

# Innovation and Sustainability: Rethinking Economic Policies for the Future

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On April 25, 2024, stakeholders from across the European Union gathered at the MERI-BELSPO Conference to address the urgent need for aligning Research, Development, and Innovation (RDI) with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The focus was on rethinking economic policies to foster a sustainable economic growth that is both innovative and responsive to the global challenges of our time.

The conference began with a foundational understanding of innovation, defined as significant new or improved products or processes that differ markedly from previous ones and are introduced to potential users. This broad definition sets the stage for integrating innovative practices with sustainability, which was described, following the 1987 United Nations Brundtland Commission, as meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. In a world where nearly 140 developing countries grapple with the dual challenges of development and climate change, this definition has never been more relevant.

A concerning picture of SDG progress was outlined at the conference, indicating that only 37% of the goals are on track, with 15% stagnating or regressing, and a significant 48% moderately or severely off track. These figures highlight the critical need for a realignment of RDI strategies towards sustainable outcomes. Historical data from the European Commission and various studies showcased a positive relationship between R&D investment and economic growth, further emphasizing the importance of innovation in achieving economic sustainability.

European Union's Horizon Europe program (2021-2027) exemplifies the commitment to supporting RDI projects that align with societal challenges such as climate change and digital transformation. At a national level, Belgium has also taken robust steps to integrate SDGs into their federal policies, focusing on sustainable development and aligning with European and international goals.

The conference discussed the challenges and opportunities for SDGs through a SWOT analysis, identifying strengths such as environmental protection and economic opportunities that come with sustainable practices. However, challenges such as high initial costs, resistance to change, and policy fragmentation were also noted. Opportunities for technological innovation and international cooperation were highlighted as avenues to advance the SDG agenda, while political instability and economic pressures were acknowledged as significant threats.

To effectively integrate SDGs into national and European RDI strategies, the conference proposed several strategic approaches. These included fostering multi-stakeholder collaboration through a quintuple helix model that brings together governments, academia, industry, civil society, and international organizations. Emphasizing interdisciplinary research approaches was suggested to tackle complex sustainability issues holistically. Moreover, there was a strong call to focus on the impact and societal relevance of RDI projects, ensuring they contribute tangibly to the SDGs.

In conclusion, the conference advocated for simplifying RDI state aids rules, aligning and streamlining funding processes, and increasing public funding for RDI. The need for mission-oriented RDI projects that not only innovate but also align with the overarching goals of sustainable and inclusive growth in the EU was emphasized as crucial for future strategies.

The MERI-BELSPO 2024 Conference set a forward-looking agenda for integrating innovation with sustainability in economic policies, aiming to shape a future where economic growth and environmental sustainability go hand in hand.

For further details or follow-up, attendees were encouraged to contact Michele Cincera at the provided email address, [Michele.Cincera@ulb.be](mailto:Michele.Cincera@ulb.be).