

Sustainable development in the European Union

Pamela M. Barnes

Sustainability is a very European brand, enshrined in Article 3.3 of the Treaty on European Union.

(Karl Falkenberg, 2016:9)

Although notions of sustainability have early origins, the location of the concept of sustainability in the academic and political discourses in Europe and worldwide is relatively recent. Early ideas saw sustainability with an ecological emphasis as counter to notions of economic progress (Club of Rome report, Meadows et al., 1972). From the 1980s, a paradigm shift was apparent in the discourse. Ideas about ecological modernisation, portraying economic growth and environmental protection as complementary, gained in prominence in Europe (Dryzek, 2013:16). For many, the definition of sustainable development provided in the Brundtland Report (WCED, 1987) marked the beginning of the era of sustainability. Since the mid-1990s, sustainable development has become an overarching objective of the European Union (EU), governing all the EU's policies and activities, set out in the Treaty on European Union (TEU), (Council of the EU, 2006:2). As the EU has enlarged to include 28 states,¹ and notions of sustainability have been mainstreamed into policy and action, the EU has increased opportunities to fundamentally shape the pace and form of debates about sustainability at European and global level.

The three-pillar focus of sustainable development on the social, ecological and economic dimensions of development conformed to deep-seated European social constructs. Its appeal lay in the reassurance for the public that economic growth and environmental protection were complementary. At an international level, the EU's commitments to sustainable development, dominant in the global discourse, have enabled the EU to align itself with international best practice and develop a European identity in international forums, (Baker, 2007). But for sustainability to be credible as a 'European brand', all, from national policy-makers to the general public, must be able to trust the EU to have the ability, capacity and willingness to deliver what has been promised. This chapter questions if the EU has taken the opportunity to use sustainability as the 'vision' for the future of Europe envisaged by Karl Falkenberg,² addressing the social and political concerns contributing to current dissatisfaction with the European construction seen in the rise of populism, nationalism and isolationism. It is argued in this chapter that

Pamela M. Barnes

there remains much rhetoric, not action, in the sustainability debate in the EU, undermining the credibility of the brand and the opportunity for sustainability to become 'the vision' for the future of the EU.

Sustainability – a complex and contested political concept

The first challenge for those seeking to establish the credibility of sustainability as a European brand is to define sustainability. Broadly, it is the potential of an ecosystem to subsist over time and, additionally for some, its ability to bounce back from shocks to return to a stable equilibrium state (Scoones, 2016:295). But it is a contested concept, one of those terms

we can never all agree to define in the same way because the very definition carries a different social, moral or political agenda. . . (but) . . . somehow nowadays . . . we cannot live without it.

(Crick, 2002:1)

It represents "the endless quest for a permanent and habitable planet on which life evolves with reliability and dignity. . . . It is a moral ideal, a universally acknowledged goal to strive for" (O'Riordan and Voisey, 1998:3). It is contradictory and potentially open to conflict as "a pluralistic conception of sustainability not as a fixed end but as a dialogue of values, a view that accentuates the need to identify and strengthen social institutions to manage value conflict at different scales" (Ratner, 2004:51).

In modern times, sustainability has come to be widely used by policy-makers and the general public. By some sustainability is used interchangeably with environmentalism or by others interchangeably with sustainable development. Bartlett identified a spectrum of uses of 'sustainability' from a precise use by people introducing new concepts after thinking profoundly about the long-term future of the human race to those using the term almost mindlessly in an attempt to shed favourable light on continuing activities (Bartlett, 1998:8). Daly argued,

instead of discussing 'sustainability' in the abstract we should make it an adjective – we then must at least name something that is sustainable. Even better is the transitive verb 'to sustain' . . . [which] obliges us to name both what is being sustained and what is doing the sustaining. . . . It is the economy that is being sustained, and the biosphere that is doing the sustaining. . . . The economy is the subsystem dominated by transformations of matter and energy to serve human purposes. The problem is that the scale and quality of these transformations interferes significantly with the biosphere, reducing its capacity to sustain the economy.

(Daly, 2007:36–37)

In any event "part of what makes sustainability so fascinating is that it draws on a diverse set of political viewpoints" (Caradonna, 2014:71).

Sustainability and sustainable development are conceptually related, with partly overlapping intellectual history, but they are not the same. Sustainable development was popularised in the Brundtland Report as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (WCED, 1987:43). The definition was criticised because of its lack of clarity. Brundtland viewed sustainability as an ambiguous term, simply meaning a business model or political system capable of delivering business or electoral success. In giving the 2018 Barbara Ward lecture at the International Institute for

Environment and Development, Gro Harlem Brundtland cited, with some irony, the global arms trade as an example of a sustainable industry. Sustainable development, on the other hand, is development that meets the basic needs of all; secures equal opportunities and human rights; and establishes patterns of development to benefit everyone, protect our planet and promote world peace (Brundtland, 2018). Barnes and Hoerber view sustainability as the long-term goal of a sustainable world where economic growth is compatible with planetary boundaries and fair distribution amongst all. Sustainable development provides the processes and pathways towards that goal. They cautioned that

as long as sustainable development remains the hegemonic discourse on sustainability in Europe, and as a conceptual model, provides the framework for action, then it is important that the participants in the discourse constantly challenge what is meant by sustainability.

