

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS – EXPERIENCE TRANSFER FROM CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPEAN COUNTRIES TO THE EU

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This paper is dedicated to the memory of the late Kofi Annan, Secretary General of the UN (1997–2006), who paved the way for the development of the SDGs by launching the visionary ‘Millennium Development Program’ in the year 2000.

1. Background and Introduction

1.1. The SDG program and challenges for North and South

At their General Assembly end of September 2015, the UN member states have unanimously agreed⁴ on a very challenging mission: shifting our world towards a sustainable path. This change requires all nations, countries, all type of economic, social or other entities, and indeed every single person to implement a change in

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⁴ url of the official website: http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/docs/globalcompact/A_RES_70_1_E.pdf; for a hard copy edition see e.g.

their lifestyle, i.e. way of operation and functioning. Basically, the UN member states have agreed on a voluntary change at the whole system's level, a global transition to a sustainable world.

The UN General Assembly Resolution's title is "Transforming our world". This is precise wording, as the program for 2015-2030 foresees a real, in-depth change in many key aspects of our present world. And we have to realize up front, that this change is a greater challenge for the industrialized countries than for the non-industrialized ones, despite of the obvious differences in technological resources available, or that in the stability and experience of political institutions.

One difficulty for 'the North'⁵ is, that where things are running more or less 'all right' (at least in everyday superficial context), it is more difficult to persuade the societies of the need for transformation. Where the average living standards are acceptable, the resource scarcity is not obvious, and social tensions are not causing wide-spread everyday violence one could say 'If ain't broken, don't fix it!' And this is precisely the case in the more fortunate Northern part of the world. The other difficulty is, that in most parts of the developed world there is no living memory of rapid, peaceful, in-depth change, triggered and managed top-down. The rapid transformations they (we) used to have are in the history books by now.

At the same time, on the other side of the globe, in the developing world, both social tensions and resource scarcity are more apparent. The growing inequality in property, income and consumption is a global phenomenon, yet the poverty at the lower end of the scale is incomparable in the South and in the North. However, it is also this part of the world, where the recently completed 15-year long Millennium Development Goals program of the UN, – the MDGs – have left a positive experience of transformation efforts⁶.

1.2. Special position of CEE (EU and non-EU): recent transition experiences

It is a quite difficult decision for any responsible political leader or group to leave short or mid-term socio-economic stability and open up a period of de-stabilization, even for the sake of an ecological, social and economic system that is more secure and stable in the long-term. Systems-level transition is a rare experience for societies, and thus experience in it is very hard to find and to collect. We suggest that it is in this very respect that the Visegrad 4 region has a special position. The V4 countries form a region which has a living experience of a system-level change, a deep transition,

⁵ The North-South divide is a socio-economic and political divide. In this sense Europe, the United States, Australia, and the most developed parts of Asia belong to the "North", while the "South" consists of Africa, Latin-Amerika, the southern part of Asia and the Middle East. As for socio-economic well-being, political stability, as for natural resources, food and shelter, the North is the well equipped, fortunate part of the globe. The South is characterised by poverty, famine, lack of functioning socio-economic systems and political instability. The same time, the latter is stricken more by climate change and the depletion of natural resources.

⁶ For the final report of MDG achievements see: http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/2015_MDG_Report/pdf/MDG%202015%20rev%20%28July%201%29.pdf (22.08.2018)

knowledge which is very valuable for the rest of the world, and yet difficult to acquire. In retrospect, we can obviously state now, that this region is experienced in how to deliver and implement a peaceful transition, without a system's breakdown, without social or economic collapse. There must be conclusions and lessons learned that could and should be used by the UN Member States for the implementation of the SDGs.

