

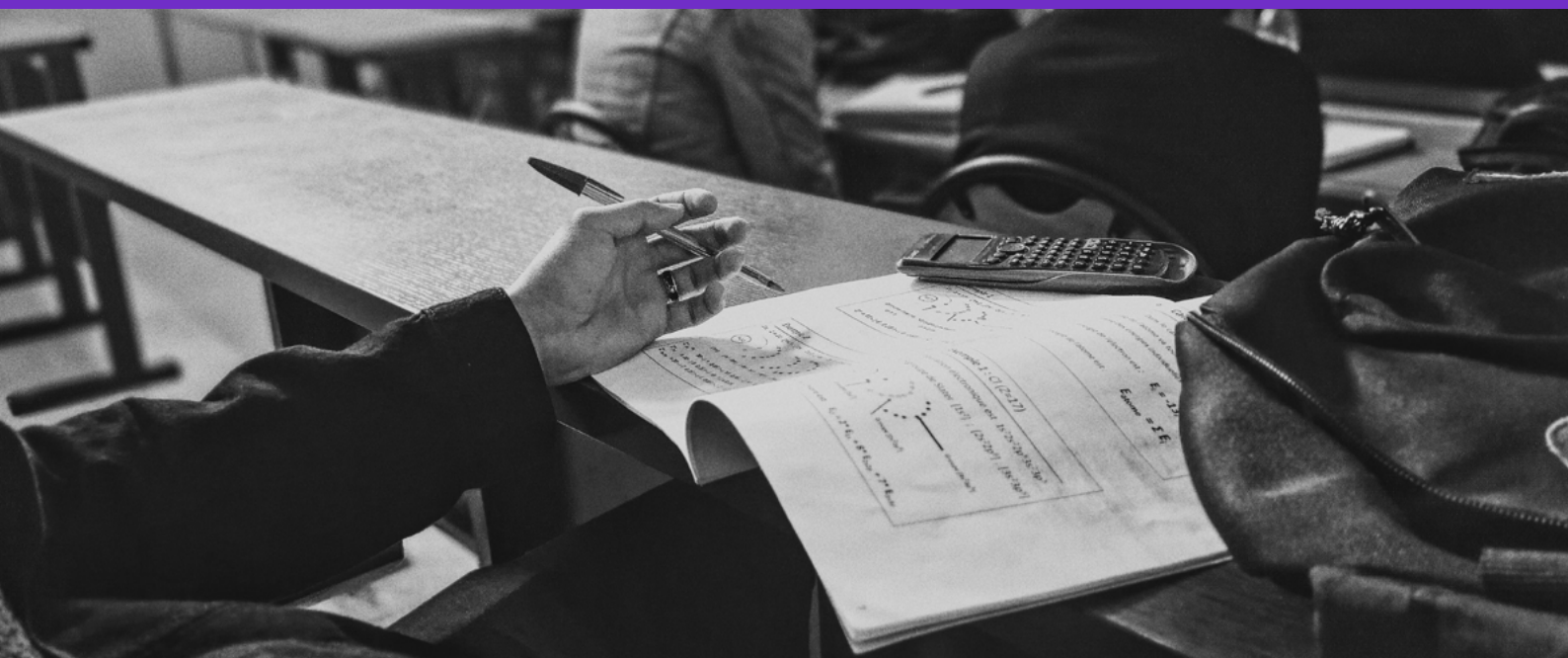


POLICY BRIEF

# Towards Agenda 2030 in the Euro-Mediterranean

Mitigating the impact of Covid-19

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# Introduction

In September 2019, world leaders called for a Decade of Action ahead of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) target date of 2030. The unprecedented crisis caused by the advent of Covid-19 in early 2020 has severely disrupted plans - on global, regional and national levels - to mobilise financing, enhance implementation and strengthen institutions to achieve the goals by the end of this decade.

Measures to respond to the immediate threat of Covid-19, including lengthy lockdowns in several countries, have led to a global economic crisis. This presents a significant setback for ambitions to achieve Agenda 2030, particularly in poorer countries. As does the fact the longer-term consequences of the pandemic - whether economic, social or political - remain uncertain.

The Sustainable Development Report in the Mediterranean 2020 indicated that Covid-19 is likely to have severe short-term negative impacts in particular on SDG 1 (zero poverty), SDG 2 (zero hunger), SDG 3 (good health and well-being) and SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth). Covid-19 severely exacerbates income inequalities and other forms of inequities.

