Voluntary National Review 2023 | Synthesis text | Science and research | EN

Version 1

Processed contributions

This synthesis text incorporates contributions from:

- Fonds voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek – Vlaanderen (FWO)
- Vlaamse Adviesraad voor Innoveren en Ondernemen (VARIO)
- Strategische Adviesraad voor Landbouw en Visserij (SALV)
- Académie de Recherche et d'Enseignement Supérieur (ARES)

We have chosen to include advisory councils VARIO and SALV in this synthesis text. Strictly speaking, they do not really fall into the 'science and research' category, but inclusion in any other category would probably make even less sense. In any case, their contribution to the discussion should not be lost.

Which SDGs are the partners themselves working on?

- The answers show that the institutions support or promote actions around several SDGs, with some emphases.
    - The FWO mentions that in principle, by giving support to scientific knowledge building, there can be a contribution to all SDGs. It is up to the researchers requesting support to determine what their research is about (and therefore which SDG that research is linked to). Whether the FWO supports a research proposal depends on the quality of the proposal and the merits of the researcher/star. Within the 'Strategic Basic Research' (SBO) research channel, proposals in the field of sustainable development can be given a selection advantage. These include proposals that improve the integration of sustainable development objectives in government or organisations, or proposals that focus on system innovation or transition aimed at sustainability.
    - On its own initiative, VARIO has issued a number of opinions related to the SDGs. These include (1) The SDGs as a compass for science, innovation and entrepreneurship policy, (2) The SDGs - Opportunities for Flemish Enterprises, (3) Draft fourth Flemish Sustainable Development Strategy. A concrete proposal in those opinions is to make all government support to companies conditional on a positive impact on the SDGs.
    - The SALV has issued several opinions on the various key Flemish strategies linked to sustainability issues.These include the implementation of the SDGs. The SALV is currently updating a vision on the crucial challenges for Flemish agriculture and horticulture. Among other things, the SALV made opinions on: (1) Vizier 2030, (2) The fourth Flemish Sustainable Development Strategy, (3) CAP 2021-2027, (4) food policy. The SALV monitors the implementation of the SDGs at the different policy levels.
    - ARES is both a federation and an administration. | As a federation, ARES promotes quality education (SDG 4) in many ways. It participates in the work of various international organisations working on sustainable development. Its own committees work on sustainable development issues. Its own 'sustainable development committee' makes an annual project call for colleges, focusing on projects around sustainable development. (The selected projects mainly focus on SDG 6, SDG 7, SDG 12 and SDG 13.)

That committee also manages an academic cooperation programme with 18 partner countries in the South. (The initiatives contribute to several SDGS, including SDG 2, SDG 3, SDG 4, SDG 6, SDG 7, SDG 9, SDG 12, SDG 15.) Within the ARES, there are also committees on inclusive higher education (SDG4, SDG 5, SDG 8, SDG 10) and on women and science (SDG 5, SDG 10). The sustainable development committee is also a partner for the Walloon sustainable development strategy and for the transversal plan for the ecological transition of the French-speaking Community. (SDG 17) | As an administration, ARES is taking initiatives to reduce its own footprint (SDG 13), to strive for sustainable consumption (SDG 12) and to integrate sustainability clauses in some public contracts (SDG 12). Inclusive writing is also being promoted (SDG 5).

What are priority themes or SDGs for Belgium in implementing the 2030 Agenda?