Admittedly, in the V4 countries, the change to the market economy and democracy was to a certain extent a reverting to their system between the late twenties to early forties of the last century. More precisely: press freedom, multi-party politics, free market, free academic research, free travel – to name but a few fields – was certainly much nearer to the ideals then, than they were in the period between 1948-1988. This between-wars memory and even experience – at least at the personal level – has actually survived the communist period. We mean that people, who were in their 20's at the time of the communist take-over were able to contribute to the transformation, the shaping of the democratic system after 1989, being in their 60's or 70's. We all recall how in the V4 countries⁷ many institutions, such as political parties, governments, trade unions, even constitutional courts have benefitted from this fact.

The V4 region was, in the period between 1989 (announcement of returning to free elections and multi-party politics in Hungary) – 2004 (joining the EU), in permanent transformation. Transformation means dismantling and re-building, i.e. breaking the resilience of certain parts of the system to allow for disintegration. However, other parts of the social-economic-ecological system were intended to be carried over intact into the “new world”, to the “other shore”. Let us just mention parts of the common good like basic human rights, social floors, essential national property, natural resources, cultural integrity, public health etc. Resilience of these had to be strengthened through legal and institutional measures. Successes and failures of these efforts, far from being the same in the individual V4 countries, should form a valuable basic experience, a certain “training in transformation” in this area.

Therefore, when the UN resolution was adopted in 2015 the question arose, what can the V4 area – now part of the EU – offer as a decisive contribution for launching the SDG system? This is why we invited to our research project and workshop institutions and persons who would speak with this transition/transformation experience behind them.

1.3. Role and interests for the EU and Europe in full SDG program implementation

We may stop here for just a very brief statement: the success of the global SDG program is a vested geopolitical interest of the EU, and thus also for the V4 member states. Let us recall, that the wording, contents, and spirit of the SDGs greatly reflect the interests and proposals of the EU as a whole, as brought forward and discussed in the UN Open Working Group by the EU Member States. The maintenance of the multilateral diplomacy, and the multilateral development cooperation are both European values,

⁷ This kind of ‘social memory’, ‘human capital’ was not available any more in other areas breaking free from the Soviet camp, such as the Baltic countries or in the Caucasus.

and typical European approaches. The new development system fits perfectly into this pattern. Not mentioning the other factor, which is the burden of failure. The impacts of a possible humanitarian catastrophe – caused by the running out of water, famine due to resource scarcity, climate change, and armed conflicts resulting from the root problems – would be ultimately hitting the Eurasian continent. At the same time, a well prepared and guided transition could also be considered as an economic possibility. Now it's easy to understand the geopolitical and economic thread in the story.

2. Method and Process

As the European Commission started to prepare for the work of implementation of the new global UN development program, the Regional Environmental Center for Central and Eastern Europe (REC) received a request⁸ to organise a regional consultation for the Eastern EU Member states (Baltics, Visegrad4, Western Balkans) about the Post-2015 Development Agenda of the UN. As Mr. Zlinszky was heading the Sustainable Development Academy of the Regional Environmental Center, he and his team was responsible for the organisation and delivering of the conference and of the writing of the outcome paper. The aim was to gather experiences and recommendations from the Eastern Member States for the initial phase of SDG implementation.⁹ This experience transfer process formed the base of the outcomes of this paper. The process started with drafting a concept and sharing it with invited institutions and individual experts. It was followed by offering them¹⁰ a position paper with draft outcomes, a kind of hypothetical outcome, together with questions for the discussion.

Discussion at the workshop revolved around these questions:

- a) What should be regarded as the main European priorities for implementing the 2030 Agenda from a CEE perspective, especially in the dedicated environmental SD Goals and in other Goals where the environmental dimension is paramount (e.g. health, transport, energy, agriculture, cities)?
- b) How could countries ensure better policy coherence for sustainable development? How should vertical coherence between the local, national and international level be ensured?
- c) The ambition and commitment of the EU to the 2030 Agenda implies demonstrating continuing leadership at global level in the follow-up and monitoring. How could the EU most effectively report on measures and progress, including in the HLPF¹¹, using where possible the existing EU reporting?

