First-Ever SDG Index and Dashboards Report for European Cities

Paris/Tilburg – Today, the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN), which co-produces the Global Sustainable Development Report (formally SDG Index and Dashboards), in partnership with the Brabant Center for Sustainable Development (Telos, Tilburg University), released the first-ever SDG Index and Dashboards Report for European Cities.

The report compares the performance of capital cities and a selection of large metropolitan areas in the European-Union (EU) and European Free Trade Association (EFTA) on the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In total, results for 45 European cities are presented in this first prototype version using 56 indicators. The report includes contributions from Nilda Mesa (Center for Sustainable Urban Development, Columbia University), the OECD and, European Commission and urban policymakers.

Why the SDGs & European cities?

In 2015, global leaders adopted a common vision for sustainable development with goals and targets to be achieved by 2030 (Agenda 2030, SDGs, Paris Climate Agreement). These goals and targets were adopted by national governments but with a clear recognition that regions and municipalities would play a crucial role in implementing these goals.

This report is released exactly four months before the opening of the United-Nations' SDG Summit, where Heads of State and Government will follow up and comprehensively review progress in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It also comes at a crucial moment for Europe with major changes happening in 2019 including a new Parliament, Commission and Presidency.

Achieving the SDGs will require, at the local level, deep transformations of transportation, energy and urban planning and new approaches to address poverty and inequalities in access to key public services including health and education. SDSN estimates that about two-thirds (65%) of the 169 SDG targets underlying the 17 SDGs will not be reached without proper engagement of, and coordination with, local and regional governments (SDSN 2015).
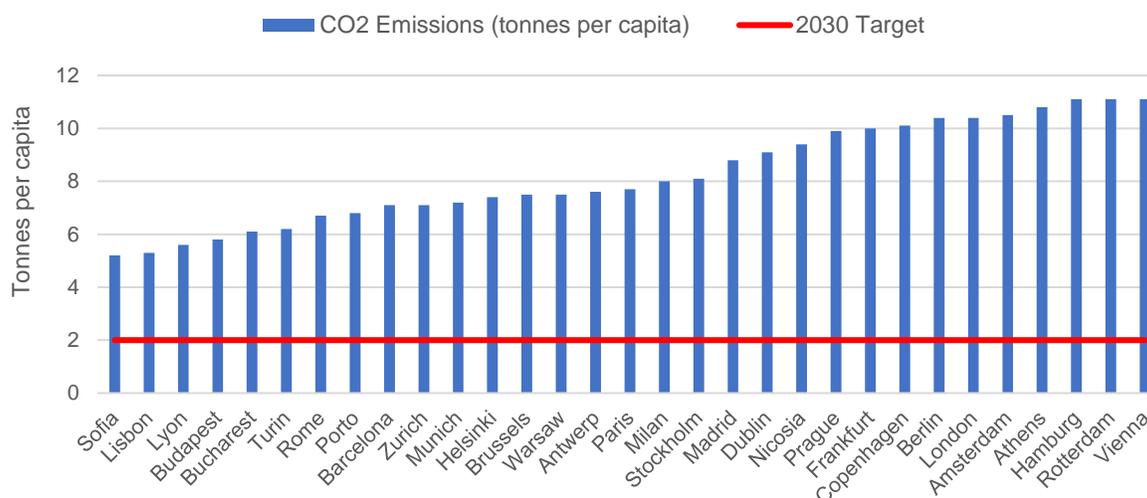
The SDGs matter for European cities for 3 reasons. Firstly, because over two-thirds of EU citizens live in urban areas while about 85% of the EU's GDP is generated in cities (European Commission 2019). Secondly, available evidence suggests that Europe is not on track for achieving the SDGs by 2030, which calls for further action at all levels of government. Lastly, in Europe, regions and cities possess significant policy and investment levers to drive the necessary transformations towards sustainable development.

Main Findings

The top rankings from the 2019 SDG Index and Dashboards for European Cities are as follows: Oslo takes the number one spot with a score of 74.8. This means Oslo is 74.8% of the way to achieving the SDGs, according to measures used in this Index. Stockholm comes in close second with a score of 74.2 and Helsinki takes the third spot with a score of 71.3.

This report finds that no European capital city or large metropolitan area has fully achieved the SDGs. Nordic European cities – Oslo, Stockholm and Helsinki – are closest to the SDG targets but still face significant challenges in achieving one or several SDGs. Overall, cities in Europe perform best on SDG 3 (Health and Well-Being), SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure). By contrast, performance is lowest on SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), SDG 13 (Climate Action) and SDG 15 (Life on Land). Further efforts are needed to achieve zero net CO_2 emissions or very close to zero net emissions by 2030.

Figure 1: CO2 emissions in European cities, 2015

Note: Data not available for Bordeaux, Bratislava, Eindhoven, Ljubljana, Luxembourg, Marseille, Nuremburg, Oslo, Riga, Tallinn, The Hague, Valletta, Vilnius, Zagreb.
Source: Global Gridded Model of Carbon Footprints (Moran et al, 2018)

Access to affordable and quality housing is also a persistent issue in most European cities. This is covered under SDG 11 (Sustainable cities and communities), and more specifically target 11.1 which calls for policymakers to ensure access to adequate, safe and affordable housing by 2030[1].

Data Gaps and Limitations

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[1] "11.1 By 2030, ensure access for all to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services and upgrade slums".

As always, our analysis is constrained by the availability, quality and comparability of data. This constraint is even greater at the subnational level. Despite the groundbreaking work conducted by the European Commission – notably via Eurostat, European Environment Agency and the Joint Research Centre – to define territorial levels and metropolitan areas and standardize subnational data and indicators, major gaps remain to monitor all of the SDGs. A table summarizing some of these major gaps is included in this report.