



25TH LISBON FORUM

25-26 November 2019

***"Bridging the Paradigm:
the relation between Development and
Human Rights, the Rule of Law and Democracy***

Achieving together the Sustainable Development Goals"

Report of the General Rapporteur

Introduction

The 25th edition of the Lisbon Forum, with its dense programme rich in conceptual thoughts, in opinions and suggestions, was an appropriate first occasion to mark the 30th anniversary of the North-South Centre. The Centre received many—fully earned—congratulations for its work and achievements.

The two-day event brought together 230 politicians, practitioners and administrators from a wide range of institutional backgrounds and world regions. Over forty speakers shared their views and experiences on the "Agenda 2030" adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 2015 on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). The Forum specifically debated the questions and issues raised in the preparatory document (Concept Note), in relation to which this report acquires its ultimate sense.

On the first day, following the opening addresses by the Secretary General of the Council of Europe, by the former President of Portugal Jorge Sampaio, by Miguel Angel Moratinos on behalf of the Secretary General of the United Nations, and by the Chair of the Executive Committee of the North South Centre, the Forum discussed the assessments of the partners of the "quadrilogue", as well as the approaches of international organisations, the perspective of the Council of Europe Development Bank and the role the Council of Europe may play in the elaboration and evaluation of National Plans for the achievement of the SDGs. The programme offered opportunities to also learn about the experience of parliamentarians from different backgrounds; the past and planned contributions of local and regional authorities to the 2030 Agenda; and the challenges faced by civil society organisations. On the second day the Forum mainly discussed the role of intercultural dialogue, and the potential contributions of the North-South Centre to the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Main results

The 25th Lisbon Forum fully proved its worth as the natural place for dialogue and exchange of experience. It produced a wealth of insights and experiences, which can be summarised in four main points.

Success stories

All stakeholders present at the Forum emphasised that the international community, governmental and non-governmental alike, fully accepts the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the obligations it entails. Neither in Europe, nor in the non-European societies represented at the Forum, is there a pervasive fundamental refusal to act and to address the challenges in the dimensions of sustainable development: economic, social, environmental and institutional.

Trivial as this may sound, it is a huge progress from the times when development was conceived unilaterally as the responsibility of the "underdeveloped" world—whereas the "developed" world had no such obligation, other than perhaps to voluntarily assist the "underdeveloped" world. As stated in the preparatory "Concept Note", the 2030 Agenda has brought about an important paradigm shift: from understanding "to develop" as a transitive verb, to understanding it an intransitive one. We are thus all under development, and we all face a common challenge to avoid regressing on the path towards development.

The speakers from the various stakeholders also shared quite a few more detailed success stories. The Forum was for instance informed about:

- the reflection of the Sustainable Development Goals in national and local budgets;
- the alignment of public funding programmes with the SDGs;
- more importantly: the change of non-sustainable practices at national and local level, e.g. in the area of mobility;
- the readiness of institutions to monitor progress and to provide assistance;
- the multi-level engagement of civil society organisations contributing to the 2030 Agenda.

Undoubtedly, a widespread sensitivity and sense of responsibility can be observed. Several speakers even mentioned the optimism and enthusiasm, which seem to inspire at least part of our societies as regards the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. Some tangible results are already there.

Problem stories

However, the Forum also identified numerous problems, and the list of problem areas may in fact be much longer than the list of the achievements reached so far.

One such problem area is the evidently inadequate capability of our societies to address efficiently the existential challenge of climate change—an issue raised by several speakers.

Similarly, many countries seem to move away from a more egalitarian and equitable model of society, rather than progressing towards it. Populist political movements grow in many countries, which creates increasing dangers for social cohesion.

If it is true that 65% of the Sustainable Development Goals must be addressed at local level, as was mentioned during the Forum, the full involvement of local actors is essential. This is an area where it seems that much needs to be improved, for instance with regard to:

- the freedom of local authorities to act according to their specific needs, often given the absence of a sufficient degree of subsidiarity;
- the availability of expert knowledge and examples of good practice;
- the availability of adequate material and staff resources;
- the awareness of development problems—and indeed the 2030 Agenda itself—among the local population;
- easily accessible opportunities for an exchange with partners in other localities;
- the integration of civil society in the formulation and implementation of development policies.

“If it does not work locally, it will not work nationally or globally”, was the laconic alert issued during the Forum by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe.

Civil society, generally, is often faced with enormous challenges to find adequate resources to underpin its widespread engagement for the 2030 Agenda. Even if the problem awareness is high, there are acute problems of political access and recognition.

[The relationship between human rights, democracy, the rule of law and development](#)

A specific aspect of the Forum debate was the intricate question of the place of human rights, the rule of law and democracy in the context of development.