⁸ The Executive Director of the REC received this request from Mr. Karl-Friedrich Falkenberg, Senior Adviser for Sustainable Development at the European Political Strategy Centre (EPSC) on the 20th January, 2016. The authors wish to express here their appreciation to Mr. Falkenberg for his initiative.

⁹ The key outcomes of this consultation were submitted to the European Commission for use in the so-called '*Falkenberg report*' (http://ec.europa.eu/epsc/publications/strategic-notes/sustainability-now_en)

¹⁰ Materials written by the authors of this paper.

¹¹ High Level Political Forum at the UN, the body responsible for the monitoring and voluntary reporting process for the implementation of the SDGs. Home page: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/hlpf>

- d) What could the Eastern EU Member States (such as the V4) specifically bring as added value to the SDG implementation? Can the CEE region become a useful pilot area for implementation and reporting on SDGs?

Participants to this consultation were government officials from the Central and Eastern European countries, as well as experts from academic institutions, some of whom earlier had participated in the drafting of the UN resolution, “Transforming Our World”. Citizens of the following CEE countries took part: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Kosovo¹², Lithuania, FYR of Macedonia, Montenegro, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, and Slovenia. The 74 contributing participants were affiliated with governments, academia, business, international organizations, and civil organizations. International bodies represented were the European Commission, FAO, GWP, IISD, SDSN, REC, UNESCO, and the UN CCD. They gave input to the research during a recorded, live, two-day workshop held at the Head Office of the REC in Szentendre, Hungary. This input was written up, arranged, and checked with the contributors by the authors. Conclusions and recommendations presented below were drawn on the basis of this proofed material.

3. Findings and Recommendations

3.1. Recent (1989-2009) transformation of the CEE region – more than one change?

During the research work, some of our initial hypotheses failed, some were confirmed, and some refined and modified. The most important ‘failing’ hypothesis was an implicit one: we took for granted the consensus on the statement that the CEE region went through *one* large-scale, thorough transformation in the past 25 years. But it has become apparent very soon, that, as far as the civil servants were concerned, in the V4 region there were *two* transitions of this kind! The first one, as proposed by us, was the return to democracy and market economy. But in the perception of civil service, soon a second one came, not less transformative: the accession to the European Union! Both of the transition periods showed that a full scale transformation of legal, institutional and economic systems can be done peacefully and on a very rapid timescale. Let us support the argument for ‘two changes’ by listing some differences between the two changes, and drawing lessons they offer (Table 1).

¹² This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence.

Transition to Market Economy and Democracy	<i>Features compared</i>	EU Accession
1988–1998	<i>Time scale</i>	1994 (official start of the accession negotiations) – 2004–2007 (accession of first and second CEE waves)
Multi-party democracy, market economy	<i>Clear political aim</i>	EU membership – joining the club
Some cases top-down, some bottom-up	<i>Initiation</i>	Top-down, induced and managed from above
“Trial and Error”	<i>Type of process</i>	Well established, repetitive processes
Country specific, ‘every man for himself’ approach		‘Waves’ of enlargement, groups of countries
Internal development with bilateral assistance – ‘seconded experts’		On a social-economic terrain there was no room for manoeuvre
Different patterns of solutions and pathways, with very similar final outcomes		Very restricted methods and a given structure to achieve, same outcomes
To ensure hitherto unavailable freedoms and rights – to ‘widen the field of manoeuvre’ for individual and community		To take up commitments (bounds?) and obligations in exchange for some privileges – to narrow the field and scope but deepen cooperation in the remaining areas
Inner / Internal innovations – the aim couldn’t be to return to the 30’s and restart from there, but adaptation of old principles to new realities		60 years of <i>acquis communautaire</i> to adapt without real adjustment to the national specificities
Spontaneous, but there is public participation in the process.		Well prepared at all levels – information dissemination, awareness raising, capacity building.