(Barnes and Hoerber, 2013:248)

The language of economics influences much of the sustainability debate (c.f. Table 18.1). In 'weak' approaches to sustainability, the focus is economic growth, where natural capital and human capital are substitutable if long-term benefits and well-being are maintained. For advocates of 'strong' sustainability, the focus is environmental protection as a prerequisite for economic growth, and stocks of natural capital need to be maintained. Caradonna portrayed this as a model of a series of concentric circles, arguing that society and the economy are supported by, but could not exist without, the environment, and therefore the environment should take conceptual priority in any model of sustainability (2014:9). Amongst 'deep ecologists' are followers of the Romanian economist Georgescu-Roegen (1971, 2008), whose work was the basis for the emergence in the early 2000s of a radical discourse of 'de-growth' amongst academics, primarily in France. 'De-growth' argues that environmental protection, economic growth and equity or social justice are incompatible, rejecting the notion that growth and sustainability could go together. It highlights the urgency of organising collective action to encourage a decline in the most damaging social and environmental practices. As such, it appears to be applicable at a local or small-scale level but would require 'heroic' decisions about what is needed by society and individuals and as such remains limited in terms of acceptance and support from policy makers at all levels within the EU (Slim, in Barnes and Hoerber, 2013:56).

Sustainability requires a process of societal transition to take place. Through the Single Market, the EU has long-standing competence over consumption issues from the supply side but less on the demand side. The environmental impacts of consumption remain unsustainably high, despite the success of some measures to raise consumer awareness. Behaviours with regard to production and consumption patterns have not changed (Baldock and Charveriat, 2018:16). Various responses to create the conditions to make societal changes are possible. Dobson viewed the sustainability transition in political-institutional terms or social and ethical practices that a society should follow (1995:80). But Dobson concluded there is no single form of society that is appropriate for sustainability. Both political-institutionalist positions and changes to social and ethical practices are needed to achieve the goal of sustainability. The EU's unique political and economic union, based on the legal frameworks established in the EU's treaties (Forganni, 2021: in this volume), provides the opportunity to mainstream sustainability into EU policies and legislation including policies as diverse as environmental policy and foreign and security policies. But what is more difficult for the EU to achieve is the acceptance of sustainability as a dialogue of values (Ratner, 2004:51), establishing those social institutions and ethical practices that meet the expectations of EU citizens. The arena of sustainability is one of shared competence between the Member States and the supranational level. Implementation is the responsibility of the national governments, with

Table 18.1 Evolution of the discourse on sustainability in Europe

Anthropocentric		Eco-centric	
Pollution control <i>Unlikely to lead to Brundtland model of sustainable development</i>	Weak sustainability "No special place for the environment" (Pearce, 1993:16)	Strong sustainability	Deep ecology 'ideal model' <i>Unlikely to lead to Brundtland model of sustainable development</i>
Focus – resource exploitation	Focus – economic growth	Focus – environmental protection as a pre-condition for economic growth	Focus – nature has intrinsic value, no substitution is possible
Outcome: Pragmatic market-led approach	Outcome: Rhetoric not action	Outcome: Ecological modernisation as dominant ideology	Outcome: Environment takes on a 'personality' to which moral obligations are owed
'End of pipe' solutions to pollution control	Substitution of natural capital with human capital	Maintain critical natural capital	Internalisation has taken place of norms, no action needed
Command and control regulation led by state	Some limited institutional reform introduced	Integration of environmental concerns at sectoral level	Decentralisation of institutions, 'bottom-up'
	Some cross-sectoral policy co-ordination	Partnership and shared responsibility across multi-levels of governance	community structures in place
	May address pollution at source	Democratic participation of civil society	Strict limits on resource use
			Labour-intensive economic development

Note: The view of proponents of weak sustainability is that there is no place for the environment, but if it is assumed that all forms of capital are substitutable, fewer roads may be offset for the future by more wetlands, or if natural resources are depleted (e.g. fossil fuels), this may be accompanied by investment in substitute fuels – that is, investment in renewable energy (Pearce, 1993). The outcome would be one in which the environment was protected, but it would not be the focus of the strategy.

Source: Based on Pearce, 1993:18, "The sustainability spectrum" and Baker, 2006:30, "The Ladder of Sustainable Development, the Global Focus", cited in Barnes and Hoerber, 2013:24

monitoring and oversight being the responsibility of the EU. The importance of agreeing, accepting and embedding shared notions of sustainability in the political discourse is crucial to ensuring the effective implementation of any policy measures. Also of importance is ensuring appropriate governance structures are in place to include not just governmental bodies in policy making but other stakeholders, including business and industrial groups and citizens' groups.

