Policy Brief n°1

SPES | Sustainability performances, evidence & scenarios

The "winds of change": Fostering Sustainable Human Development in Europe

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Key messages

- Given co-existing societal challenges and crises in human, environmental, economic, and political domains, **sustainability transitions** are the only way to drive the world towards a better future for all.

- Sustainable Human Development with its five pillars – productivity, equity, environmental sustainability, participation & empowerment, and human security – should be the **cornerstone** of future European policy frameworks.

- Global and European policies should embrace an **integrated vision of Sustainable Human Development** to holistically fulfil societal needs while respecting planetary boundaries through collaborative governance.

- The transition towards Sustainable Human Development must be dynamic and centred on **collective human action**, requiring resources, actions, and capacities to adapt the path to changes within multi-level and multi-stakeholder processes.

- **European policies** must enable appropriate governance mechanisms, capital investments towards Sustainable Human Development, the adoption of suitable measurement systems, transformative Research & Innovation policy, and the promotion of active citizenship.

Background & Context

Over the past years, the sustainable development paradigm and the need for sustainability transitions at all levels and sectors have gained a broad global consensus, based on which the decision-makers worldwide are building several international, supranational, national and sub-national strategies. This is apparent with the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 SDGs and related targets and in the Paris Agreement, the first-ever universal, legally binding global climate change agreement.

In this global setting, the EU has assumed a leadership role in the attempt to propose strategies and policies for a paradigm shift towards sustainability transitions. The vision and narrative for sustainable economic, social, and environmental policies in Europe are characterised by the commitment to placing the economy on a more environmentally sustainable and socially inclusive path. This can be seen if we combine the current main European policy frameworks, primarily referring to the European Pillar of Social Rights, the European Green Deal, and the Next Generation EU, among others. Taken together, they illustrate the openness of current EU leadership to shifting towards a new model of growth and sustainability based on an integrated approach to development able to holistically pursue these three dimensions of sustainability.

However, the real-world scenario makes it evident that we are still far from having undertaken the necessary changes required to truly achieve the transition towards sustainability. Indeed, we live in an era of multiple co-existing and overlapping societal challenges and crises in human, environmental, economic, and political domains. The dramatically high costs of the COVID-19 pandemic have coupled with the severe impacts of climate change (especially in the Global South) and the increasing frequency of extreme weather events and biodiversity loss, persistent multidimensional poverty also due to high levels of inflation and the resulting cost-of-living crisis, and increasing inequalities within countries. Moreover, people and communities are facing

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net losses in terms of human security due to the exacerbation of conflicts and violence across the world.

All in all, robust evidence supports an increasingly shared consensus that economic growth, while crucial for improving well-being, does not automatically equate to Sustainable Human Development.

For these reasons, the current scenario urges us to redefine the links between economic activity, well-being, and sustainability. The time to act is now, with shifts in the global landscape (including the digital transition) offering a crucial window of opportunity to make deep transformations in our economic and social systems. These need to be characterized by new social dynamics and more sustainable, innovative and inclusive forms of development. However, sustainability transitions are complex systemic changes that involve multi-level and multidimensional processes, experimentation, and adaptation. Therefore, appropriate governance mechanisms, dialogue with societal stakeholders, and

a priority on innovation and resilience capacities are crucial. These should further be tailored at different levels, combining a common global responsibility for Sustainable Human Development with the necessary differentiated commitments between the world regions and the population groups.

In the current debate, the starting point of such structural changes is the recognition that the lives of human beings – as agents, beneficiaries, and judges of progress – and the sustainability of our societies in terms of People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace and Partnership should be the ultimate concern for any government intervention at all levels.

This assumption requires a shift in the vision of development at all levels. This can be done by combining two major paradigms - sustainable development and human development – that are increasingly supporting global and supranational institutions, national policymakers and scholars in shifting the focus from economic growth to the well-being of people and the planet.

Having a sound framework is a key element of this process as it enables the key interrelationships among theories of development, its definition, objectives, related policies and performance measurements to be addressed.