Table 1. Some key differences of the two recent transformation processes experienced in Central and Eastern Europe between 1989–2009.

As already this short comparison indicates, indeed two in-depth transformations had been implemented in the V4 countries (as well as the other new EU member states from the Western Balkans), and in their details they were very different.

3.2. There are lessons in past transitions for future global change

The processes outlined above offer very valuable experiences and lessons learned that could and should be used for the implementation of the SDGs. The detailed evaluation and adaptation of them could be subject of interesting further studies, but was not, per se, topic of the present investigation. Still, as an example, let us point out some lessons from the transformation experiences we collected.

3.2.1. A general conclusion from the CEE change to democracy

Socio-economic change is in some periods impossible, sometimes it becomes possible, other times even inevitable. In the case of the first CEE transition, the kind of change

could be compared to ‘taking off the lid’. As it is well known, the Russian ‘glasnost’ and ‘perestroika’ left the ruling elites of the region without the back-up power of the Russian military forces. They had to realize that the Soviet Union led by Mikhail Gorbachev would no longer protect them, nor will it make serious economic sacrifices to prevent the bankruptcy of their system. As a consequence, the socialist system started shaking and threatened to fall apart in all of the satellite countries (albeit not in the same moment). The then-communist governing elites took two different reactions. There were the ones, where the elite realized the wind of change, and took the lead in it. In those countries – like Hungary or Poland –, the ruling group could stay in a managing position for some more time, was at the negotiating table as terms and conditions of the process were worked out, and in some – if not many - ways saved and transferred their political and economic power for years into the new era. For the price of a voluntary opting out, they ensured a peaceful, orderly transition process.

And there were those countries, where the elite did not want to read the signs of the times, or simply packed the wrong horse, and have tried to carry on as before – like in Romania or Czechoslovakia. In these countries, though with some delay, the ruling elite was rapidly and violently cast away, and at least for some time peace and order was lost.

What is the general lesson we should draw from this part of history for the starting phase of the SDG process? In our reading it is that there are times when change cannot be halted. It can be delayed but not stopped. If the ruling elite is brave and smart enough to understand key data and information, (co-)designs the change process, and tries to take the lead in it, it is for the better for everybody. If they resist, because they are weak, afraid, rigid or simply don’t understand the processes, change will happen to them without control, and abruptly. For the society – and in a globalized world, like ours, also for the economy – this is a more dramatic and traumatic way. But in any case, if change must take place then change will happen.

3.2.2. General conclusions from the CEE change to EU membership

While the first of the two recent CEE transitions was partially unexpected and definitely unprepared, thus requiring “learning on the job”, the second was coordinated and well prepared. Due to adequate awareness raising, information dissemination and capacity building, society as a whole acted more or less in unity towards EU accession, which was a common target for all.

The *acquis communautaire* brought in its essence a holistic change to the CEE countries. At the same time, the EU acted as a coordinator for the implementation of the required transformations. A similar approach would also be helpful for the implementation of the SDGs.

3.3. Lessons from past SD programs and the SDG development process

3.3.1. Maintain close cooperation with sustainability science

One of the main reasons for the success of the SDG development process of the UN Open Working Group (OWG), and for the worldwide political support behind the present development agenda “Transforming Our World”, is that the process was a unique example of science-based, multi-stakeholder, open policy development. It is vital that all levels of governance maintain a similar knowledge-based approach during the implementation phase as well.

An open and proactive approach to the same process is also required from science. Research needs to be tuned to countries’ implementation needs. Experiences should be fed back into both academic and political processes. Existing partnerships (e.g. the climate-smart agriculture concept of the Food and Agriculture Organization) can already offer lessons learned.

Sustainability science – knowledge from all academic fields dealing with nature, societies, the human person, as well as economics, technology, and governance - is essential for the elaboration, preparation and management of a peaceful transition. To build a new economic model, we need to raise the complexity of the economy — otherwise there will be a collapse. This increase means e.g. more energy use, which, however, needs to originate from cleaner energy sources.