Historical and conceptual roots of sustainability

Authors including du Pisani (2006) and Caradonna (2014) explored the historical roots of sustainability to illustrate different ideas underpinning the current discourse beginning in the early Greek and Roman empires. For du Pisani, by the middle of the 20th century, population

growth; increased consumption post the Industrial Revolution; and the danger that crucial resources, for example, wood, coal and oil, could be depleted boosted the awareness of the need to use resources in a sustainable way, with fears that future generations would not be able to maintain their living standards (Du Pisani, 2006:87). Caradonna, in his work *Sustainability: A History* (2014), identified four main features characterising modern discussions of sustainability:

- Human society, the economy and the natural environment are interconnected, and for a society to be considered sustainable, it must address not only environmental but also social and economic issues.
- A society will respect ecological limits or face collapse, as developed in the work of ecological economists, notably the 1972 Club of Rome report, *Limits to Growth* (Meadows et al., 1972).
- A society that hopes to stick around in the long term needs to plan wisely for the future, taking its focus from the intergenerational aspects of sustainability, as demonstrated in the definition of sustainable development in *Our Common Future*, the Brundtland Report (BR) (WCED, 1987:43).
- Localise and decentralise, as a reaction to industrial society heavily influenced by Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful* (1973), increasing the opportunity for public participation in decision-making.

Caradonna noted that, "the sustainability movement generally functions with all four assumptions in mind, although, of course, there is broad debate about the specifics" (2014:19).

Since the 1980s, sustainable development has become hegemonised in the sustainability discourse and political debate. In seeking to reconcile the ecological, social and economic dimensions of development at the present time and into the future establishing a new era of economic growth, sustainable development contrasts with the view of the Club of Rome and other similar pessimistic reports. It was "an attempt to bring environmentalist ideas into the central area of policy, which in the modern world is economics . . . to be the ground on which the mainstream was to consider the environmentalist case" (Dresner, 2008:69). "The idea endures because it captures something essential about the problems of environment and development confronting the modern world" (Meadowcroft et al., 2019:1). Debate about the concepts of sustainability and sustainable development is essential to provide a point of contact between contending positions and work towards the practical process of achieving sustainability (Diesendorf, in Dunphy et al. 2000:21).

Sustainability in the European Union – building the brand

Increased awareness of environmental impact from economic activity globally led to the UN Conference on the Environment, Stockholm, June 1972. Subsequently the EU adopted its first Environmental Action Programme (EAP), 1972–1977, ending "the dark ages of EU environmental protection policy" (Haigh in O'Riordan and Voisey 1998:65). Although a framework for action, it was accompanied with a weak level of authority, as there was no specific inclusion of environmental action in the Treaties (Haigh, 2016:7). This came later. The approach was consistent with one of 'weak' sustainability, in which the focus of attention was predominantly on remedial action with the objective of not undermining economic growth. The EU's fifth EAP, 1992–2000, entitled "Towards Sustainability", incorporated the Brundtland definition of sustainable development to EU action, marking movement by the EU towards a 'strong' sustainability model. Since then, a further three EAPs have been initiated.

Table 18.2 EU Environmental Action Programmes – ‘building the brand’

<i>Date</i>	<i>Title</i>	<i>Focus</i>	<i>Treaty changes</i>
1957–1972		Nothing that could be called environmental policy	“The dark ages” Haigh in O’Riordan and Voisey (1998:65)
1972–1977	First	Pollution control, remedial action	Gradual process of establishing environmental policy
1978–1981	Second	Preventative action	
1982–1987	Third	Environmental protection not an ‘extra option’	
1987–1992	Fourth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Counterbalance to the Single Market ➤ Harmonisation of internal market objectives with environmental protection 	1987 Single European Act Environment chapter added to the Treaty
1992–2000	Fifth “Towards Sustainability”	Priority for action: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Industry ➤ Energy ➤ Transport ➤ Agriculture ➤ Tourism 	1993 Maastricht Treaty 1997 Amsterdam Treaty Sustainable development and environmental protection connected
2002–2012	Sixth “Our Choice, Our Future”	Priorities to:- <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Tackle climate change ➤ Protect and restore nature and halt the loss of biodiversity ➤ Achieve a quality of environment that does not give rise to risk to human health ➤ De-couple resource use from economic growth ➤ Ensure policy making is based on participation and sound knowledge ➤ Integrate environmental concerns into EU external relations 	“Makes the link between environment and our European objectives for growth and competitiveness” (COM [2001] 31 final, cited in Baker (2007:305) 2009 Lisbon Treaty
2013–2020	Seventh “Living Well within the Limits of Our Planet”	Setting the vision for 2050: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Environment and climate change as drivers of green growth, a healthy planet and improved human well-being 	
2021–2030	Eighth “Turning the Trends Together”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Recalling the UN 2030 Agenda for sustainable development, the SDGs and the Commission reflection paper “Towards a Sustainable Europe by 2030” 	

Source: Author compiled

The Treaty on the European Economic Community (EEC) (1957), 'a child of its time', adopted when the dominant discourse was that of industrialism, had not contained any reference to environmental protection but did highlight the need for "harmonious development of economic activities, a continuous and balanced expansion" (Article 2, TEEC). The first substantive amendment to the Treaty, the Single European Act (SEA) (1986), included a commitment in a new Environment chapter "to ensure a prudent and rational utilization of resources" [Article 130r (1)]. Article 130r (2) established environmental protection requirements as a component of other policies, a commitment to environmental policy integration (EPI) that "attracts great scholarly interest as well as widespread political backing. . . (and) . . . support is particularly strong in the European Union" (Jordan and Lenschow, 2010:147). Although European integration was founded on economic values, consensus was apparent for a shift to EU-led environmental policy, deepening European integration. As environmental issues raise complex questions about the causes of degradation and measures to resolve the existing problems, it opened wider sustainability debates.