Even before Covid-19, the Euro-Mediterranean region - home to more than 520 million people across 24 countries - faced unique challenges across its 42 member countries. Shared by three continents, this complex environment is the region in the world most vulnerable to climate change after the Arctic, and is roiled by several ongoing conflicts. Chronic political, economic, social and environmental difficulties have exacerbated inequities and widened development gaps around the Mediterranean.

In such a context, the SDG target date of 2030 appears daunting. As the 2020 Sustainable Development in the Mediterranean Report, which analysed the level of SDG progress for southern Europe and the Mediterranean basin, observed: "In general, all the 24 Mediterranean countries are far from achieving the SDGs and must improve their performance."

It is clear that sustained and accelerated action is needed if the Euro-Mediterranean region is to build on its existing SDG achievements - or at least prevent a reversal - and overcome existing obstacles in order to further progress. In line with SDG 17, developing collective policy tools and partnerships is key to enacting change that both involves all and benefits all. While Covid-19 has undermined current plans, it has also been a wake-up call to increase collaboration between governments plus regional and international institutions. Multilateral and collective action on pandemic recovery would help lay the groundwork to strengthen resilience to future crises and work towards the 2030 agenda.

The Mediterranean neighbourhood needs enhanced partnerships; a renewed commitment to multilateral solutions; and increased empowerment of young people through education and technology, to ensure that the region's emergence from the pandemic advances wider sustainable development goals. As Nabil Al-Sharif, Executive Director of the Anna Lindh Foundation for Dialogue between Cultures, has warned, putting development cooperation on the back burner due to Covid-19 would not only be short-sighted, it would have a devastating impact on the region. "This disease which has crossed borders and does not recognize [them] can only be met by more partnerships, by more working together", he added.

International cooperation can help achieve a swifter resolution to the pandemic in the medium to long term, and better mitigate its impact in the shorter term. The report identifies five key measures that such global cooperation should include: disseminate best practices rapidly; strengthen financing mechanisms for developing countries; address hunger hotspots; ensure social protection; and promote new drugs and vaccines.

This publication will explore how the Euro-Mediterranean region is progressing with the SDG agenda, paying particular attention to SDG 17 (which relates to partnerships) and SDG 4 (which relates to education). It will examine the impact of the Covid-19 crisis, outline examples of actions aimed at mitigating the immediate effects and long-term consequences of the pandemic, and set out recommendations for sustained and enhanced cooperation on implementing SDG 17 and SDG 4 in the Euro-Mediterranean.

## Agenda 2030 in the Euro-Mediterranean: the story so far

The SDGs provide an invaluable framework for recovery from Covid-19. The pandemic has laid bare the fragile economic, social and environmental underpinnings of our world today. Agenda 2030 was adopted to address risks and fragilities across economic, social and environmental domains. If the Covid-19 crisis is to have any positive consequences, it should be to shake the world from complacency and commit to investing in a sustainable and inclusive future for all.

According to the 2020 Sustainable Development in the Mediterranean Report, which analysed the level of SDG progress for 24 countries of southern Europe and the Mediterranean basin, the Mediterranean region as a whole has an average index score of 73.5, hypothetically corresponding to the 50th position in the world ranking.

When the Mediterranean is broken down into three sub-regions, the values of mean index (weighted by population) are variable, being 78.5 (ideally corresponding to the world rank 18) in Europe West, 74.8 in Europe East (world rank 38), 70.2 in North Africa and the Middle East (world rank 72).

While the report notes that most of the European countries individually perform well on the index score, they are still some way below the maximum score of 100 and need significant improvements. Israel and Algeria have the highest score in the Middle East and North Africa. Libya and Palestine are not included in the index as most data required for assessment is unavailable.

The report assesses progress in the pursuit of each SDG, with positive results recorded with regard to SDG 1 (zero poverty) and SDGs 3 and 4, which report net improvements on the health and well-being of the populations and on quality education. On the other hand, negative results were recorded on SDGs 2 (zero hunger), 5 (gender equality), 9 (industry, innovation and infrastructures) and 14 (life below water).