This is the main ambition of the SPES project – Sustainability Performances, Evidence and Scenarios: identifying and discussing the "winds of change" to offer a **clear direction for policies towards Sustainable Human Development**, to help pushing Europe and the world towards a better future for all.
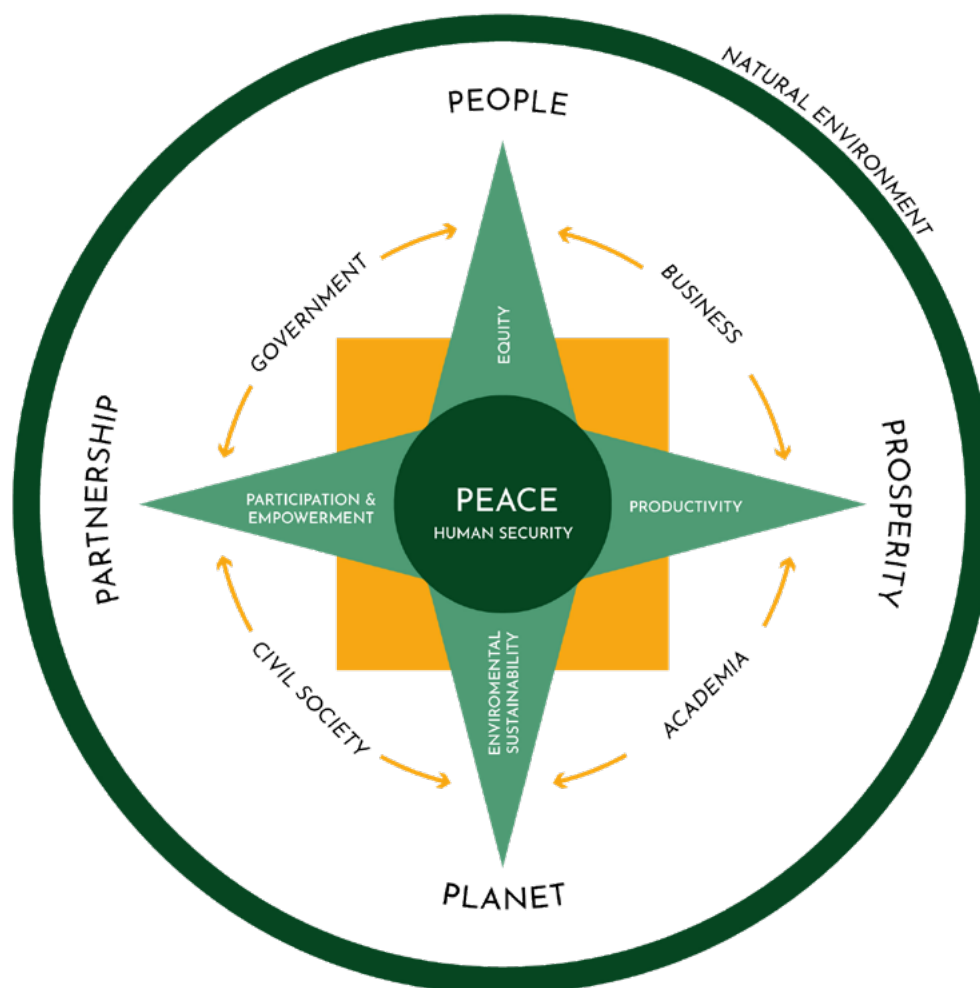
SPES
Evidence

The SPES project provides a new integrated framework that is both **theoretically-grounded and policy-oriented** and able to reconcile potential contradictions between economic, social, and environmental spheres.

The SPES framework links the 2030 Agenda with the Sustainable Human Development paradigm and the integral ecology perspective, in order to identify the pillars, driving actors, and triggering factors for sustainability transitions.

This framework offers a clear integrated vision for sustainability transition processes, by placing economic growth and human flourishing within social and environmental boundaries while embracing both material and immaterial dimensions of sustainable well-being.

In short, the novel SPES framework is composed of three building blocks:

1. We refer to the 5 Ps of the 2030 Agenda – People, Prosperity, Planet, Partnership, and Peace – as the main critical areas of action, thus advocating for sustainable development as the overarching policy framework at the global level.
Due to their fundamental role in setting global, national, and local development agendas and strategies, these 5 Ps must be

taken at the forefront of any interpretative framework concerning sustainability transitions. Nevertheless, despite the integrated and indivisible nature of the 2030 Agenda, Peace is viewed as the cornerstone, with a much broader meaning than simply the absence of conflicts: rather, it refers to the harmonious coexistence between humans and the ecosystem. In other words, it is both a means and an end since "there can be no sustainable development without peace, and no peace without sustainable development" (UN, 2015, p. 2).

2. We identify the corresponding objectives – productivity, equity, environmental sustainability, participation & empowerment, human security – each on equal terms, to fully embrace a Sustainable Human Development vision.

We re-interpret the original pillars of the human development paradigm according to current societal challenges, while also introducing a new fifth pillar to consider the role of social relations, stability, and peace: the notion of human security. This

emphasises that many current human insecurity threats are the by-product of the human choices made in the pursuit of unsustainable and unbalanced growth.