The Maastricht Treaty (1992) represented the earliest specific reference to sustainability but not sustainable development, referring in Article 2 to "sustainable and non-inflationary growth respecting the environment" and "economic and social progress which is balanced and sustainable" (Article B, Common Provisions of the Treaty). Further clarity came in the Amsterdam Treaty (1999) establishing commitment to the integration of EPI into policies "with a view to promoting sustainable development" (Article 3c). Sustainable development became an organising principle for incorporating environmental policy across EU activities but with limitations, as sectors intrinsic to sustainability such as land use, water resources, energy matters and taxation remained subject to unanimous voting (O'Riordan and Voisey, 1998:46). The Lisbon Treaty (in force, 2009) committed the European Union to

work for the sustainable development of Europe, based on balanced economic growth and price stability, a highly competitive social market economy, aiming at full employment and social progress, and a high level of protection and improvement of the quality of the environment. . . (and) in its relations with the wider world, the Union . . . contribute to peace, security, the sustainable development of the Earth.

(Article 3 TEU)

Sustainable development was thus established as a fundamental objective and normative concept in the EU, not as a simple policy guideline but a binding constitutional objective (de Sadeleer, 2015:58). The Treaty does not provide a definition of sustainable development, but there is an indication of how it is to be achieved through the tool of policy integration (Van Hees, 2014:63). Article 7 TFEU states, "The Union shall ensure consistency between its policies and activities, taking all of its objectives into account and in accordance with the principle of conferral of powers." But although the EU has governance structures and mechanisms in place to enable the longer-term perspective for sustainable development policies to be implemented, what is apparent is that sustainability is not yet the overarching paradigm of all EU policies.

From concept to EU action

Notions of sustainability transition are prominent in academic literature (Kohler et al., 2019) and influence EU policy frameworks. These are increasingly characterised by multidimensional

goals, a focus on diverse societal actors and the adoption of system transition approaches, emphasising innovation. But "[A]lthough there has been a growing consensus on the end points of sustainability, combining environmental, social and economic goals – now parsed in terms of circular, low-carbon or green economies there has been less discussion of how to get there" (Scoones, 2016:299). Transitions are fundamentally uncertain processes typified by setbacks, accelerations and unintended consequences. Achieving sustainability transitions will depend on coherent contributions across all policy domains with policies, investments and knowledge brought together to transform the systems driving unsustainability (European Environment Agency (EEA), 2019). The Treaty requirement for integration of environmental protection and sustainable development to EU policies provides support for transitional policies, but this is challenging for policy-makers not least because of ambiguity and lack of clarity in the definition of sustainability and sustainable development.

The EU launched the first of its Sustainable Development Strategies (SDSs) to achieve sustainable development in 2001 (COM [2001] 264 final). SDSs are "iterative devices that should, through a process of continuous objective setting, identifying means of achieving, then monitoring and reporting them, be a learning process helping society to move towards sustainability" (IIED, 2002, in Pallaemarts et al., 2007:6). The EU and the Member States agreed to implement the framework UN Agenda 21 adopted at the 1992 Rio Summit. But national governments were engaged in individual policy-making. Supranational action was needed in order to prevent fragmentation undermining EU ecological sustainability and economic development (Barnes and Barnes, 2000:55). The EU's successive SDSs have been subject to much criticism throughout their history. Ecological modernisation (Janicke and Jacob, 2006) provided the framework for the SDSs. From the 1980s, it had become the major discourse and strategy for (Western) industrialised countries to marry economic growth to environmental protection policies (Baker, 2007:297). For Baker, it represented the reality of organised power and interest group politics in the EU with sustainable development being a meta-narrative framing, legitimising the integration process. But she cautioned that differences between ecological modernisation and social justice aspects of sustainable development meant ethical considerations were sidelined by attention to efficiency procedures (Baker, 2007:304).

The 2001 SDSs added the environmental dimension to the Lisbon Strategy to establish the EU as "the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion" (Council of the EU, 2000: Conclusions). The Lisbon Process enshrined sustainability amongst its goals, but its evolution was telling evidence of an increasing focus on economic achievements and the environment's gradually decreasing prominence (Interview, Commission official, 10.1.17, in Zito, et. al. 2019). When sustainability objectives were perceived to be in direct conflict with sectoral interests, there was a strong tendency to ignore the mandates of the SDSs altogether, with environmental and health objectives being weakened in the interests of preserving competitiveness (Pallaemarts et al., 2007:35).