Specifically on SDG 4, the report noted that trends are positive compared to 2019. It observed that primary school enrolment looks similar in the four areas of the Mediterranean but the pupil/teacher ratio shows differences. It recommended that MENA countries improve the lower secondary education completion rate and that some OECD countries boost pre-primary and tertiary educational rates. In addition, the report noted that almost 2.7 million youths in the Middle East and North Africa do not demonstrate good literacy levels. It recommended that scientific skills be “much improved”, including in some OECD countries, and that educational opportunities become more available for students from low income families. Along the same lines, the Intercultural Trends Survey 2020 conducted by the Anna Lindh Foundation and Ipsos-MORI in 13 Euro-Mediterranean countries revealed that 73% of respondents in Europe and 72% in Southern and Eastern Mediterranean countries (SEM) consider that schools are places where children learn to live in diversity. Furthermore, over two-thirds of SEM respondents would like to see women play greater roles in education, arts and culture (68%) and around two-thirds would like to see women play greater roles in science and technology (64%).

In general, the report notes that while actions related to climate and socio-economic issues have been undertaken, they need further improvement. Mediterranean countries tend to perform better on goals related to socio-economic outcomes and climate mitigation, but need to maintain progress in these areas and increase transnational cooperation. Ongoing conflict in some parts of the Middle East and North Africa continues to lead to reversals in SDG progress, as does the continuing impact of Covid-19.

At a joint Friends of Europe and the Anna Lindh Foundation online debate on aligning regional recovery from Covid-19 with fulfilment of SDGs, Angelo Riccaboni, Chair of the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) Mediterranean and Chair of the Partnership for Research and Innovation in the Mediterranean Area (PRIMA) Foundation, highlighted how the pandemic was undermining Agenda 2030 efforts.

“Covid-19 has a short-term negative impact on most SDGs and these impacts are amplified for the vulnerable groups”, he said, explaining that the pandemic was creating “clear problems” for progress towards the achievement of the SDG goals.

## **Sustainable Development Goal 17: progress through partnership**

The Covid-19 pandemic has demonstrated how interconnected our world has become. It also underscores the importance of SDG 17 which calls for new inclusive partnerships - global, regional, national and local - for sustainable development. SDG 17 girds the entire Agenda 2030 and without it, the remaining SDGs would be impossible to achieve.

Covid-19 has offered a stark reminder of the need for transnational solidarity and cooperation: no country can overcome this pandemic alone. Yet, many global leaders have retreated back to national approaches towards crisis solving.

Pre-Covid, approaches towards Agenda 2030 in the Mediterranean region tended to be characterised by an array of public and private stakeholders contributing to a specific SDG within a particular geographic or sectoral domain. There was much room for improvement in terms of more efficient coordination and collaboration between such actors to expedite overall progress towards the SDGs. The Covid-19 recovery offers an opportunity to reshape the framework for development in the Mediterranean region, encouraging a deeper multilateralism that forges ties at civil society level, as well state-to-state.

As Nasser Kamel, Secretary General of the Union for the Mediterranean, wrote in a May 2020 **op-ed for Euractiv**: “The Euro-Mediterranean region needs to build a development strategy based on the promotion of local, regional and circular economies which can be exploited as engines of a growth that is sustained and yet sustainable, fairly distributed yet still drives competition, and that has gender equality and young people at its heart. As we recover, we must leverage the opportunity to create new inclusive societies that ensure young people and women can fulfil their potential as agents of change and contributors to the region’s economy as a whole.”

Nona Deprez, Head of Unit for the Partnership Instrument for the European Commission’s Service for Foreign Policy Instrument (FPI), told the joint Friends of Europe and the Anna Lindh Foundation online debate that she saw an opportunity to harness the urgency behind global efforts to stem the pandemic and its fallout in order to speed progress towards longer-term ambitions on sustainable development up to 2030. “This is a key moment where the short-term goals completely align with the EU’s long-term goals, because building resilience is a growth strategy, it is fully in line with the green transition, with the digital transition, and brings us close to the Sustainable Development Goals”, she said.

The EU’s response to the coronavirus pandemic in its southern neighbourhood shows how measures to address the immediate impact of the pandemic need to be accompanied by steps to mitigate its longer-term consequences. The EU adjusted its on-going regional assistance programmes to mobilise emergency support of over 2.2 billion euro. Based on needs expressed by partner countries, this re-orientated support is focusing specifically on health, economic and social sectors. Of the total, 18 million euro is for immediate needs, 888 million euro has been allocated to strengthen the health sector; and 1.3 billion euro has been earmarked to support the social and economic recovery of the region.

