

Progress in implementation of sustainable development goals: a comparison of Russia, developed and developing countries

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Abstract. Since the adoption of the United Nation's 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, attempts to monitor their status of achievement are increasing by governments, the academic community, and non-governmental actors. Implementation of the SDG is of particular interest both in international context and according to the agenda of socio-economic development of the Russian Federation, thus the task of identifying medium-term sustainable development priorities of Russia acquires great importance. The paper is based on comparative analysis of priorities of the Presidential Order "On National Goals and Strategic Objectives of the Russian Federation through to 2024" (the May-2018 Executive Order), active state programs and the SDG targets. The purpose of the paper is to determine the correlation between the SDG targets and Russia's medium- and long-term national strategic goals. Particular focus is thereby put on constructing composite indices that allow benchmarking of countries according to their level of SDG achievement. The author argues that the existing SDG indices should be complemented with a longitudinal perspective to assess development over time towards or away from the 2030 Agenda's objectives.

Keywords: Sustainable development goals, Sustainability indicators, Composite index, Measuring progress, European Union Ranking, Developed countries, Developing countries.

JEL codes: O10, Q01

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Introduction

The Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development designated the term "sustainable development" as representing "not a steady condition of harmony, but a process of change in which the scale of operation of resources, the direction of capital investment, orientation of technical development, and institutional changes will be coordinated with present and future requirements" (Degai et al., 2021). A majority of scientists consider the sustainable development principles as entailing an understanding of the movement of society in the future based on reasonable compromises in the relationship of society, nature, and individuals. A more precise definition of the term "sustainable development" underlines that "it is the economic growth that provides satisfaction of material and spiritual needs of current and future generations when maintaining the balance of historically developed ecosystems" (Hák, Janoušková & Moldan, 2016). The experts of the World Bank identify sustainable development as "a process whereby future generations receive as much capital per capita as – or more than – the current generation has available. Traditionally, this has included natural capital, physical or produced capital, and human capital. Together they constitute the wealth of nations and form the basis of economic development and growth" (Gootaert, 1998; Serageldin, 1996).

Russia actively implements SDG, accepted by the UN General Assembly in 2015. In particular, the country cooperates with the international organizations of the UN system, works on projects of ensuring food security, modernization of infrastructure, and the solution of economic problems of developing states (Russian Federation Voluntary National Review, 2020). The following article will examine the progress made in achieving the SGDs in the Russian Federation including the measures of the realisation of these goals in the country relative to other areas of the globe.

Main Part

The status of and progress made in the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals in the Russian Federation

Russia is a social state and its policies are aimed at the creation of conditions for decent life and free development of a person. Due to Russia's socially oriented policy, considerable achievements have been made in the implementation of the basic principle of the 2030 Agenda: "leaving no one behind". This is the underlying principle of the national policy for ensuring access to socioeconomic, political and other spheres of life for everyone (Russian Federation Voluntary National Review, 2020). The acceptance of the Paris Agreement by the Russian Federation in 2019 became a major event in the global efforts to combat climate change. Russia's full participation in the Paris Agreement, in addition to already effective international mechanisms including those at the level of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), United Nations Development Program (UNDP), World Meteorological Organization (WMO)), may become an additional driver for reducing carbon intensity and improving energy efficiency of the national economy, thus contributing to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals at the global level (Russian Federation Voluntary National Review, 2020). In 2020, the Russian Federation adopted the Kigali Amendment to the Montreal Protocol, which will facilitate the performance of climate obligations through a considerable reduction of extra greenhouse gases consumption.

Measures for the realization of the SDGs in Russia

In March 2016, the Federal Council of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation promulgated proposals for the parliamentary hearings on the post-2015 UN agenda whose recommendations focused on issues related to international development assistance and national efforts on adaptation to climate change (Degai et al., 2021). The document also included important recommendations on the spread of information concerning Russia's activity as a global donor.

The coordination of efforts among various governmental bodies concerning the SDGs is formally conducted by the interagency taskforce for the Executive Office of the President of the Russian Federation on issues related to climate change and sustainable development. In 2016 the taskforce examined the conformity of the tasks and goals laid out in Russia's executive orders issued in 2006-2016 with the SDGs, in close cooperation with federal executive bodies. The taskforce inspected the status of statistical data necessary for monitoring implementation of the SDGs in Russia and established a new expert group on info-statistical support for the monitoring of SDG implementation, composed of officials from federal executive bodies.

Despite the fact that three years have passed since the adoption of the SDGs, Russia has not laid out a national approach to their implementation and has not formulated an adapted national strategy of sustainable development. However, the Russian Statistical Service (Rosstat) has started to prepare a set of indicators to monitor SDG implementation and in September 2017 the Federal Plan for Statistical Efforts was complemented with indicators of SDG implementation in Russia (Kolmar & Sakharov, 2019). Ninety indicators were incorporated with the majority focusing on such aspects as poverty and welfare, decent jobs and economic growth, healthcare and education. Russia also actively participates in the UN Conference of European Statisticians on issues related to SDG statistics.

