THE 2030 AGENDA AS A BLUEPRINT

Regions and the 2030 Agenda: the Role of the Four Motors for Europe

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The 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a continuation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The fundamental difference is that while the MDGs represented the lowest common denominator with which the international community could seek to address specific challenges, the SDGs are more comprehensive and ambitious [1]. Similarly, while the MDGs only targeted developing countries, the SDGs are designed to be met by all states; this is a renewed attempt to move away from the stigma of less developed countries having to follow the instructions of richer countries, especially when the latter still haven't solved many of their own structural problems, such as inequality. In addition, adopting the SDGs implied an acceptance that the existing model was unsustainable and that bringing about change would demand action in all areas because they are all interconnected.

Compliance with the 2030 Agenda is strongly linked to meeting the SDGs, whose primary objective is to ensure no one gets left behind as societies prepare for the changes and challenges the planet demands. The idea is for humanity to be ready to face them by 2030

and beyond, eradicating poverty (SDG1) and hunger (SDG2), ensuring good health and well-being (SDG3), education (SDG4) and gender equality (SDG5), providing clean water and sanitation (SDG6) and affordable and clean energy to humanity (SDG7) while ensuring economic growth and decent work (SDG8) and investing in industry, innovation and infrastructure (SDG9). The SDGs also aim to reduce inequality between and within states (10), make life sustainable in cities (11), ensure responsible consumption and production (12), take action on climate change (13), preserve life below water (14) and on land (15), and achieve peace and justice through strong institutions (16) and build partnerships to accomplish it all (17).

The circumstances that led to the adoption of the SDGs have been over-diagnosed. As Ayuso said [2], every Secretary-General of the United Nations (UN) has tried to add their two-cents worth to the reform and achievement of its goals without addressing the structural problems that have prevented that accomplishment: a crisis of governance that impedes decision-making; a crisis of effectiveness (as a consequence of the previous crisis) that limits the ability of international organisations to evaluate their own results, innovate to improve them and make room for some flexibility to retrofit those actions and strategies post evaluation; a crisis of legitimacy, no matter how much SDG17 claims that the process of drafting the 2030 Agenda was participatory – which is especially devastating if we take into account that meeting the SDGs requires widespread participation from all actors; and a permanent financial crisis, because states are systematically late in paying dues and most taxes are earmarked for fixed purposes rather than being structural, which limits the United Nations' capacity to act and, therefore, the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

The SDGs, which are both ambitious and contradictory – particularly in the way they juxtapose sustained economic growth and the need to deal with the climate threat – have also been criticised in their original conception. Hickel criticised, for example, the fact that the achievement of the goals would be assessed on the basis of a failed economic model and described the SDGs as "actively dangerous" [3]. He also accused the major advertising campaign launched for the 2015 signing of failing to inspire, despite the need to turn citizens into guarantors and protagonists to accomplish them. The reason, Hickel suggests, is that qualitatively speaking, "there's nothing in the SDGs that's really new".

> The 2030 Agenda and the SDGs have provided a kind of seal of approval for the public policies, actions, initiatives and business activities

In this context, the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs have generated at least two frameworks. On the one hand, they have provided international organisations, states and their governments, civil society and some private companies with a kind of seal of approval that allows them to participate in a global advertising campaign for their planet-saving actions. And, on the other, they have provided all these stakeholders with a framework for action so that they

can ensure their public policies, actions, initiatives and business activities are in line with the goals. In this context, what role have the regions played or could they play in complying with the 2030 Agenda and achieving the SDGs? More specifically, are alliances such as the Four Motors for Europe (4ME) useful in localising these goals within the territory?

The regions: an elementary part of the 2030 Agenda

Successful implementation of the 2030 Agenda will impact all areas of government within a state, from education policy to economic and environmental policy. The decentralisation of states into different levels of government (state, regional, and local) means that many of the competencies needed to achieve the SDGs are not found in state governments. In fact, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has calculated that at least 105 of the 169 SDG targets cannot be achieved without the involvement of regional or local governments [4]. Therefore, implementing the 2030 Agenda requires participation from all administrative levels, including the regions.

For sub-state governments to participate, we will need to seek out coordination mechanisms to ensure that all administrative levels work in an organised fashion to achieve the SDGs without negatively impacting the efficacy or efficiency of their work. This cooperation can be structured in three different ways [5]. The first follows the principle of subsidiarity, according to which each level of government (international, national, regional and local) manages the issues that fall under its jurisdiction independently. The second structure follows the top-down principle, according to which the higher levels of government instruct the lower levels on what to do to achieve the SDGs. The third alternative is a collaborative approach in which all levels of government cooperate and provide mutual assistance to achieve the goals of the 2030 Agenda.