At country level, the EU response is being adapted to local contexts. For example, in Lebanon, Jordan, Morocco, Tunisia and Egypt, ongoing EU projects are being reallocated to support national health systems, ensure continuity of critical health care and provide most-needed protective equipment, specific training and technical assistance in hospitals.

For long-term recovery from Covid-19 to be effective, intercultural dialogue is key to understanding the often very different challenges faced by people across the Euro-Mediterranean region.

Respondents to the Intercultural Trends Survey 2020 in SEM countries (91%) appear assured of the benefits of intercultural cooperation between European and SEM countries, particularly regarding its potential for increased economic growth and employment. Respondents in both Europe (90%) and SEM (94%) countries see the potential benefits in terms of education and training opportunities. Furthermore, 7 in



10 respondents in the SEM countries think that greater intercultural cooperation in the Euro-Mediterranean region can ‘definitely’ improve environmental sustainability in their societies (compared to 4 in 10 in Europe).

Dialogue across sectors from policymakers to civil society can help stakeholders within the EU and its southern neighbourhood better predict and assess how the pandemic may shape the region in the longer term, resulting in a more informed joint approach to Agenda 2030.

“The key question is ‘what comes next? What is the medium to long term response that we can shape?’ I think that here is where partnership comes into play”, Anna Strzaska, Head of Department for Strategy and Instruments of the European Neighbourhood Policy at the European External Action Service (EEAS), told the joint Friends of Europe and the Anna Lindh Foundation online debate. “We are very far from knowing what the impact of the pandemic will be, but one thing is for sure and clear: it will be huge for both sides of the Mediterranean and for the whole world.”

Prioritising intercultural dialogue and cross border cooperation is important not only to drive forward the implementation of Agenda 2030 but also to enable more understanding and coordination in the short term. Given the restrictions of the Covid-19 era, stakeholders should explore new ways of not only continuing but increasing intercultural exchanges, particularly through digital means.

## Sustainable Development Goal 4: education

Ensuring that all girls and boys have access to quality education is a key ambition of the Sustainable Development Goals. The benefits are evident: a more diverse and prosperous economy, access to better services and increased equality. Even before Covid-19, the Mediterranean region faced considerable educational challenges. One in five children in the MENA region was not in school, according to UNICEF. An estimated 14.3 million children were unable to attend school due to conflicts in Syria, Iraq and Yemen. This situation has been drastically worsened by the pandemic. With a majority of students around southern Europe and its Mediterranean neighbourhood out of school for much of 2020 due to lockdowns, the progress of recent years is at serious risk of being reversed. The disruption to learning affects all, but especially the most vulnerable and marginalised. The long-term costs can be devastating. In the MENA region, where youth unemployment rates are already among the highest in the world (close to one-third of youth in North Africa and more than one out of five youth in Middle East states are estimated to be unemployed as of 2018, according to UNICEF), disrupted education can have far-reaching economic and social consequences. A recent World Bank research paper found alarming levels of potential losses both to individual earnings and gross domestic product (GDP) as a result of school closures.

Authorities in Europe and parts of its southern neighbourhood have scrambled to develop alternative education systems to connect teachers and students out of the classroom. However, the switch to digital learning has deepened inequalities as students without access to computers and an internet connection find themselves shut out of education. Action is urgently needed to tackle this; funding for equipment

and training is essential to ensure more children across the Mediterranean region can get online to obtain the education they need to build better lives.

“Equity and equal opportunity are issues that cannot be overlooked, the process should not exacerbate the digital divide”, Driss Ouaouicha, Moroccan Deputy Minister for Higher Education and Scientific Research told a Friends of Europe and the Anna Lindh Foundation online debate on the impact of Covid-19 on education. “We absolutely need to invest in the hardware so that all students have equal access to technology (and) invest in capacity building for the teaching staff.”

Making radical changes to learning now as part of the Covid-19 response and recovery programme could provide the foundation for educational systems that are more inclusive and resilient in the long term. “There is a need to explore educational solutions that integrate all students and that would continue beyond Covid-19 ... this is a main objective, to fight inequalities in education”, according to Elisabeth Guigou, President of the Anna Lindh Foundation.