The official representatives of Russia responsible for the country's activities toward the implementation of the SDGs on national and international levels have announced several times Russia's intention to introduce national and subnational SDG indicators, and to establish an accounting platform for delivering information to the UN and preparing national reports containing Russia's achievements in SDG implementation on a regular basis (Degai et al., 2021). Recently, steps were taken toward establishing a national system of indicators for measuring the progress achieved in this sphere. Concluding and presenting Russia's voluntary report to the UN High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development could be a great impetus for these efforts. Despite the fact that 162 countries (46 in 2018) including several Eurasian Economic Union countries – Belarus (2017), Armenia (2018), Kazakhstan (2019) – and two BRICS members – China (2016) and India (2017) –

have already presented their achievements, Russia has not yet completed its report to the UN High-Level Political Forum (Kolmar & Sakharov, 2019). The outcomes of the evaluation of SDG implementation in Russia conducted by the Analytical Center generally match the SDG Index demonstrating countries' achievements in the implementation of the SDGs arranged by the Sustainable Development Solutions Network.

Russian and foreign experts have noted that since the 2000s Russia has achieved the most significant results in combating hunger (SDG 2) and poverty (SDG 1), and has demonstrated moderate accomplishments in providing quality education (SDG 4), promoting modern and clean sources of energy (SDG 7), employment policy (SDG 8), building sustainable cities and communities (SDG 11) and mitigating the effects of climate change (SDG 13) (Kolmar & Sakharov, 2019). There is more to be done concerning gender equality (SDG 5), clean water and sanitation (SDG 6), sustainable infrastructure (SDG 9), sustainable consumption and production (SDG 12), building partnerships between governments, civil society organizations and the private sector (SDG 17), as well as preservation of life on surface and water ecosystems (SDGs 14 and 15).

The most challenging SDGs for Russia are good health and well-being (SDG 3), peace, justice and strong institutions (SDG 16) and inequalities (SDG 10). Economic development based on a raw-export model increases the environmental impacts that cripple people's health and well-being.

Likewise, the study found that in recent years, Russia has demonstrated positive results in each SDG, most successful of them being SDG 1 "No poverty", SDG 4 "Quality education", SDG 8 "Decent work and economic growth" (Baimakova & Rytikova, 2020). However, the achievement of some targets still requires activation of joint efforts of the government, private sector, and society. The study also found that the main challenge for Russia is implementing SDG 5 (Achieving Gender Equality and Empowering All Women and Girls where it is established that gender issues are generally lacking in the country's programme and strategic documents. Notably, in 2017 Russia ranked 53rd out of 189 according to the UN Gender Inequality Index (Kolmar & Sakharov, 2019). Additionally, Russia lags behind the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries in terms of deaths per 1000 births and teenage pregnancy. The most challenging issue is women's involvement in political processes measured according to the share of parliament mandates held by women – in these terms, Russia falls behind not only developed, but also the majority of developing countries, including the former Soviet Union (UNDP, 2021).

According to the abovementioned report on sustainable development goals as well as Russian researchers' studies (Bobylev & Grigoryev, 2020), strategic documents of Russia, including those adopted in 2017 – the Strategy on Economic Security (On the Strategy, 2017) and the Strategy on Ecological Security (Environmental Security Strategy 2017) – do not correlate with the sustainability principles and thus extra measures for the implementation of the SDGs into Russia's agenda are required.

The key medium-term strategic document of Russia is the "Action Plan of the Government of the Russian Federation Through 2024" (Action Plan of the Government, 2018) adopted in 2018. The Russian Federation has not yet adopted a document on the implementation of the SDGs in line with the General Assembly resolution adopted in 2015. The majority of SDG targets are realized by means of national socio-economic development policy including subprogrammes and specialpurpose programmes.

Applicability of the implementation of the SDGs in Russia was fixed in the Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly in 2018 (Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly, 2018) and the May 2018 Executive Order (On National Goals and Strategic Objectives, 2018). The tasks formulated in these documents touch upon various issues – healthcare, education, demography, commodities and urban areas, international cooperation and export, labour productivity, SMEs and promotion of private entrepreneurship, safe and quality infrastructure, ecology and digital economy – all of which correlate with the SDGs and thus should be incorporated into strategic plans.

The May 2018 Executive Order is a programme document that establishes the goal of achieving a scientific and socio-economic breakthrough. The milestones of this breakthrough are the achievement of: Russia as one of the top-five economies of the world; population growth; increased life expectancy (from 72 to 78 years and up to 80 by 2030); growth of disposable income of the population and double-time decrease of poverty; annual improvement of living conditions for five million households; and a healthy environment

for self-realization and creativity of every individual.