Regardless of how the different levels of government cooperate, the goals need to be seen in a regional context for the collaboration to be effective. Given the idiosyncrasies of the different regions within a state, sound knowledge of the starting point in each specific area is essential. Furthermore, regionalising the goals allows each region to identify which aspects of the 2030 Agenda it needs to prioritise and monitor its progress. Regionalisation can also assist the state in implementing the SDGs by reinforcing centralised efforts and focusing on the unique factors at play in each region, offering a more detailed view of the progress made [6].

According to J.A. Alonso, regionalising the 2030 Agenda is the first of the four phases necessary to achieve the SDGs [7]. He identifies this phase as the ownership phase, in which the Agenda is adapted to the specific circumstances in each region and population. The second phase is implementation through action plans and the allocation of sufficient funds; regions such as Catalonia, the Basque Country and Lombardy already have these plans. The third stage is the follow-up phase to provide accountability for the plans implemented and ensure correct usage of the funds. The last key phase is evaluation, which compares the expected results to the actual results to decide whether the policies implemented should be maintained or changed. However, the 2030 Agenda is not just about

achieving the SDGs with specific policies, but providing a frame of reference that policy-makers must keep in mind in any public policy; in other words, they have to take it into account in the design, execution, implementation, and evaluation of all government actions.

The principal ingredient required for the regions to be successful in achieving the 2030 Agenda is for political leadership to believe in the process of implementing the SDGs. Sometimes, however, leadership alone cannot overcome all the obstacles facing the regions. Generally speaking, these obstacles are difficulties in prioritising the SDGs, a shortage of the capacity and equipment needed to meet the challenges of the 2030 Agenda, and the limited economic resources available to regional levels of government.

> The regions have a hugely important role to play in raising the population's awareness of the SDGs

By contrast, a regional government's proximity to citizens and businesses can be advantageous because this crucial connection results in increased collaboration with civil society actors interested in meeting the SDGs. Goal 17 includes creating public-private partnerships to achieve the goals. The regions, therefore, as a local administration, have a hugely important role to play in raising the population's awareness of the SDGs and mobilising actors to work towards achieving them.

The role of the Four Motors in achieving the 2030 Agenda

The Four Motors for Europe, which comprises the regions of Catalonia (Spain), Baden-Württemberg (Germany), Lombardy (Italy) and Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes (France), have the advantage of more than thirty years working together to implement public policies that improve the lives of citizens. What's more, the very existence of the 4ME alliance in itself fulfils the SDG 17 target of seeking partnerships with other actors to achieve the goals, as specified in the previous paragraph. When Catalonia took over the presidency of the 4ME in September 2020 (for approximately one year), it decided to put the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs at the centre of its programme, with the aim of ensuring no one gets left behind in the transition to a more sustainable society.

The programme was divided into three axes of transformative resilience: (a) social, to tackle inequalities by addressing problems like the digital divide, strengthening education to make it inclusive, promoting the importance of higher education -particularly in the field of research-, and strengthening health systems by integrating artificial intelligence, for example; (b) environmental, to ensure a green economic reconstruction and promote social awareness, for example, by launching an initiative on educating for sustainability at the UNESCO Conference on Education for Development, focusing on the energy transition, learning about climate threats and strengthening food sovereignty; and (c) economic, emphasising the circular, social and cooperative economy to make it more sustainable and familiar.

Finally, the programme mentioned the importance of alliances in achieving the SDGs, and, without doubt, the 4ME offers a clear illustration of the potential that regions can tap into when they work together. Thus, the Catalan presidency of the Four Motors for Europe has deployed a broad agenda covering many of the SDGs, reaching an extensive network of stakeholders and highlighting the virtue of alliances.