Within the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals, accelerating digitalisation can play a key role in reaching the SDGs target more generally over the next decade. Closing the digital gap can have a positive impact on primary, secondary and tertiary education, help empower civil society through the training of trainers and promote intercultural dialogue. The results of the Intercultural Trends Survey 2020 suggest that digital technology is playing both an increasingly prominent role in shaping perceptions of other cultures and in creating new (virtual) opportunities for cross-cultural communication. Notably, most respondents think that digital technology is likely to have a positive rather than negative impact on intercultural dialogue, though people in SEM countries are especially optimistic about its impact with 94% versus 88% for European countries.

“We can make the most of the remaining 10 years ahead only if we work together on a new normal that is more sustainable and more inclusive and thus also more digital”, according to Nona Deprez, Head of Unit for the Partnership Instrument for the European Commission’s Service for Foreign Policy Instrument (FPI).

Given Covid-19 has led to border closures and restricted international mobility, new ways of fostering intercultural dialogue and exchange are necessary in order to continue the sharing of knowledge and experiences.

As student mobility could be reduced for months or years, ‘internationalisation at home’ should be boosted through digital means; it could include a mix of face-to-face, distance learning and work on capacity building using virtual training programmes for educators.



# Recommendations

The UN's Agenda 2030 presents a unique opportunity to improve the lives of those who call the Euro-Mediterranean region home. While some of the region's difficulties are country-specific, others - including climate change - are shared challenges. Transnational partnerships are key. The process of attempting to reach the Sustainable Development Goals provides opportunities to work together to find common solutions. This can lay the foundation for more and better cooperation to bring about a deeper transformation in the long term.

## 1. Improve coordination and cooperation

The Covid-19 crisis, while causing daunting disruption to existing SDG efforts, underscores the importance of solidarity and partnership. It should act as a clarion call for boosting the idea of the Mediterranean as a shared space that can be collectively strengthened through more intense transnational cooperation and collaboration, both at state and civil society levels. More consistent and efficient coordination and cooperation between actors and stakeholders already working on the Agenda 2030 within their own national and sectoral spheres can help accelerate overall SDG implementation in the region. EU-wide Covid-19 recovery plans in sectors that converge with the Agenda 2030 should be open to the participation of countries in the southern neighbourhood.

## 2. Think local

Reduced mobility due to the pandemic has encouraged people to think more local. This has led to a new focus on the importance of community and localised problem-solving. Adopting a more localised approach towards achieving the Agenda 2030 can help produce outcomes - from the setting of goals and targets to implementation and monitoring - that are informed by local dynamics and therefore more effective. Engaging with local actors, from municipal authorities to civil society, can bring about more comprehensive and lasting change, when done in parallel with state-to-state partnership.

## 3. More - and faster - digitalisation

Covid-19 has prioritised the need for digitalisation in the Euro-Mediterranean. From the economic sphere to the educational and cultural domain, digital and technological development is urgently needed to mitigate the effects of pandemic lockdowns and decreased mobility. With just 57% of EU citizens saying they have basic digital skills and little over 50% of households in the Middle East and North Africa having access to the internet, the digital gap needs to be closed quickly. Accelerating digitalisation may be expensive, but it's an investment with a guaranteed return in the form of more prosperous societies. The right investment in digital technologies now could turn the pandemic into an opportunity to not only modernise education but also foster greater intercultural awareness in the Euro-Mediterranean region.

#### **4. Prioritise education**

The Covid-19 threat to achieving Agenda 2030 is particularly acute in the educational sphere. School closures across the Mediterranean region are not only an obstacle to further progress but could also reverse hard-won gains. An entire generation of students stands to lose if the pandemic's impact on their learning is not mitigated. Investment in innovative solutions - including digital and other technologies - must be prioritised. The digital gap affecting poorer communities must be bridged. Stakeholders should also consider how the pandemic could offer an opportunity to rethink previous educational models to better prepare for the future.

#### **5. Keep the intercultural dialogue going**

With the pandemic causing horizons to shrink, maintaining intercultural dialogue in the Euro-Mediterranean region is important not only to help push forward the implementation of Agenda 2030 over the next decade but also to enable more understanding and better coordination in the short term. Given the restrictions of the Covid-19 era, stakeholders should explore new ways of not only continuing but increasing intercultural exchanges, especially through digital means. This is particularly important at civil society level. Programming related to youth - including girls and young women - should be priority. Preparing the next generation of stakeholders around the Mediterranean is key.

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