The Commission reviewed the 2005 SDSs (COM [2005] 658 final), finding a lack of progress in linking and integrating policy areas to achieve sustainable development. A number of key issues were identified that needed a strong push at the highest political level to engage the public, speed up decision-making and action at all levels, encourage more 'joined up' thinking and accelerate the uptake of new and better ideas. Prominent amongst these issues was lack of linkage between climate change and energy policy, particularly action on sustainable energy with a view to enhancing security of energy supply, reducing climate change and local air pollution, reducing poverty and promoting local and regional development (COM [2005] 658 final:5).

Energy policy and climate action have become important political priorities and pillars of the EU's sustainable development policy since the mid-2000s when Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso³ presented the Energy Policy for Europe (EPE) strategy (COM [2007] 1 final). But environmental organisations were critical of Barroso for giving economic development, not environmental protection, priority within a sustainable development framework. In a speech in 2005, he commented, "if I have three children – the economy, our social agenda, and the environment. Like any modern father – if one of my children is sick, I am ready to drop everything and focus on him until he is back to health. . . . But that does not mean I love the others any less! We must deliver jobs and growth" (Barroso, 2005). Although measures such as the introduction of reports on the State of the Environment by the European Environmental Agency⁴ (EEA) and measurement of sustainability indicators through Eurostat, the EU's statistical office, were introduced, the 2009 evaluation of mainstreaming SDSs into a broad range of policies found unsustainable trends were continuing (COM [2009] 400 final). The EU's 2020 Strategy sought to mainstream and reinforce the role of sustainability in policy development, establishing mutually reinforcing priorities of smart, sustainable and inclusive growth (COM [2010] 2020). It contained critical environmental objectives focusing on how to create resource efficiency and move towards a low-carbon, low-impact economy.

Post-2010, the notion of a 'green economy' emerged in the sustainability discourse. This linked economic growth and ecological sustainability in the search for a low-carbon economy emphasising 'green job' creation. Commitment to both domestic and global action came in the EU's green growth strategy (COM [2011] 363:2). The EU's focus was to promote the 'right kind' of growth in a green economy, transforming challenges into economic opportunities, not only reversing negative environmental trends but also driving future growth and jobs (COM [2011] 363 final:5). The green growth discourse was based on the assumption of an absolute, permanent, global and fast decoupling of economic growth from environmental pressures. But there was little evidence of this taking place at sufficient scale and potential longevity (Parrique et al., 2019:3).

Beginning his presidency of the European Commission in 2014, Jean-Claude Juncker⁵ declared the time had come for a new approach (Juncker, 2014). He introduced ten priorities for action, prominently establishing a resilient Energy Union and a forward-looking climate change policy (COM [2015a] 80 final). There was little reference to sustainable development in Juncker's growth agenda. Because of the focus on investment, regulatory and business environments, environmental groups saw this as retreat on environmental protection. Controversially, the environment portfolio, led by Karmenu Vella, was included within the grouping of portfolios headed by Commission Vice-President Maroš Šefčovič, responsible for the Energy Union, thus creating potential conflict, not integration (Cavoski, 2015:502). Martin Schulz, then president of the European Parliament (EP), raised the concerns of Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) about failure to include sustainable development in the portfolio of Jyrki Katainen, commissioner for jobs, growth, investment and competitiveness (Euractiv.com, 2014, 29th September).

The EU committed to implement the UN-agreed 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its core Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and also to the Paris Climate accord (CoP 21) in 2015. The EU was instrumental in shaping the 2030 Agenda. The 17 SDGs had an apparent environmental impact focus, specifically on climate change. Each goal had specific targets – 169 in total – to be achieved by 2030.

The SDGs will be at the heart of EU's policymaking and action. To this end, the European Semester provided a well-established framework for the coordination of economic

and employment policies needed to guide the Union and its Member States through these transformations, which have economy-wide implications.

(COM [2019c] 650 final: 2)

The EU's strategy was underpinned by commitments to lower resource consumption and consideration of the limits to growth of the planet. The importance of ingraining sustainability as a guiding principle in choices made by citizens, companies and civil society actors and sustainable growth as a means of preserving social welfare systems was emphasised (COM [2016] 739 final:17). The EU Circular Economy Action Plan, consistent with meeting SDG Goal 12, Responsible Consumption and Production (c.f. Table 18.3), highlighted the necessity to achieve growth relying less on scarce resources (water, soil or raw materials and fossil fuels) and more on renewable energy resources maintaining materials within the production cycle (COM [2015b] 614 final).