Is development feasible without human rights? No, was the unanimous answer from the 25th Lisbon Forum. Can development, as now defined in the Sustainable Development Goals, happen in the absence of the rule of law and stable, reliable and transparent institutions? The answer, again, was no. And neither would development be possible without democracy, because democracy is more than elections; democracy also presupposes e.g. adequate and trusted institutions, and the existence of a free, vibrant civil society.

Echoing the UN Declaration on the Sustainable Development Goals of 2015, the Forum underlined that development on the one hand, and democracy, human rights, the rule of law and good governance on the other were interdependent and mutually reinforcing objectives, which need to be pursued simultaneously.

[Desiderata](#)

Much of the Forum debate was devoted to the question what is necessary for a successful and timely implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. Across all stakeholder groups, a number of common points emerged.

- The Forum speakers strongly underlined the need for a better *horizontal* cooperation and coordination between the various actors. This would imply for instance an *integrated* approach involving not only public authorities, but also civil society, the media, religious communities, industry etc. At international level, it would for instance strengthen the case for a closer cooperation between international institutions, as already practised in some cases and some geographical areas, e.g. the Mediterranean region.
- Similarly, there was a widespread consensus that the *vertical* cooperation and coordination between the various levels—global, in international regions, national, regional and local—must be improved. Although national governments were often described as the pivotal point for driving the SDG policy, the Forum did not leave any room for doubt that a successful SDG implementation is crucially dependent on the involvement of all other actors at all levels. The quadrilogue governance structure of the North-South Centre was in this regard seen as a model and an asset, which should be developed further in the context of interregional co-operation on development issues.
- Many speakers illustrated the need for an *evidence-based* approach of SDG implementation. Clear development criteria, performance measures and operational standards are necessary, to be made available preferably at international level in order to reach coherence and comparability. The Council of Europe was widely seen as the natural source of such criteria and standards, not least because of its *acquis* of conventions and monitoring mechanisms.
- A major problem at all levels is the lack of *public awareness* of the Sustainable Development Goals. It was underlined that without the active support of the citizens, or against them, no development policy will ever achieve its targets. A political approach without the involvement of the citizen might even exacerbate the problems of social disintegration and inequality. Therefore, more attention must be laid on information and awareness-raising, on citizen participation and education.
- The Forum produced ample evidence on the important role of *intercultural dialogue*—and its problems in practice. It was felt that intergenerational dialogue was often sorely missing. The question was raised whether intercultural dialogue can be promoted in situations where a national dialogue on the future of society and its institutions has not even been established. Several speakers referred to the crucial importance to work further on these issues, to make more progress and thus benefit from intercultural and intercivilizational dialogue in order to promote human rights, democracy and the rule of law.
- And finally, several speakers identified the need for *more and better platforms* for the open exchange of good (and bad) practice, and for mutual learning. A number of institutions are already offering such platforms, but it was widely felt that much more needs to be done.

Where to go from here: action points and recommendations

The 25th Lisbon Forum produced a number of consensual and important messages.

- **More, and more efficient, action on the implementation of the SDGs is a matter of growing urgency.**

There are increasing signs that the problems affecting our societies are growing, not diminishing. This is particularly true for climate change, which in the Mediterranean area is already amounting to an imminent climate crisis. The trend is not limited to the climate; it can also be observed in some countries e.g. with regard to inequality, social disintegration and poverty. The Forum sent the message that waiting and procrastinating are no options, but will only exacerbate the problems.

The role of the Council of Europe

At the 25th Lisbon Forum there was widespread support for the notion that the SDG implementation could greatly benefit from a stronger regional (continental) effort of SDG governance and co-ordination.

- **The Council of Europe should continue the reflection whether, in addition to the global and national layers of SDG governance, a continental regional layer of governance could—specifically in Europe—offer an added value, and how this could be achieved.**

The relevant global and regional international organizations, active in this field, should be associated to this effort. The considerations made in this regard at the Forum's panel of international organizations should be taken into account.

The Forum underlined that this would have repercussions on the policy agenda of the Council of Europe.

- **The Council of Europe should explore ways to place development—in the comprehensive sense of the Sustainable Development Goals formulated by the United Nations—higher on the political agenda, to give it more attention and prominence.**

In exchange, the development paradigm would lend additional relevance to the values of the Council of Europe.