A holistic, integrated, systematic approach at both EU and national level is essential for the success of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It must be determined which goals and targets are more connected, and which are otherwise higher ranking than others from a systems point of view, as their implementation will have a significant impact on the entire system.

Decisive steps towards a circular economy are to be encouraged, as it also works as an “implementing agent” of the SDGs. Greenfield investments should only be authorised if they contribute to the circular economy instead of the old type of economy.

The SDGs must not be confined to the political domain of environmental protection, as they are not only environmental but also economic and social tools and targets. In some cases the environmental improvement the achievement of certain SDGs would result in can be regarded as a positive “side effect”.

3.3.2. Capacity building and public participation are the two rails of the green economy track

Right at the beginning of the implementation period of “Transforming Our World” a strong and wide capacity-building effort should be launched with respect to transformative change, and the SDGs as a system, to be continued year by year for each new generation of young people joining the ranks of the respective stakeholders. Participatory planning, implementation, monitoring and experience exchange processes, involving all relevant stakeholder groups, if properly established at the outset, will, in the long run, save expense and defuse tensions.

As an urgent task, the SDGs must be integrated into public education curricula as well as university education. Targeted and effective programmes that contribute to achieving necessary changes in behaviour and attitudes must be developed for formal, non-formal and informal education. Throughout the 15 years of implementation, it is of utmost importance that capacity building, investment and governance proceed in parallel, in the same way as top-down and bottom-up approaches.

Wide and ongoing awareness raising, involving not only civil servants but also the general public, will help to ensure the implementation of the SDGs. A well-informed general public will provide agents of change in grassroots communities. Ultimately, capacities on the ground will be decisive.

Institutions, stakeholder groups, civil society and academia must participate in the planning of the implementation of the SDGs, and throughout the entire process in order to ensure the wide acceptance of the changes required and the stability of the transition process. To this end, it is essential to facilitate the early exchange of best practices and experiences. Training and support will have to be tailored to the needs of each specific group of stakeholders.

4. Key elements for the successful European implementation of the 2030 agenda

One of the most important similarity of the transition to market economy and democracy, and the implementation of the SDGs is that in both cases society had to use the already existing institutions and systems, and step by step transform it in a way which is more adequate for the new regime. All of this had to be done as smoothly as possible, not disturbing more than necessary the functioning of society, economy and the institutions.

Increased institutional cooperation vis-à-vis the implementation of the SDGs is essential. One innovative aspect of the SDG system is that all goals are three-dimensional. They all have environmental targets, as well as social and economic ones. In addition, many issues and values have been mainstreamed horizontally across the goals. Administrations are currently working in silos, while the “soul” of the SDGs is the fact that they have been constructed using a systems approach – and they need to be implemented in the same way.

This means that progress in any of the traditional “silos”, such as agriculture, infrastructure, nature conservation or health, will be greatly assisted by the accomplishment of certain targets in other goals, possibly assigned to other “silos”. The climate change goal (Goal 13), for example, has five targets, while progress with respect to climate change mitigation and adaptation will be furthered by no fewer than 24 targets that belong under other goals. No branch or “silo” of administration will be able to implement a SDG on its own, nor should they be left alone with such a task.

Coordination should be managed at the highest governmental level possible.¹³ As the SDGs form a comprehensive programme in which everybody has a role to play,

¹³ The different structures used by different countries are presented in the lately published Compilation of main messages for the 2018 voluntary national reviews. See: National Voluntary Reports <http://www.>

enhanced institutional cooperation is a must. Simultaneous systems-level awareness, horizontal communication and vertical action in the civil service can underpin this approach. In many countries, at different levels, institutional reforms or innovations may also be useful or necessary.