The plan outlined by the European Commission to implement the SDGs included three possible scenarios based on a two-pronged approach – one to establish the policy foundations for a sustainable future and the other to establish 'horizontal enablers' for the sustainability transition, including a re-orientation of the Multi-Annual Framework for the EU's Budget (COM (2019a), 22 final). Whilst the three scenarios differed in the respective roles for the EU and Member States, all three relied on a shared premise and broad recognition by EU, businesses and civil society of the need for enhanced commitment if the EU and the world are to secure a sustainable future and achieve the SDGs by 2030. But, again, it appeared that sustainable development in the EU concerned economic development, with the other goals of the environment and social sustainability less prominent. The Juncker Commission was criticised for modest levels of economic growth in the short term but longer term widening of inequalities and little concern for the environment (Diab, 2020). Further shortcomings were evident. Sustainability requires comprehensive longer-term approaches to be implemented to replace sectoral short-termism. To ensure effective parallel balanced economic, social and ecological decisions based on political choices and trade-offs requires full transparency and participation in the decision-making process (Falkenberg, 2016:3).

When Ursula von der Leyen assumed the position of president of the European Commission on 1 December 2019, she made a commitment that "Europe must lead the transition to a healthy planet" with sustainability as an overriding political principle. Prominent in the political goals for her presidency was a European Green Deal (EGD) (von der Leyen, 2019). The EGD was the EU's response to tackling climate and environmental-related challenges and an integral part of the Commission's strategy to put sustainability and the wellbeing of citizens at the centre of economic policy by implementing the UN's 2030 Agenda and the sustainable development goals (COM [2019c] 640 final).

However the coronavirus pandemic of 2020 quickly came to dominate the von der Leyen presidency and the EGD as Europe's growth strategy became the basis of the strategy to 'Repair and Prepare for the Next Generation' (COM [2020c] 456 final). It spawned a new definition of sustainability, 'competitive sustainability', focusing on job creation, with the commitment that public investments in the recovery should respect the green oath to 'do no harm' (COM [2020c] 456 final:6). The twin challenges of transitions to a green and digital Europe were acknowledged and support for EU climate and environmental objectives reaffirmed (COM [2020b] 442 final:3). Three green policy issues were central to the EGD – climate neutrality, biodiversity and sustainable food (Farm to Fork strategy, COM [2020a], 381 final). In the wide-ranging package for financing the EU, combining the future Multi-annual Framework (MFF) and a special recovery effort under the next Generation EU (NGEU), agreed upon at

Table 18.3 EU response to UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development: the Sustainable Development Goals

SDG	Focus	EU response (examples of measures and initiatives)	Eurostat report, 2020 Progress on SDGs
	Adopted at UN Sustainable Development Conference, New York, September 2015		Overall progress made on almost all goals
1	No Poverty	European Pillar of social rights, strengthened European semester*	Considerable but too slow to meet target to lift 20 million people out of poverty by 2020
2	Zero Hunger	CAP, CFP, circular economy	No major issues regarding food security in EU but some adverse impacts of agricultural production still visible in EU
3	Good Health and Well-Being	European Pillar of Social rights, scoreboard, action on diseases, Framework Convention on Tobacco Control	Rather strong progress over past five years but EU off track in meeting target to halve road accident fatalities between 2010 and 2020
4	Quality Education	European Education Area by 2025, Skills Agenda	Progress on 4/6 benchmarks but movement away from education outcomes target and target to raise adult participation in education
5	Gender Equality	Strategic engagement for gender equality, 2016–2019	Moderately negative, with inequalities in education, labour market and employment gap increasing
6	Clean Water and Sanitation	Revised drinking water rules	EU aggregate data not available for several indicators. Available data paint a favourable picture for the EU
7	Affordable and Clean Energy	Energy Union strategy 2030 Energy and Climate Framework	Overall assessment is mixed; increased energy consumption since 2014 has undermined progress towards energy efficiency target with increase in import dependency. But the share of renewables has been rising with a fall in greenhouse gas emissions. Number of households in fuel poverty has fallen
8	Decent Work and Economic Growth	Investment Plan for Europe	Steady improvements in the EU's economic and labour market situation over recent years
9	Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure	Industrial strategy, Connecting Europe Facility, Horizon 2020	Unlikely to meet the targets of R&D spending, making transport infrastructure sustainable, decrease in emissions from new cars slowed
10	Reduced Inequalities	European Pillar of Social rights scoreboard, work-life balance package	Positive overall in past five-year trends but recently widening of income poverty and employment rates

(Continued)

Table 18.3 (Continued)

SDG	Focus	EU response (examples of measures and initiatives)	Eurostat report, 2020 Progress on SDGs
11	Sustainable Cities and Communities	Urban agenda for EU, cohesion policy	Favourable trends in issues such as overcrowding, exposure to noise and pollution and occurrence of crime but slowing in progress towards more sustainable transport
12	Responsible Consumption and Production	Circular economy action plan	Mixed response
13	Climate Action	Entry into force of Paris Climate accord	Overall assessment remains neutral, progress in some areas but negative in others
14	Life Below Water	EU plastics strategy	Available data are limited but evidence suggests lack of effectiveness of measures
15	Life on Land	Action plan for nature, people and economy	Mixed picture
16	Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions	Global strategy for foreign and security policy, trade for all strategy	Clearly favourable trends in past five years, putting the goal on top of the ranking
17	Partnerships for the Goals	EU better regulation agenda, yearly monitoring of progress on SDGs	Mixed results, imports from developing countries grown but financial support to these countries has fallen. Low level of environmental taxes in total tax revenues has declined and shift of taxation from labour to environmental taxes not evident

Notes

* European Semester

Country-specific recommendations from the Commission to support the Member States to achieve sustainable and inclusive growth.