- Organisations' responses place different emphases.
    - Priority SDGs for our country: (1) SDG 4 access to quality education, (2) SDG 12 socially responsible production and consumption, (3) SDG 13 climate action, (4) SDG 14 and SDG 15 protection of marine and terrestrial life (more particularly in connection with education in pollution control, (5) attention to the social and environmental impact of one's own activities, (6) tackling the export of plastic waste and pesticides, (7) protecting biodiversity. (ARES)
    - Based on studies, it can be seen that our country has yet to make significant efforts on responsible consumption, the environment-related SDGs and climate change mitigation. These SDGs deserve an operational priority. (FWO)
    - At the same time, it is important to point out that pervasive research efforts around all SDGs are needed in affluent countries. They are an important link for achieving the SDGs at the global level. (FWO)
    - The SDGs are an interesting framework for sustainability, partly because it is a global, standardised and comprehensive framework. There is now an emphasis on health and climate. As a result, other important goals, such as the pursuit of quality education for all, could potentially be forgotten. In this sense, no specific SDGs are put forward as the number one priority. (VARIO)
    - Attention to a sustainable agriculture, horticulture and agri-food sector. A vision for a robust and sustainable food system. (SALV)
- Some general elements (from the discussion during the SDG Forum):
    - Supporting and monitoring a more sustainable economic model requires, among other things, other indicators. In developing these, scientists can play an important role.
    - In general, science can play a major role in the public debate. Even though in the end it is always politics that decides, scientists can help make choices and evaluations in a transparent way.
    - It is important that university courses are sufficiently adapted to the need for a transversal approach to societal challenges. Independence of research is important. And in addition, better cooperation between areas of expertise and across the boundaries of one's own research world is also very important.

What issues require changes at European or international level to implement the 2030 Agenda?

- The organisations point to a number of issues:
    - There is a need for scientific breakthroughs in the socio-economic value chain necessary for improving prosperity and well-being. To this end, a few things are needed as prerequisites: (1) intensify international research and development investments in both human and institutional resources, (2) develop initiatives (worldwide) for the widest possible free access to information (open science) and to promote the exchange of standardised data (open data), (3) stimulate inter- and trans-disciplinary research, (4) improve and intensify the dialogue between researchers, policy-makers and the general public, (5) make sustained investments in training the next generation of creative scientists and technically qualified workers. (FWO)
    - Some important challenges are: (1) the development of sustainable economic models that help reduce the profits of large multinationals (through social clauses, working conditions, etc.), (2) access to quality education for all throughout life, (3) a greater commitment to reducing the carbon footprint (ARES).
    - There is a need for more coherence in the way different policy levels monitor the implementation of the SDGs and their targets. Different indicators are used depending on the level (global, European, Belgian, Flemish). (VARIO)
    - There is a need for a better system for internalising external costs. If this is not well organised, companies may be at a competitive disadvantage, e.g. with a CO2 tax. An arrangement at supra-national level is preferable. (VARIO)
    - There should be sufficient attention to the level playing field in the international market. Companies that have to meet strong sustainability requirements in their country may be at a competitive disadvantage compared to companies from countries where there are no such requirements. This attention is already taking concrete shape in the Commission's proposal for a CBAM under the ETS system. (VARIO)
    - There is a need for more policy coherence in the EU's Common Agricultural and Food Policies to better ensure the sustainable future of agriculture. (SALV)

What key messages would you like to see in the VNR?

- The organisations have some suggestions:
    - Underlining the importance of scientific research as a mediator for global prosperity and well-being. After all, achieving the SDG goals presupposes a continuous process of research and development. Therefore, (inter)national innovation policy should provide a balanced investment flow with room for both (academic) free research and mission-driven innovation initiatives within research institutions and industry. (FWO)
    - The SDGs hold many opportunities for companies. SDG 8 and SDG 9 can be strengthened by focusing on the other SDGs. Profit and purpose can reinforce each other. It was a recommendation to the Flemish government to build expertise for solving the societal challenges framed within the SDGs, which can then also strengthen the position of our companies on the international market. (VARIO)
    - The current growth model is not sustainable. We need to evolve towards a 'new economy' based on a different model: climate-neutral, circular, inclusive, with fair chains. Innovation will be the distinguishing factor. There is a need for a 'transformative

innovation model'. The EU has already taken initiatives in this direction through the Green Deal and NextGenerationEU. (VARIO)

- Two things are really very important: (1) access to quality education for all and for life, (2) sustainable consumption. (ARES)

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