The milestones listed above are to be achieved by 2024 by means of national policies in 13 spheres of strategic development (National projects of the Russian Federation, 2022), among them: demography; healthcare system development (SDG 3); education (SDG 4); housing and urban areas (SDG 11); ecology (SDGs 13, 14 and 15); safe and quality automobile roads (SDG 9); improving labour efficiency and employment (SDGs 8 and 9); culture (SDGs 4, 8 and 9); promotion of SMEs and private entrepreneurship (SDGs 2, 3, 8 and 9); international cooperation and export (Baimakova & Rytikova, 2020). Some of the projects are based on programmes launched in 2016 in such spheres as healthcare, education and housing; in other cases, a programme was put in place (Digital economy in the Russian Federation, 2022).

A new national project management system was introduced in order to implement the policies. Project authorities are formed on basis of the government and the federal executive bodies. Some bottlenecks may arise related to the nuances of coordinating the projects discussed above with existing programmes that had been a cornerstone of budgeting before 2018 (Baimakova & Rytikova, 2020). Preparation of national and federal projects should take into account their contribution to the implementation of the May 2018 Executive Order's goals and correlate with existing state policies.

Comparison of developing countries' implementation of the SDGs to Russia

Developing countries have faced some challenges in implementing their SDGs. In particular, key challenges that different communities face when adopting sustainable development is the confusion of metric devising. In developing nations, some terms might be unfamiliar to the local communities due to the lack of awareness towards the topic of sustainability, but the communication and collection of information are also challenging due to the fragmentation or even lack of data (Sarvajayakesavalu, 2015). Most developing countries suffer from low statistical abilities and cannot respond to the SDGs' growing demand for data. For example, in the Middle East, there is a regional deficit in data related to the performance of the human resources department when it comes to the recruiting, retaining, and promoting processes, making it difficult to track the region's performance in achieving SDG number 5, which is gender equality (Allen, Metternicht & Wiedmann, 2018). This contrasts from Russia which has adopted a successful multilateral cooperation in the field of statistical capacity development for SDG monitoring by implementing a joint programme of Russia and the World Bank to support statistical capacity building in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, which is aimed at improving expertise, systems of official statistics, data processing and distribution, and the creation of a system of professional training and professional development.

Another challenge that many developing countries face when attempting to implement sustainable development is the absence of reliable infrastructure and even lack of policies that have to do with infrastructure. These nations are thus unable to accomplish the SDGs since they lack the developed infrastructure needed to support the use of internet, networking, computing, as well as the database management system (Allen, Metternicht & Wiedmann, 2018). In fact, the listed elements are highly important and much needed in scientific research, nature control, successful planning, as well as decision making. Furthermore, receiving mapping data to manage and monitor disasters is also challenging third world nations due to their high cost, absence of methods to observe the ground, or even natural reasons like the struggling to access mountainous regions. For example, in the Philippines, unreliable infrastructure is considered to be a major limitation to the nation's goal of expanding its economy and reducing poverty, SDGs number 8 and 1 respectively. Even though it has enough control of water and electricity, the country struggles from a poor business environment as well as poor planning and cooperating capabilities.

In contrast, most of Sustainable Development Goals and targets of 2030 Agenda have already been integrated, in a varying degree, in the basic strategic and policy documents of the Russian Federation. Currently, Russia has 12 National Projects and the Comprehensive Plan for the Modernization and Expansion of Main Infrastructure, which are implemented to achieve the national development goals and strategic objectives of the Russian Federation up to 2024 and actually aimed at SDG achievement (Koroleva et al., 2019). National Projects were launched in such areas as demography, healthcare, education, housing and urban environment,

environment, safe and quality roads, workforce productivity and employment support, science, digital economy, culture, small- and medium-sized enterprise and support for individual entrepreneurial initiative, international cooperation and export (Koroleva et al., 2019). National Projects and the Comprehensive Plan for the Modernization and Expansion of main Infrastructure cover, directly or indirectly, 107 of 169 SDG targets.

Another issue most developing countries face is the lack of access to enhanced cooking energy technologies, which has to do with each nation's socio-economic and technical limitations. These barriers are restricting the improvement of the communities' quality of life and creating a vicious circle of poor economic development, causing low access to reliable energy services. This circle could be broken by creating energy policies related to income generation from efficient energy activities. If not, SDG number 7 (providing Affordable and Clean Energy) might never be achieved, leaving many communities across the world dependent on standard biomass energy. That is the case for the majority of the people living in Sub-Saharan Africa, where women spend up to four hours a day collecting firewood instead of investing their time in education or other economic activities (SDGs number 4 and 5, Quality Education and Gender Equality respectively) (Jiménez-Aceituno et al., 2020). In contrast, to ensure universal access to sustainable and modern energy sources, Russia has been implementing the package of national policy measures, including the Energy Security Doctrine of the Russian Federation and the State Programme "Energy Development" to attain SDG 7 (Koroleva et al., 2019). The energy saving and energy efficiency management system continues to be improved through inclusion of relevant targets in industry strategic planning documents at all levels.