The SDGs must be institutionalised at the EU level. Since the EU, as a legal entity, has also signed up to the SDGs, its role goes beyond coordination. While keeping in mind the subsidiarity principle, the EU is obliged to take all necessary steps to ensure the success of implementation.

Lessons learned from the fate of the Brundtland Report¹⁴ – and the subsequent Agenda 21 – should be taken to heart. There was no comprehensive European understanding, no shared “umbrella” obligations, thus implementation was inadequate. We need to be more progressive this time, with the involvement of politicians, the business community, citizens and academia.

In this sense, shortly after the adoption of the SDGs, the Commission has come forward with a communication, “Next steps for a sustainable European future – European action for sustainability”¹⁵. In this document the Commission projected that the SDGs will be fully integrated into the European policy framework and priorities, and that a long term implementation will be prepared after 2020. For the time being the European Parliament will discuss the topic of the state of implementation under an own-initiative report, the *Annual strategic report on the implementation and delivery of the SDGs*. Once it’s adopted one will have a clearer view about the state of art on the EU level. However, it is important to point out that though there is a possibility for the EU to influence the direction of development in the Member States via legislative initiatives and policy measures, the real acts of implementation are on national level.

Increased cooperation must expand to all stakeholder groups. Relevant regional institutions and catalyst organisations will be particularly useful in providing EU assistance, facilitation and guidance for the implementation of the SDGs in the EU and its neighbouring regions. Close cooperation with relevant experts and institutions will be necessary for the wide capacity-building and planning activities described above.

The North must make early moves to establish credibility in the global South by strongly scaling up efforts towards sustainable consumption. For the South, this SDG is the litmus test for Northern sincerity. Beyond the credibility issue, transforming consumption into sustainable patterns is also vitally important for the purpose of making sustainability “fashionable”, i.e. changing the guiding vision of the desirable future lifestyle of the populations emerging from poverty.

Halting processes that cause irreversible damage, such as biodiversity loss (including agricultural), soil degradation and GHG emissions, is an urgent priority. Based on science, the external costs of industrial, business and financial activities must be internalised. Natural resources and ecosystem services are to be properly priced, and will have to be taken into account during all types of economic activities.

un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=E/HLPF/2018/5&Lang=E (2018.12.03.)

¹⁴ <http://www.un-documents.net/our-common-future.pdf> (2018.12.03.)

¹⁵ (COM(2016) 739 final.

Sustainable development institutes and other independent, non-profit “catalyst” facilitators – among others, the Regional Environmental Center for Central and Eastern Europe, or the UNDP, – in the region are available for use. They can break down the goals and targets into sectoral plans and legislation, and can share and disseminate lessons learned. The creation of a harmonised implementation plan for the region can accelerate implementation.

4.1. Policy coherence for sustainable development should be ensured at all three levels of governance (local, national and international)

A common understanding of the wording and interpretation of the post-2015 transformation agenda — including definitions and terminology — should be established and subsequently maintained throughout the process, especially among the civil service, in public education and in the media. To ensure the uniformity of the definitions and terminology, an international body, possibly the HLPF¹⁶ should oversee the building and maintenance of the “sustainability language”.

Clarify content as well as member states’ intentions and ambitions in the SDG framework. A concise summary of the evolution of the content of each individual goal during the Open Working Group process would be useful in order to clarify interests and ambitions, especially in cases where the early language and wording, reflecting EU proposals, have been softened or blurred during later stages in the interests of consensus. The EU as a whole is certainly interested in effective implementation that safely averts the present dangers stemming from the lack of social and ecological sustainability.

4.2. The planning of the starting phase of implementation should be science based, using the “2Rs” approach (relevance for the community and ranking in the system of targets)

The relevance of targets for the European and national levels must be established. Targets may be more relevant (or less relevant) from two aspects. Relevance is higher where progress/action is urgently needed in the EU as a whole, or within a European country; and where the EU and/or the country can provide particularly valuable assistance to third parties/beneficiaries to achieve targets and/or take action.

