

# POLICY BENCHMARK ON SUSTAINABILITY AND GENDER

Gender equality and the gender dimension of sustainable development are not sufficiently reflected in R&I policy documents in the EU. This policy benchmark presents recommendations, based on best practices, on how to implement the objectives of gender and sustainability so that they are mutually promoting. The aim is to strengthen the capacity of Horizon Europe to contribute to gender equality and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda.

The adoption of the 2030 Agenda, together with the Paris Agreement on climate change, is an ambitious commitment by the nations of the world to jointly meet global challenges and strive for an economically, socially and ecologically sustainable future.<sup>1</sup> Since 2015, it has engaged many actors and sectors in society. An early-identified sector of particular importance is that of education, research and innovation, not only to meet the targets by 2030 but also to shape the agenda beyond 2030.<sup>2</sup> A special challenge for universities, in their capacity of both research performing organisations (RPOs) and higher education institutions (HEIs), is to recognize how **sustainable conditions for researchers/teachers and students – expressed primarily in SDG 4 and SDG 8 – are linked to how knowledge production can contribute to the transition to a sustainable world in a broader sense (all SDGs)**. Gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls are highlighted as a cross-cutting issue in the 2030 Agenda, with a stand-alone goal (SDG 5) as well as

being integrated as targets in most of the 17 SDGs. Similarly, the United Nations and the European Commission, most notably, as well as others have prioritized gender equality and the gender dimension in education, research and innovation.<sup>3</sup> In order for R&I and the HE sector to be able to contribute to the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs as desired, **it is crucial that the objectives of sustainability and gender do not function as competing goals but on the contrary, can create synergies for increased scientific quality and social impact.**

## Horizon Europe and the Global Approach to Research and Innovation

Building on the efforts under the Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme, Horizon Europe (2021-2027) aims to eliminate gender inequality and intersecting socio-economic inequalities throughout research and innovation systems, and sets the integration of the gender dimension into research and innovation content as a requirement by

default across the whole programme. Specific funding will be allocated for gender studies and intersectional research, in particular in Pillar II Cluster 2 *Culture, Creativity and Inclusive Society*.

Furthermore, the Strategic Plan 2021-2024 is based on an ambition to promote the EU policy priorities – including the European Green Deal – which is expected to strengthen the R&I contribution to the SDGs, “especially taking into consideration co-benefits and trade-offs among them”.<sup>4</sup> Sustainability is integrated in all six clusters of the second pillar of Horizon Europe ‘Global challenges and European industrial competitiveness’, so that the R&I funded can help in the transition to a sustainable world. However, the strategic plan does not elaborate on how gender equality and the integration of the gender dimension as a cross-cutting priority on the one hand, and the ambitions for sustainability on the other, should be able to relate to each other in ways that are mutually promoting – handling trade-offs and maximizing co-benefits.

The EU strategy for international cooperation on R&I also addresses sustainability as well as gender equality and the gender dimension, with reference to the 2030 Agenda, the Commission’s Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025, and the EU agenda for gender equality and women’s empowerment in EU external action.<sup>5</sup> While both gender and sustainability are thus prioritized in the strategy, the interconnection of the two is expressed above all in the fact that the Gender Equality Strategy is considered to deliver on the gender equality goal (SDG 5) of the 2030 Agenda, and on gender equality as a cross-cutting priority in all SDGs.

### **Best practices on gender and sustainability in R&I**

The commitment for the 2030 Agenda poses particular challenges for the research funding system, in terms of promoting innovative

ways of developing the knowledge needed for the transition to a sustainable world. There is a need for a greater understanding of the positive and negative relationships between sustainable development goals and targets, as well as the human-nature nexus that delimits the socio-ecological implementation of the 2030 Agenda.<sup>6</sup> Interdisciplinary collaborations are crucial to this endeavour, as is a broad understanding of innovation, and **SDG relevance needs to be included as criteria for evaluating scientific excellence and quality**.<sup>7</sup> These recommendations will be further elaborated through the following three cases of best practice.

### **Gendered Innovations for Sustainable Development**

Since 2011, the Gendered Innovations project at Stanford University has been supported by the European Commission to strengthen the gender dimension in R&I, aiming to integrate sex, gender and intersectional analysis in basic and applied research to stimulate excellence, reproducibility and responsibility in science and technology.<sup>8</sup>

While efforts to increase the numbers of women and members of underrepresented groups in RPOs/HEIs are important and contributing to the achievement of the gender equality goal (SDG 5), all scientists and engineers, regardless of gender, need to learn analytical skills that lead to excellence in research. In that sense, sex, gender and intersectional analysis are crucial to the greater goal of R&I contributing to the transition to a sustainable world.<sup>9</sup>

In 2018, the project developed 15 interdisciplinary case studies, contributing to the achievement of the SDGs and covering six different areas: 1) *Health*, 2) *Climate change, energy and agriculture*, 3) *Urban planning, transport*, 4) *Information and communication technology*, 5) *Finance, taxation and economics*, and 6) *Ad-hoc case study on the coronavirus*. Based on these, the project

recommends cross-disciplinary research for the development of gender knowledge related to all SDGs.<sup>10</sup>

## **Gender-Net Plus Joint Call on Gender and the Sustainable Development Goals**

Launched in 2017, the Horizon 2020 project Gender-Net Plus ERA-NET Cofund has provided support to the promotion of gender equality through institutional change and instigating the integration of sex and gender analysis into research and funding programmes. In their joint call of 2018, the project invited applications integrating a gender dimension in addressing urgent societal challenges.<sup>11</sup> Taking its point of departure in the SDGs, the call requested for explorations of interactions and interdependencies between SDG 5 and SDG 3, SDG 9 and/or SDG 13. Six topics were formulated for the applicants to focus on: 1.1. *Gender-Based Violence*, 1.2. *Sex, Gender and Ageing*, 1.3. *Sex, Gender and Health*, 2.1. *Gender and New Technologies*, 2.2. *Gender in Entrepreneurship and in the Innovation System*, and 3.1. *Gender Dimension in Climate Behaviour and Decision-Making*.