3. We rely on the Quintuple Helix model to show how different societal actors – government, business, academia, civil society, natural environment – interact and drive the sustainability transition. We identify the spheres of actors and their interactions driving the sustainability transition towards Sustainable Human Development. This model provides the necessary transformative dynamics by considering the continuous interplay of the roles by all societal actors in their different domains shaping the integrated pursuit of the 5 pillars in all 5 critical areas of action.

Jointly, these building blocks successfully combine the global policy framework of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development with the theoretical insights of the Sustainable Human Development paradigm,

making our original contribution both theoretically-grounded and policy-oriented.

Similarly, they allow the SPES framework to be dynamic and centred on collective action shaped by a clear perspective for the common good and a novel interpretation of normative objectives and societal factors steering transition processes.

Find out more on the SPES framework and policy mapping

Policy recommendations

In line with the SPES framework, **the overarching goal of all European policies should be to foster a fundamental transformation of socio-economic systems to fulfil societal needs while respecting planetary boundaries**.

This requires that productivity and value-added enhancing processes stand on fully equal terms and priority with the reduction of inequalities and vulnerabilities, as well as with environmental protection and mitigation and adaptation of climate change.

01.

Ensuring appropriate **governance mechanisms** as an accelerator for sustainability transitions

Good and "conscious" governance refers to collaborative principles and practices for the effective, inclusive and ethical management of institutions and resources in a society. It emphasizes the significance of collective action through multi-stakeholder involvement and engagement, while prioritizing transparency and mutual responsibility. Furthermore, the combination and coordination of resources, actions and capacities from different governance levels, policy fields and societal actors are seen as fundamental enabling factors for sustainability transitions, which must result in policy coherence for Sustainable Human Development.
Therefore, the combination of "whole-of-government" and "whole-of-society" approaches in policy design and implementation is essential to establish partnerships based on multilevel and collective efforts, steering policy coherence towards Sustainable Human Development.

02.

Steering **capital investments** towards Sustainable Human Development

Different forms of capital, accumulated and inherited from the past, contribute to the well-being of both present and future generations. Therefore, the pillars of Sustainable Human Development give a new direction for capital investments at a broad societal level.

Investing in – while also preserving – different forms of capital (natural, human, built/ physical, economic/financial, social/cultural) is fundamental for sustainability transitions. The public and private sectors should create a supportive environment for well-rounded capital investments towards Sustainable Human Development, also through public-private partnership pooling risks linked to transitions. In particular, assets representing the shared and common good, such as education and training, basic research, public health, infrastructures, and natural resources, particularly require public investment or proactive governmental intervention. Furthermore, governments should regulate market inefficiencies, ensuring that private investments in wealth generation align with the broader public interest.

03.

Pushing to definitively **go beyond GDP** in our measurement systems

In recent years, it has become increasingly clear that GDP is not able to accurately capture the state of social, economic, and environmental development of countries, regions and cities.

Thus, it is essential to define and ensure the uptake of an appropriate measurement system to capture the real progress on Sustainable Human Development and transition performances in Europe.

Indeed, despite several global initiatives pushing to go "beyond GDP" on development measurement, this is not part of the mainstream views yet and is therefore not embedded in policy and public debate. Therefore, it is fundamental to direct all efforts in "valuing what counts", developing new definitions and metrics of sustainable well-being and social progress, as well as of productivity and value-added for sustainability transitions.

04.

Making **Research & Innovation policy fully transformative** towards Sustainable Human Development

Science, Research and Innovation are not merely technical but have a social and political impact. Therefore, the purpose of R&I policy can no longer be the non-directional promotion of innovation for growth and competitiveness. Rather, R&I processes can be at the core of system transformation processes, playing a fundamental role in questioning the status quo and to pave the way for (and accelerate) this transformative change towards Sustainable Human Development.
In other words, R&I policy should not remain neutral, but should pursue an integrated and balanced perspective on economic, environmental and social sustainability.

05.

Promoting critical, creative, and caring **citizenship**

Fuelling the process of systemic change requires shaping values and attitudes of current and future managers, entrepreneurs, policy makers, researchers, activists, and consumers towards Sustainable Human Development. Therefore, investing in education, training and learning systems to further incorporate a sustainability perspective can facilitate the transition processes, which, in turn, can lead to an increased awareness of intergenerational responsibilities and attention for the common good. At the same time, creating the conditions for community participation fosters social cohesion, makes societies stronger and more resilient, and it also positively affects good governance.

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