Eurostat, 2020 report shows that progress on SDGs 16 and 1 is the most favourable.

Sources: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdgs>; COM (2019a) 22 final, Annex 1:58–63; Eurostat, 2020 monitoring report

the Brussels European Council meeting in July 2020, support to help transform the EU through its major policies, particularly the EGD, the digital revolution and resilience were identified (European Council, 2020:2).

The EU has made a strong commitment to sustainable development. But “Ecological modernization provides the framework within which the EU marries economic growth to its environmental protection policies” (Baker, 2007:297). Baker argued, “The vision of sustainable development has many key elements needed for it to act as a legitimizing, mobilizing value for the European integration process” (2007:298). But she cautioned that accepting technical and managerial approaches in solving environmental problems was supporting the view that nothing needs to radically change (Baker, 2007). Despite the adoption of strategies to promote sustainable development, review of the EU’s growth strategies shows unsustainable trends are continuing, particularly the devastating impact of climate change and degradation of natural capital (EEA, 2019). Other negative trends are apparent with increasing levels of inequality, especially inequality of opportunity. Approximately one-quarter of the EU’s

population is at risk of poverty or social exclusion (COM (2019a) 22 final). Overall, it appears that the EU has not been successful in developing strategies capable of balancing the three dimensions of sustainable development. Renda concluded that whilst at the highest political level, EU institutions and Member States have set targets and ambitions for sustainable and inclusive growth, in their daily practice of policy-making, EU institutions have 'danced to a different tune' (2017, 2).

The EU and the Member States share the competence for action on sustainability. The EU is proposing strategies, including measures to be put into operation at the national and sub-national levels. To be effective, this requires acceptance of the norms and values that underpin the transition to sustainability at the national and sub-national level. Initiatives require a great deal of long-term investment at all stages from research to operationalisation, for example, in the energy sector, where massive amounts of funding were required for the introduction of green and renewable energy technologies.

Is sustainability a "very European brand"?

The objective of sustainability has been mainstreamed into EU domestic and external policies. The EU, as a group of states with a unique legal and political system and close agreements on policy with neighbouring European states, has played a significant role in the development of global strategies for sustainability. Within the EU, the principle of Environmental Policy Integration (Lenschow, 2002) was an important step towards the later commitment to integration of sustainable development as a fundamental objective of the EU and resulted in a deepening of the process of European integration from the late 1980s. Sustainable development provided a 'discourse of reassurance', appearing to satisfy all those participating in the sustainability debate. The sustainable development discourse opened up the opportunity for wide-ranging participation in the debate, unlike the narrow focus of radical environmentalism.

Although sustainable development is (by far) not the only goal of the EU it is a unique goal because it influences the way in which the EU designs its policies and puts particular focus on a simultaneous approach to policies of a very different nature.

(van Hees, 2014:64)

Since the early 2000s, the EU has played a particularly visible role in the sustainability discourse in domestic and global policy forums. The ambition has been set for the EU to achieve a resource-efficient and climate-neutral economy by 2050.

The difficulty is to achieve balance and develop coherence in policy action, as any real shift to sustainability is the result of political decisions that do not, and cannot, satisfy everyone and everything (Machin, 2019:224). Falkenberg argued a way forward to turn the sustainable agenda into 'the' vision for the EU and act as a positive message about transformation and change to come. "It could be a common European political project that is urgently needed . . . The EU should subscribe to the UN definition, that the SDGs are 'an Agenda of the people, by the people and for the people'" (Falkenberg, 2016:9). But monitoring reports on implementation of the SDGs since 2017 show progress on their implementation was mixed, with some commentators finding that the EU could do much better (Eurostat, 2017, in Rijnhout and Zondervan, 2018:7/8). The Eurostat 2020 report on the progress of the EU on 100 indicators towards the SDGs found the EU had made strong progress towards SDG 16, Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions, and good progress, although considerably slower, on SDGs 1, No poverty; 3, Good health and Wellbeing; 2, Zero Hunger; and 8, Decent Work and Economic Growth. Moderate

progress over the last five years was made on eight other goals. But on Goal 5, Gender Equality, the EU had moved away from the goal (Eurostat, 2020) (c.f. Table 18.3).

Progress towards environmental aspects of sustainability was slow. On Goal 13, Climate Action, it was noted that there had been no progress over the previous five years. This is particularly disappointing in light of the importance that the general public places on environmental protection. In 2017, 94% of respondents stated that the environment was important to them personally, with 56% saying it was very important (Eurobarometer, 2017) (see also Tendero in Hoerber and Weber, 2021). The issues considered most important by the public were climate change (51%), air pollution (46%) and the growing amount of waste (40%). The survey found that the majority of Europeans say their national governments (67%) and the EU (62%) are not doing enough to protect the environment. Whilst the EGD has included commitments to greener growth reaching environmental targets, it is important that economic stimulus measures do not result in damaging emissions, the responsibility for which may be laid at the door of the EU.