Subsequently, 13 projects received funding, mainly tackling health, but also industrialization, social inclusion, innovation and climate action. Based on gender/sex indicators created by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation, an impact assessment of the projects is carried out with an approach that is multidimensional and intersectional, analysing the many interrelated factors behind gender inequalities as well as the contribution to the achievement of the SDGs.<sup>12</sup>

## **Stockholm Environment Institute: SDG Synergies Approach**

In 2018, researchers at Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI) together with the European Environment Agency conduct-

ed a study to identify and analyse critical interactions between SDG targets that may be of particular relevance to environmental policy-makers in the EU.<sup>13</sup> The study was an application of an analytical and collaborative method, the SDG Synergies Approach, that the researchers at SDG had developed and discussed in scientific articles.<sup>14</sup>

Although the study of environmental goals (SDG 12 *Responsible Consumption and Production*, SDG 13 *Climate Action*, SDG 14 *Life below Water*, and SDG 15 *Life on Land*) did not integrate a gender dimension, it is an illustrative example of how a systemic approach can be used to analyse how different aspects of sustainability affect each other. The analysis suggests that progress on these environmental goals can benefit from progress on six other SDGs, among them SDG 3 (*Good Health and Well-being*), SDG 4 (*Quality Education*) and SDG 5 (*Gender Equality*), while having more challenging relationships with others, in particular SDG 7 (*Affordable and Clean Energy*), SDG 8 (*Decent Work and Economic Growth*) and SDG 9 (*Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure*).

As a conclusion, the study points to the importance of R&I going deeper in the analysis of interactions between SDGs than policy-makers engaging in a superficial box-checking that knowledge production through its social impact contributes to sustainable development.

## **Recommendations**

The following recommendations are based on the above three cases of best practice, together with international research on the field,<sup>15</sup> aiming to strengthen the commitment of Horizon Europe to gender equality in RFOs and RPOs and the integration of the gender dimension in R&I while contributing to the achievement of the SDGs.

- RPOs/HEIs need to recognize how sustainable conditions for researchers/

teachers and students are linked to how knowledge production can contribute to the transition to a sustainable world, given the negative effects of unsustainable working conditions on the quality of R&I. This calls for structural change with an intersectional approach, as developed in previous GENDERACTION Policy Briefs.<sup>16</sup>

- Work programmes promoting the development of gender knowledge on SDGs should encourage analysis of interactions between targets. Efforts for sustainability more thorough than a superficial box-checking require not only in-depth knowledge based on various indicators but also a systemic understanding of trade-offs and co-benefits between the goals. This needs to be acknowledged

in future calls. The assessment of SDG Relevance should be integrated into the evaluation of applications.<sup>17</sup>

- Gender research and research on sustainability have in common that they go beyond the boundaries of scientific disciplines, so in order for R&I to be able to contribute to the achievement of SDGs, it is important to promote multi- and interdisciplinary collaborations.
- The transformative claim of the 2030 Agenda requires knowledge interactions between relevant stakeholders, involving a wider range of actors than those traditionally involved in knowledge production and decision-making. Collaborative research processes, such as the SDG Synergies Approach or *citizen science*,<sup>18</sup> need to be promoted in future calls.

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6 | Bettina Susanne Schmalzbauer and Martin Visbeck, 'The Contribution of Science in Implementing the Sustainable Development Goals' (Stuttgart/Kiel: German Committee Future Earth, 2016).

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**12** | Pavel V. Ovseiko et al., 'A Global Call for Action to Include Gender in Research Impact Assessment', *Health Research Policy and Systems* 14, no. 1 (December 2016): 50.

**13** | Nina Weitz et al., 'SDGs and the Environment in the EU: A Systems View to Improve Coherence', report commissioned by the European Environment Agency (Stockholm: Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI), October 2019).

**14** | Nina Weitz et al., 'Towards Systemic and Contextual Priority Setting for Implementing the 2030 Agenda', *Sustainability Science* 13, no. 2 (March 2018): 531–48.

**15** | Widegren & Sand, 'Gender and Sustainability: An International Research Review' [forthcoming].

**16** | Genderaction, 'Policy Brief Series', November 2020.

**17** | Cf. 'SDG Impact Assessment Tool', accessed 24 August 2021.

**18** | Christopher Kullenberg and Dick Kasperowski, 'What Is Citizen Science? – A Scientometric Meta-Analysis', ed. Pablo Dorta-González, *PLOS ONE* 11, no. 1 (14 January 2016): e0147152.

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## Get in touch with us:

[www.genderaction.eu](http://www.genderaction.eu)

[info@genderaction.eu](mailto:info@genderaction.eu)

[@GENDERACTION\\_EU](https://twitter.com/GENDERACTION_EU)



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