Urgencies can be defined as fast closing windows of opportunities for reaping benefits or averting irreversible damage.

Targets of the “relevant” set must be ranked according to their role and effectiveness in the SDGs and their targets as a system. There are four kinds of particularly positions, or ‘roles’ in a causal web system – a system made up of elements linked by cause-effect relations. First, targets of particular importance are those that function as bottleneck

¹⁶ The *High-Level Political Forum* is the main United Nations platform on sustainable development and it has a central role in the follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at the global level. see: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/hlpf>

openers. These are the *sine qua non* targets that are preconditions for achieving further targets. Primary education, for example, is a precondition for secondary and tertiary education.

Second, targets with multiple causal effects that trigger multiple causal changes – “snowball” or “avalanche” effects, are also high-‘ranking’. Good example is the phasing out of fossil fuel subsidies.

Third, ‘engine-starter’ targets that trigger desirable positive feedback loops, or “virtuous cycles”, in the system, are also worth of special attention. For example, most capacity-building efforts such as health awareness, sustainability culture, or youth engagement have this character.

Especially from a political point of view, as fourth priority group, ‘low-hanging fruit’ targets also merit identification and special attention. These are easy to accomplish, and their implementation has a trigger effect on the implementation of other targets because it raises motivation and stamina. However, it is important to keep in mind that the exhaustion of easy targets must not result in the termination of the process.

Our course must allow for correction, adjustment and flexibility. During implementation there will be paths that lead us astray. We have to develop and maintain the capacity to acknowledge our mistakes, correct them, learn from them, and carry on.

4.3. The demonstration of continuing leadership at the global level needs to be supported by effective reporting practices on measures and progress.

The real value of a program or policy can be measured by the rate of its implementation. As the UN resolutions are all soft laws therefor not enforceable, it is of utmost importance to ensure their implementation by other means. When the SDG system was set up, the legislators kept the lessons learned of other previous international agreements in mind. Such as the Kyoto protocol, which was a good „bad example” for the lack of enforcement and the missing implementation. In case of the climate agreements, there was no mid-term reporting, no regular scrutiny. Though shortly after its launching it was clear that the pledges are not enough for reaching the minimum goals, there was nothing to do. To avoid this mistake, the following cornerstones were built into the system:

First, there is a monitoring system, which is not impeaching the implementation but rather acts as an accelerator. In some cases it can even launches the implementation.

Second, as the resolution is only a soft law, the experience exchange must be on a voluntary basis and the interaction of the states and the different levels of stakeholder groups should influence them in a positive manner. Via the regular National Voluntary Reports (NVR), stakeholders are forced to scrutinize their possibilities for the implementation, and at the same time it offers them the possibility for the actual implementation.

Thirdly, it was a clear expectation to keep the goals flexible and changeable. It means that to avoid the error of the Kyoto Protocol, they have kept the possibility for the system to be adjusted according to the changes of reality.

Finally, the creation of the SDG had been such a great success that the legislators have wanted to use the experiences of its birth during its implementation. It can be

considered as a lessons learned exercise. The key momentum of the success was the widest possible cooperation between all stakeholders. It took time, as working with hundreds of participants takes much longer than working with a few. But at the end of the day, with this method everybody felt the paper as its own, and it could pass the final voting with no votes against. This is the kind of support that is required for the delivering of the fundamental change the SDG foresees.

Based on the above, a decisive start must be followed by a clear chain of command for SDG implementation at the executive level. It should be clarified as early as possible which office/official has overall responsibility for organising SDG implementation at EU and country level. Governments should be requested to report to the EU Presidency and to share information with one another on the organisation of SDG implementation in their executive branches. The higher the chief responsible office/official is in the administration, the better the prospects for successful implementation.

A supporting/advisory academic network in relevant fields should be established, benefiting from experience gained during prior engagement in SDG development. Relevant regional institutions and organisations will be particularly useful in providing EU assistance, facilitation and guidance for SDG implementation in Europe and its neighbouring regions.