However, some issues deserve particular attention, and would have the ability to make the Four Motors an example for other European regions. Firstly, we must continue to strengthen the 4ME alliance. While the somewhat non-institutionalised nature of the cooperation can be a significant advantage when it comes to setting goals and being flexible with the issues to be addressed, an audit of the goals set by the presidency could serve as an internal evaluation at the end of each term and would allow for improvement; it would also make it possible to assess the extent to which the SDGs are being met by following the four previously described phases, particularly the follow-up and evaluation phase. Experimentation, evaluation and the capacity to redefine public policies are key to legitimising oneself in the eyes of the public. Adding a degree of institutionalisation would also make it possible to better identify the common strengths of the four regions and pinpoint the areas in which we can excel. It’s in these sectors that regional governments must invest decisively. In this context, the idea of a joint fund earmarked for investing in and developing new technologies to further our compliance with the 2030 Agenda could be explored.

Secondly, we must acknowledge that the European Union is not winning the technology race and, consequently, more investment in innovation and technology is needed. The 4ME could develop technology clusters to increase international competitiveness, a possible destination for the joint fund. Opening up to collaborations with regions from outside the 4ME, as was done with the inclusion of Flanders and Wales in the “Four Motors for Europe and Associates” brand, could be key to getting the most from our alliance, both in terms of leadership, where possible, and in knowing how to read and capitalise on opportunities when other regions are better positioned to tackle a particular challenge. If the cooperation is to work, trust is vital, and while this trust already exists among the members of the 4ME, the incumbent plays a crucial role in attracting and seeking new partners. These actions would all sit comfortably within the overarching framework of SDG17. Experiences with other regions of the world, such as the old memorandum of intent signed with the Four Motors for Mercosur or the 4ME’s work under the umbrella of the Under2Coalition, can lead the way for other regions and speak for themselves as regards to the role that the 4ME can play.

Universities and other research institutions can be involved in the process of creating knowledge to help achieve the SDGs, particularly in the area of innovation. All four regions have universities with research potential. The exchange of human capital between them could be key to fostering joint research and projects. The Four Motors could take responsibility for encouraging that mobility through incentives, potentially provided by the joint fund, and the area could be strengthened within the working groups on labour mobility and professional training and research and higher education; continuing the work already carried out, for example, within the framework of the “2021 European Week of

Regions and Cities”.

The third and final issue in which the Four Motors have a vital role is in ensuring our cities become better places to live and more resilient to climate change through sustainable mobility, biodiversity protection and promoting efficient housing. No one knows better than the regional administrations, in partnership with local councils, which stakeholders will be needed to respond to these challenges. In addition, the role of cities in driving the regions forward is vital; but there must be reciprocity and loyalty between the cities that act as these drivers and the other regions. Equally, the role of the regions in supporting smaller cities to take whatever action they can in specific areas is also important.

> The Four Motors for Europe offers a clear illustration of the potential that regions can tap into when they work together in achieving the SDGs

For example, in sustainable mobility, the need to develop green hydrogen as the fuel of the future is clear. If the majority of the Four Motors regions are developing strategies to research and invest in this area, it would be beneficial to find ways to join forces. In fact, the 4ME have already stated their position concerning the disruption of mobility brought about by the pandemic; therefore, they have already identified the issue as a priority. Lastly, they can fill the EU’s lack of action on the ecological transition by giving a prominent role to climate justice and thus fulfilling the mandate of the SDGs to ensure that no one gets left behind.

Conclusions

The actions that could be taken in terms of investment, sustainable development and innovation would be framed in SDG9: investing in industry, innovation and infrastructure to achieve the 2030 Agenda. Choosing the right areas to invest in innovation is key to making it a transformative part of public policy with real benefit for citizens. Therefore, considering a joint investment fund that involves both the public and private sectors and shares and coordinates the objectives to be achieved to benefit all four regions could be a good place to start.

Consequently, it makes sense for the Four Motors regions to decide to act, as a minimum, within the framework of SDG7 to build more efficient buildings and ensure that recycling building materials becomes common practice; within SDG8 to guarantee decent work related to the circular and green economy while ensuring growth; and within SDGs 11, 12 and 13, to make life more sustainable in our cities while ensuring responsible consumption and production and acting on climate change, an area where cities and regions are already pioneers and must continue to be so. Accordingly, the investment in research, development and innovation to make green hydrogen the fuel of the future is where many areas of

interest converge and could be a suitable candidate for investment from the joint fund mentioned above.

Finally, much of the action taken by the Four Motors can be framed within SDG17, which recommends seeking alliances to meet the targets before us. Adding a degree of institutionalisation to the Four Motors to be more accountable and better evaluate and redefine the public policies put in place would also meet goal 16: to have strong and legitimate institutions before citizens, who, ultimately, must be the ones to recognise its vital role in the proper functioning of democratic societies.

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