

Sustainable development indicators for Belgium - Where do we stand on the way to the SDGs?

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The Federal Planning Bureau, in cooperation with the Interfederal Statistical Institute and the Institute for National Accounts, publishes annually a set of indicators to monitor the progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), adopted in 2015 by the UN. This set was used in the statistical Annex of the Voluntary National Reviews that Belgium submitted to the UN, in 2017 and in 2023.

Following a request from the Court of Account (Preparedness review, 2020) and the Federal Plan Sustainable Development (2021), this set of indicators have been upgraded in 2023, following a broad debate with the federal administrations and Advisory boards. Early 2024, a set of 78 indicators have been published in the annual report Sustainable Development Indicators and on www.indicators.be.

A subset of 51 indicators, 3 per SDG, has been chosen to assess the progress of Belgium towards a sustainable development. Each indicator has an objective, based on the SDGs and on other commitments made by Belgium.

- For some indicators, the objective is quantified and accompanied by a deadline (usually 2030). These objectives are referred to as targets. In this case, the assessment consists of determining whether, extending current trends, the indicator will achieve the target by 2030.
- If the indicator has no target, the objective defines only a direction for the desired change (upwards or downwards). In this case, the assessment consists of determining whether the indicator has moved in the desired direction in the past (since 2000).

This assessment of 51 indicators shows that, based on current trends, few of the SDG's will be achieved by 2030.

- For the 26 indicators with a target, 7 should achieve it on current trends, while 19 should not.
- For the 25 indicators without a target, 9 were moving in the direction of their objective between 2000 and 2022, while 2 were moving in the opposite direction. For the remaining 14 indicators, the trend is stable or not statistically significant.

For most indicators, a comparison with other EU Member States is possible. Belgium is therefore compared, for the most recent year, with the other Member States, with the EU average and with three neighbouring countries (Germany, France and the Netherlands).

Results of this comparison are mixed. For 22 of the 59 indicators for which data is available for all European countries, Belgium is in the top third, for example for *Natura 2000 protected marine area* (i65). For 23 of them, it is in the middle third, for example for *Underachievement in reading* (i26). For 14 indicators, it is in the bottom third, for example for *Employment rate* (i40).

Among the 78 SDG indicators, 42 are broken down by region. Data shows that the positions of the regions have remained very stable over the period 2015-2022. The positions have not changed for 30

of these 42 indicators. For 4 of them, data is available for only one year. For most of the other indicators, few changes in the ranking of regions have been observed.

It's also possible to group indicators according to the direction of change in regional data. This shows that, over the period 2015-2022, the three regions are moving in the desired direction for 18 indicators, although the speed of change is not necessarily sufficient to achieve the targets. For 5 indicators, the three regions are moving in the undesired direction. The regions are moving in different directions for 14 indicators. Finally, there is no change for 5 indicators.

The 78 indicators are also broken down by relevant population categories: by sex (38 indicators), age (16), income (20), level of education (11), etc.

- Firstly, differences between women and men, to the detriment of women, are observed in several areas: *Postponement or cancellation of healthcare for financial reasons* (i07), *Mental disorders* (i17), *Long-term work incapacity* (i38) and *Security feeling in public space* (i73). The largest differences to the detriment of men concern the indicators relating to deaths, namely *Road deaths* (i20), *Suicide* (i18), *Fatal accidents at work* (i42) and *Premature deaths due to chronic diseases* (i15).
- Secondly, people with low incomes, the low-skilled, single-parent families and the unemployed systematically obtain the worst results. These differences by income, education, household type and employment status are most apparent in the poverty, employment, housing and/or health indicators.
- Thirdly, some indicators show age-related differences. Young adults (15-24), for example, have a much higher than average *Unemployment rate* (i39), while adults between 35 and 45 are more affected by *Mental disorders* (i17).
- Fourthly, the differences between the population categories analysed hardly change over time, except for a few indicators in the social field which would merit specific political attention on the basis of the "Leave no one behind" principle.

To sum up, progress of SDG indicators under current policies is not sufficient to reach all the SDGs in 2030. New policies are thus necessary. Beyond monitoring overall progress, indicators are also useful when broken down by category of population, to focus policies on the most vulnerable categories and "leave no one behind".