The development of proper indicators for the SDGs is a sensitive issue. It is more important to get them right than to act fast. It is worth taking the time to develop/decide on a set of key or “headline” indicators that could serve both monitoring and communication purposes. This process could benefit from the results of the “Beyond GDP” initiative launched by the EU many years ago. One cautionary consideration is that, while trying to restrict the number of headline indicators for the sake of easier communication, we must avoid at all costs the “GDP trap” – that is, the oversimplification of a complex situation, which results in screening off important aspects of the process.

Identifying and using pilot areas for implementation and reporting may prove useful. Eastern European EU member states (such as the V4), and EU Neighbourhood and candidate countries, having had considerable experience in socioeconomic transition, may be among such pilots. When the EU assists partners in starting work on the SDGs or launching cooperation for transformation, the 2Rs approach to orchestrating the pattern of target implementation should be widely visible.

5. Concluding thoughts

As we close our analysis, we would return to the question: “What could our region possibly offer to the world as contribution to the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals?” Our answer, in short, could be: our knowledge and experience deriving from managing deep national-regional transitions! It is this experience that is reflected in the list of recommendations below:

Key points emerging as general, shared opinion of all expert contributors:

1. The SDGs offer a vision of a fairer, more prosperous, peaceful, sustainable, inclusive world.

2. The SDGs cannot be achieved in isolation: reaching all the goals paves the way to ending hunger and poverty.
3. Among the diverse political institutions engaged in implementation, a proper approach to SDG implementation must promote ownership at all levels and in all sectors.
4. The SDG implementation should be initiated and run in participatory processes, with regard to subsidiarity.
5. The SDGs need to be translated into national targets and then localised in their entirety, not just pursuing “low-hanging fruits”.
6. Capacity and knowledge are of key importance in transition processes.
7. Policies and programs must be evidence based and transparent, with proper monitoring to ensure accountability.
8. Actors, including governments, must be ambitious and push beyond the limits with sustained efforts.

Key messages from the Eastern European EU member states:

1. The key lesson learned from the recent transitions in CEE is that multi-stakeholder preparation, and international guidance and monitoring are guardrails of success.
2. Awareness raising, capacity building and public participation will also be key to the successful implementation of the SDGs.
3. Gap analysis, experience sharing and a new kind of institutional cooperation are essential at all levels.
4. High-level coordination is required to facilitate the process.
5. An ongoing commitment to leave no one behind is important after the highest-priority goals have been addressed.

Key messages from South Eastern Europe:

1. Besides the usual emphasis on transposition, assistance to EU accession must also include capacity building for the implementation of the SDGs.
2. The EU needs to institutionalise the SDGs for effective regional implementation.
3. The SDGs must be mainstreamed into existing government structures after a thorough gap analysis.
4. Capacity building is an obvious priority both at the start of the process and throughout, as it is an enabler and facilitator.
5. Education curricula should refer to and support SDGs, as appropriate, at all levels.
6. During the implementation process, there is a need for horizontal coordination within government and with all external stakeholders.
7. “Living strategies”, – i.e. regular, frequent feed-back and adjustment periods – are needed towards implementing and achieving the SDGs.

On an historical timescale, our CEE region is barely out of a period of rapid and profound social and economic changes, and we are about to face a change yet again. But this time it will not be regional, but global. It is forced by natural framework conditions

set in motion by humankind, especially in the political ‘North’. Either we shift our societies, our economies and our lifestyle to a sustainable path in a planned, controlled, resilient management process – this would be the implementation of the SDGs –, or we continue to wait until the socio-economic system changes in a spontaneous, chaotic manner, driven directly by the changes in the natural system. In this paper we argued that recent CEE history recommends the first, and presented a set of detailed guardrails for the process from the pooled experience of regional experts.