Implementation of the SDGs in developed countries

The UN Statistical Commission and Eurostat Statistical offices have developed official SDG indicator sets whereas researchers and non-governmental organizations have created SDG indices and dashboards to rank countries according to their level of achieving the 2030 Agenda's goals and target (UN Sustainable Development...; Gökmen & Lyhagen, 2022; Tóthová, 2022). Throughout these rankings, European Union (EU) Member States and other OECD countries tend to come out on the top (Hametner & Kostetckaia, 2020). Within the EU, the highest levels of SDG achievement are usually found in the Scandinavian countries, while southern and eastern Member States appear at the bottom of the spectrum (Guijarro & Poyatos, 2018; Campagnolo et al., 2018; Muff et al., 2017). This distribution of countries in terms of SDG achievement confirms country rankings of earlier SD-related studies, such as on achieving the Europe 2020 strategy on smart, sustainable and inclusive growth (Çolak & Ege, 2013; Fura & Wang, 2017).

Despite their different methods and data sources, the results of the studies are quite homogenous: within the EU, the Nordic countries – Denmark, Finland and Sweden – together with the Netherlands and Austria are usually on top of SD-related country rankings. Southern and eastern European countries, in particular Bulgaria, Greece and Romania, are usually found at the bottom of these rankings.

Overall, most countries are making progress towards the SDGs, though progress is slowest on some of the environmental goals. Whereas many high-income countries have almost completely eradicated extreme poverty or hunger they obtain their lowest scores on goals like "responsible consumption and production", "climate action" or "life below water".

According to Kostetckaia & Hametner (2022) Europe faces its greatest SDG challenges in the areas of sustainable diets and agriculture, climate and biodiversity (SDG2, 12-15), in strengthening the convergence of living standards across its countries and regions and needs to accelerate progress on many goals. Finland tops the 2021 SDG Index for European countries (and worldwide), as it was less affected by the COVID-19 pandemic than most other EU countries. It is followed by two countries also from Northern Europe – Sweden and Denmark. Yet, like the rest of Europe, these countries face significant challenges in achieving SDG targets in the areas of sustainable diets and agriculture, climate and biodiversity, partly due to international spillovers – such as deforestation – embodied into trade (Kostetckaia & Hametner, 2022). The pace of progress on many goals is generally too slow to achieve the SDGs by 2030 and the Paris Climate Agreement targets by 2050. Candidate countries perform well below the EU average, although they were making progress before the

pandemic hit. Thus, both Russia and the well ranked developed countries alike have to out in effort to have a general holistic progress in all areas of the SDGs particularly on the climate change aspect and in lessening their carbon footprints.

Conclusions

To sum up, the study has examined the progress made in achieving the SDGs in the Russian federation including the measures of the realisation of these goals in the country relative to developing countries and the developed countries of Europe. The study has established that sustainable development leaders appear to not have progressed any further towards all the SDGs, and have partly even moved away from the 2030 Agenda's goals. This indicates that the leading countries may have reached a level of SDG implementation – although this level does not necessarily mean fulfilment of the agenda 2030's ambition – that makes it increasingly difficult for them to take further advantage of win-win situations. Instead, they appear to face more and more trade-offs between different SD objectives, where further progress in one area takes place at the expense of progress in other areas. The review highlights that while progress has been made in some initial planning stages, key gaps remain in terms of the assessment of interlinkages, trade-offs and synergies between targets. Gaps are also clearly evident in the adoption of systems thinking and integrated analytical approaches and models. Thus, effective implementation and the transformative potential of the SDGs will necessitate a strong commitment from national governments toward localizing the implementation of their development plans for developing countries and setting up of SD governance mechanisms across EU Member States, including political leadership for the 2030 Agenda to influences countries' progress towards the SDGs.

The majority of UN SDGs are fully or almost completely incorporated into Russia's 2024 development agenda. However, it should be noted that Russia's approach to implementing the SDGs requires more consistency. One aspect of the SDGs that is not fully incorporated into Russia's strategic documents is social justice and the promotion of human rights including gender inequality, development and representation of local communities, and building just, peaceful and inclusive societies.

In the absence of political will for adoption and realization of a special implementation strategy, potential solutions could encompass different solutions such as: paying special attention to the SDGs while drafting policies and ensuring division of responsibilities among federal and regional executive bodies; specification of indicators for monitoring; regular monitoring based on specified indicators; involvement of social stakeholders in the realization, monitoring and evaluation; and heavy coverage of achieved results.

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