The Council of Europe integrates a number of bodies under its roof – the Committee of Ministers, the Parliamentary Assembly, the Congress, the INGO Conference, the Development Bank and others. Within their specific institutional context and mandate, all these bodies were invited to actively contribute towards the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

The efforts to bridge the paradigms of development on the one hand, and of human rights, the rule of law and democracy on the other, and to jointly achieve the SDGs, require reflection processes mainly within the Committee of Ministers, the Parliamentary Assembly, the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities and the INGO Conference, as well as a joint reflection of the four actors of the quadrilogue. The North-South Centre constitutes a unique platform in this respect, whose potential in this regard should be fully deployed.

- **The Council of Europe should act (more systematically) as a bridge between the global and the national level, building on the *acquis* of conventions and monitoring mechanisms. The Council of Europe should further reflect, together**

with its member States, on the role its reports and outputs may play in the elaboration and evaluation of National Plans for the achievement of the SDGs.

This relates mostly to the assistance the Council of Europe may provide to member States (and possibly non-member States in certain areas) in terms of the preparation of national action plans and voluntary national reviews, e.g. through the provision of criteria, statistical data and monitoring methodology, the exchange of experience and the promotion of good practice. This work can build on significant achievements in several areas relevant to the SDG policy, and should take into account the ideas, considerations and proposals made in the workshop dedicated to this issue during the Forum.

The recommendation was addressed to all bodies of the Council of Europe, including the Parliamentary Assembly which was invited to continue the preparation of standards in certain areas covered by the Sustainable Development Goals, notably gender equality and the rights of the child; and to stimulate the national parliamentary work on SDGs. The "Partner for Democracy" scheme was seen by the Forum as a valuable instrument for the dialogue with societies in the Mediterranean basin and the Middle East.

- **Equally, the Council of Europe should act through the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities as a bridge between the global and the local level.**

The role of the Council of Europe was described as "enabling others to deliver". Through the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, authorities should be encouraged in their endeavour to implement the Sustainable Development Goals at their respective levels. The Forum noted with satisfaction that the Congress is planning for 2020 two high-level meetings on the SDGs. Congress was recommended to consolidate and develop its outreach into the Southern Mediterranean region.

The Council of Europe Development Bank was also commended as an important facilitator between the global, regional and local levels.

Following the important contributions of the other intergovernmental organisations participating in the 25th Forum, it was felt that more efforts were necessary to harness the strengths and opportunities of international co-operation.

- **The Council of Europe could initiate new ways of co-operation between international organisations on the Sustainable Development Goals.**

The Forum encouraged the Council of Europe to develop simpler, result-oriented and resource-efficient ways of interaction with international partner organisations, in order to strengthen the synergy potential of the international level and avoid double work.

[The work of the North-South Centre](#)

The participants of the 25th Lisbon Forum expressed their full support of the work of the North-South Centre. They reiterated the great value of the quadrilogue structure, which presents a strong added value and was seen as particularly relevant in the context of the 2030 Agenda. Future work will be able to develop the significant achievements of the Centre's past activities particularly with youth and women's organisations in Europe and the Middle East and North African regions.

Against the background of the debate on the topics of this year's Forum, and inspired by the proposals set out in the "Vision Paper" adopted in 2019, the organs of the North-South Centre were strongly encouraged to continue and broaden the reflection process

on the role the Centre could play in the future. The transition from the paradigm of solidarity and interdependence towards a comprehensive understanding of the interdependence between human rights, the rule of law, democracy and development could open up new horizons and opportunities.

- **The North-South Centre is invited to make the implementation and promotion of the Sustainable Development Goals a strategic priority.**

To develop this strategic priority, as set out in the "Vision Paper", the Centre should introduce and, if necessary, reinforce the SDGs as a horizontal subject, a *leitmotif* and an objective underpinning all its programs and activities. In some cases, the 2030 Agenda could be made the main subject of activities.

Another possibility, prominently suggested by the former President of Portugal and former President of the Lisbon Forum, would be to use future Forums as a platform to enhance the political space for the discussion of development issues, as a platform to bring the various stakeholders together and to mobilize resources. The material conditions for such a move must of course be met, inside and outside the secretariats.

- **Future editions of the Lisbon Forum should fully reflect the whole range of partners in its programme, in an equitable way.**

During the meeting, the Lisbon Forum was described as the living proof of the capacity of the North-South Centre to generate a relevant platform for dialogue and exchange, particularly with a view to the promotion of dialogue between Europe and its Southern neighbours. Quite a few participants expressed the view that there was room for an improved involvement of partners from the South.

Development as a responsibility for all

Although the proceedings of the 25th Lisbon Forum often concentrated on the work of the Council of Europe and the North-South Centre, the meeting sent a strong message that the implementation and promotion of the 2030 Agenda was, and must remain, a responsibility for all stakeholders and the whole of society.

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Ensuring Sustainable Democratic Governance and Human Rights in the Southern Mediterranean

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