

UN Sustainable Development Goals: The pandemic as a huge setback

Submitted by: BlueSky Education

Tuesday, 15 June 2021

The fifth edition of the Eurostat monitoring report outlines the first effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the progress the EU and its member states are making towards achieving the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals. Despite measures like short-time working, the European job market was hit hard in 2020 as a consequence of the dramatic economic downturn. With regard to climate protection and energy consumption, however, the data indicates that 2020 brought about significant, albeit short-lived, improvements. The monitoring report was prepared by WU Vienna's Institute for Managing Sustainability. EU Commissioner for the Economy Paolo Gentiloni will present the report on June 15.

Economic development

"In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic destroyed much of the progress made in previous years," says WU researcher Markus Hametner, the head of the project, commenting on the latest data. The setback is most striking when looking at the economic growth rates: "With a drop of 6.2% from 2019 to 2020, the EU's GDP shrank significantly more during the pandemic than during the last financial crisis, when the GDP contracted by 'only' 4.6% from 2008 to 2009," explains Hametner.

Only slight reduction in employment rates

Due to the many support measures implemented, for example short-time working programs, the job market was hit less hard than many had feared. The EU employment rate dropped by 0.7 percentage points from 2019 to 2020, which is only about half the decrease observed from 2008 to 2009 during the financial crisis. However, the EU has paid a high price for limiting the scale of this slowdown: Government debt spiked in the EU in 2020, exceeding 90% of the GDP for the first time.

Life expectancy down by one year

The data is still incomplete, so it is not yet possible to draw a comprehensive picture of how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the economic, social, and ecological situation in the EU. Current EU data in the areas of health, poverty reduction, climate change, and the environment still mostly represents the pre-pandemic situation. However, an ad-hoc survey on 2020 excess mortality rates in the EU carried out by the European statistical offices showed an excess mortality of over half a million deaths above the three-year average from the 2016–2019 period. This means that life expectancy in the EU fell by around one year in 2020 compared to the year before. Men, especially from older age groups, are affected slightly more by this decrease than women.

Climate, energy, and ecosystems

Similarly, there are currently only estimates of how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected energy consumption and the climate. Across the EU, electricity consumption decreased by around 4% in 2020 as compared to the previous year. Carbon dioxide emissions from fossil fuel combustion are estimated to have fallen by 10%. Experts fear, however, that this decrease will only be temporary and that energy consumption will soon return to precrisis levels. In the five years prior to the pandemic, energy

consumption had risen more or less at a steady pace in the EU. In 2019, the EU's dependence on energy imports hit an all-time high. Imports from outside the EU accounted for over 60% of the energy consumed in the Union.

Even though protected natural areas have grown in size in the EU, many animal and plant species and their habitats are still heavily affected by overfishing, land consumption, and soil sealing. Habitat loss has primarily resulted in a long-term decline in bird and butterfly populations. "European consumption still has an enormously negative impact on the environment, and the status of our ecosystems and biodiversity remains unsatisfactory," says WU researcher Markus Hametner.

Overall, the monitoring report shows that progress towards the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals has slowed considerably due to the COVID-19 pandemic. "In some areas, for example the fight against poverty, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic will continue to be felt for quite some time. It will take years for the full impact of these negative effects to become totally apparent," Hametner points out.

On behalf of Eurostat, WU Vienna's Institute for Managing Sustainability carries out yearly analyses to monitor the EU's progress with regard to the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals. The main question that guides these analyses is what progress the EU achieved during the previous five to 15 years in its efforts to meet the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

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