There is an apparent social sustainability deficit in the modern concept of sustainability and criticism that the EU is not taking appropriate action quickly enough. "On the local and national levels we need to work to improve social justice and equity" (Bartlett, 1998:11). "We cannot underestimate the social dimension. There are loud and understandable calls for a just transition, in which potential losers from the low-carbon economy are given due care and attention" (EEA, 2019: Foreword). There was criticism of the notion of just transition outlined in the EGD from non-governmental organisations (NGOs) because of lack of clarity in what was meant by a just transition. Recognising that some regions of the EU would be more affected by the transition to climate neutrality by 2050, the EGD included financing through the Just Transition Mechanism (JTM), estimated at 100 billion euros, and support from the European Investment Bank. However, the JTM was subject to criticism of insufficient funding from some Member States, led by Poland, heavily dependent on fossil fuels and unwilling to commit to implementing the EU's objective of achieving a climate-neutral EU by 2050, in line with the EU's commitment to the Paris Accord.

The implementation of the SDGs is primarily the responsibility of the Member States, but as SDG targets and priorities are addressed through the EU policies, agreed on by all the Member States, the delivery of the SDGs is a shared responsibility (Kettunen et al., 2018:6). This raises the importance of coherence between the action of the Member States and the EU and strengthens arguments for increasing levels of integration to support the process of societal transition for sustainability.

Conclusion

It is argued in this chapter that sustainability is a complex multi-dimensional concept at the core of which is the belief that environmental, social and economic objectives should be in harmony with each other and be interdependent in the development process. It is a dynamic notion that has changed through time, becoming more inclusive, referring to all biological systems. Discussion in the early sections of the chapter focused on the manner in which sustainability has moved from a collection of ideas to prominence on the political agenda, leading to policy action. This does not mean, however, that there is clarity provided for policy action. The contested and complicated nature of the concept requires constant confrontation and debate about definition and meaning of sustainability.

Sustainability is not a peculiarly European notion, but as a group of states, the EU has and does exert considerable influence in the global forums in which it is debated. Within the EU,

the increased commitment to sustainability resulted in a deepening of the process of European integration from the late 1980s. The principle of environmental policy integration was an important step towards the later commitment to integration of sustainable development as a fundamental objective of the EU. More recently, responses to climate change have played a particularly visible role in the sustainability discourse attracting much support. Expectations have been raised about what the EU may accomplish. But brand identity is based on trust and a commitment to support the brand message over time. As demonstrated in this chapter, there is much about the EU's drive towards sustainability that is subject to criticism, undermining the opportunity that Falkenberg envisages for sustainability to become 'the vision' of the future for the EU and establish sustainability as a 'very' European brand (Falkenberg, 2016:9).

Lack of integration and coherence of policies relating to the different aspects of sustainability continues to be evident. Van Hees proposed that the EU's definition of sustainable development should be

stimulating and encouraging economic development (e.g. more jobs, creativity, entrepreneurship and revenue) whilst protecting and improving important aspects (at the global and European level) of nature and society (inter alia natural assets public health and fundamental rights) for the benefit of present and future generations.

(van Hees, 2014:75)

It is an approach demanding balance between economic development and other policy areas, such as the environment and public health, which is difficult for the EU's policy-makers to achieve. However Van Hees was not defining sustainable development but rather providing a description of action that requires openness, accountability and transparency capable of engaging the policy-makers and the public alike. Progress has been made, and there is greater clarity of action, but imbalance remains between the different dimensions of sustainability, undermining the progress of societal change. It is important to ensure that sustainability becomes the guiding principle for coherent policies and actions. Equally important is the need to constantly challenge what is meant by sustainability and ensure that all stakeholders are involved in the policy process.

Notes

- 1 The United Kingdom formally left the EU on 31 January 2020, but a period of transition followed during which the United Kingdom continued to follow all EU rules and maintained its trading relationships whilst new arrangements were negotiated.
- 2 Karl Falkenberg, director-general for environment, 2009–2015, senior advisor for sustainable development to president of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, 2016–2017.
- 3 Jose Manuel Durao Barroso, Commission president (2004–2009, 2009–2014).
- 4 The EU Agency tasked with the provision of independent information for policy makers.
- 5 Jean-Claude Juncker, Commission president, 2014–2019.

Bibliography

- Baker, S. (2006) *Sustainable Development*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Baker, S. (2007) Sustainable development as symbolic commitment: Declaratory politics and the seductive appeal of ecological modernization in the EU. *Environmental Politics*, Vol. 16 (2):297–317.
- Baldock, D. and Charveriat, C. (2018) *30x30 Actions for a Sustainable Europe, #Think 2030 Action Plan*. Brussels and London: The Institute for European Environmental Policy