that empower them to contribute to a sustainable future. Strengthen the focus on education and life-long learning in all agendas, programmes and activities.

These recommendations should be considered when addressing the issues and pursuing the future activities described in Lithuania's Voluntary National Review (2018).