Estonian National Strategy on Sustainable Development

Sustainable Estonia 21

SE21

THE ANALYSIS OF THE ESTONIAN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY "SUSTAINABLE ESTONIA 21"

Summary
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The analysis of the Estonian National Sustainable Development Strategy "Sustainable Estonia 21"

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The analysis on the timeliness and relevance of strategy “Sustainable Estonia 21” was initiated by the Estonian Commission for Sustainable Development and its conduct was commissioned by the Strategy Unit of the Government Office. The survey analyses the Estonian National Strategy on Sustainable Development “Sustainable Estonia 21” (hereinafter “SE21”), approved by the Riigikogu in 2005, in the context of new global trends, Estonia’s internal development, and the goals of the UN Sustainable Development 2030 Agenda. As a summary of the analysis, proposals on the sustainable development strategy and monitoring are made for the future activities. A total of five analysis tasks have been established for the survey:

1) to identify the most important global and regional trends influencing Estonia in the context of SE21, and to determine the relative position of Estonia’s sustainable development on the development path within international comparison;
2) to analyse the timeliness and relevance of the SE21 goals, submitted development factors, the basic mechanisms and courses of action taken to achieve the goal in the light of determined development trends, international comparisons, and the goals of the 2030 Agenda;
3) to analyse the timeliness and relevance of the SE21 indicators and the Estonian indicators of sustainable development within the framework of goals of the 2030 Agenda;
4) to make justified proposals to update the list of the Estonian sustainable development indicators;
5) to make proposals on the sustainable development strategy and monitoring.

The analysis method used in the survey is a comparative thematic content analysis, based on the expertise of a joint project team of the University of Tartu and Tallinn Centre of Stockholm Environmental Institute (SEI), the results of the interviews carried out with external experts involved in the analysis, and the results of focus group discussions. The survey is also based on the academic research article approaches and information contained in the international comparative analyses and databases.

Based on the analytical descriptions of global trends (results of the first analysis task), it is concluded in the survey that compared to 2005, when the Estonian National Strategy on Sustainable Development “Sustainable Estonia 21” was completed, there have been a number of changes both in the context of global and regional development and in Estonia’s relative position in the international comparison. As new topics, the following areas have emerged in the development context outside of Estonia:

- migration crisis in Europe and the fact that the nature of cross-border migration has become more short-term and multi-dimensional;
- predominance of the Internet, global social networks, and digital culture as the medium of culture and communication;
- technological opportunities and risks related to the Internet of Things, the smart house conception, autonomous cars, cloud technologies, and big data;
- radical deterioration of relations between Western countries and Russia;

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1 https://riigikantselei.ee/sites/default/files/content-editors/Failid/SA_eesti/saastva_arengu_tegevuskava_2030_uro_et.pdf
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- the paradigm of multilevel governance;
- the empowerment of civil society in the global middle class growth conditions and in the context of the so-called nation-free world ideology;
- the intensification of the effects of climate change and reaching the limits of environmental tolerance in certain regions.

Estonia’s position in international comparison has significantly improved in several sustainable development areas, particularly in the growth of welfare, but also in terms of the development of civil society, social inclusion, and governance quality.

The results of the assessment on the timeliness and relevance of the SE21 strategy content (the second analysis task) refer to a substantive need to thoroughly update the approaches of central structural elements of SE21. These include global trends, assumptions on political context, Estonia’s capabilities, the conceptual content of goals and their division into components, desired condition, the key mechanisms for achieving the goals, and threats.

The general conceptual goal-setting of SE21, which divides the Estonian sustainable development into four main goals, is assessed as timely and relevant in the context of the main goal in the declaration of the 2030 Agenda “to achieve sustainable development in its three dimensions – economy, society, and the environment – in a balanced and coherent way” (UN, 2015: 3). The specific character of the Estonian SE21 goals in comparison with global approach is highlighting culture as one of the central axles of sustainable development. The difference is fully justified, given that in the case of the Estonian National Strategy of Sustainable Development, the question lies precisely in the sustainable development of Estonia, since its most important basis for differentiation from the surrounding world is culture. However, the internal conceptual approach of goals and targets needs to be updated, including the balance of the approach towards components (targets)². The proposal is to conceptualise the four SE21 goal areas as follows:

- The viability Estonian cultural (space) – embracing the identities and existentialism of society;
- Growth of welfare (wellbeing) – embracing the individual progress of society and its members;
- Coherent society – embracing the involvement of society members, internal synergy and equality, and the balance of the development of society;
- Ecological balance – embracing the relations of society and economy with nature and the natural environment, ensuring the ecosystem services, and more widely ensuring living within the ecological limits of the Earth.

In order to ensure better balance of the approach, it is recommended to expand the list of sustainable development components from 12 to 18, taking into account the submitted proposal of the general distinctive reflection of the four goal areas. By goal areas, the components are the following:

1) The viability of Estonian cultural space– the preservation of Estonian people; the functionality of Estonian culture; the extent, openness, and impact of cultural space on external environment, the quality of human resources (including level of education, skills, knowledge about sustainable

² Within the meaning of the analysis, a component refers to the goal area of the SE21 target (e.g. security). The corresponding target should include a clear thematic goal, which complies with the SMART criteria. The formulation of targets serves as a task in the SE21 updating process.
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Development); the functionality of culture; the openness and impact of cultural space on external environment; the preservation of material cultural heritage;

2) Growth of welfare – economic prosperity; security; health; the quality of built living environment; the diversity of operation and consumption options;

3) Coherent society – inclusive and comprehensive society; society that has equal opportunities, reduces inequality, and is balanced (including regional development); participating and contributing citizens (including civil society); good governance (including the implementation of the sustainable development principles with policy methods); globally contributing society (including development cooperation);

4) Ecologic balance – environmental impact of production and consumption; climate and energy; the viability of ecosystems. The corresponding proposal also refers to a proposal to update the classification of the sustainable development indicators, insofar as the goal hierarchy acts as a central basis for assessing the relevance of the sustainable development indicators and a prerequisite for balancing the measurement of general goals.

The consistency analysis on the goals of SE21 and the UN Sustainable Development 2030 Agenda shows that based on the different level of detail of goals, it is possible to compare and harmonise the 2030 Agenda goals (17 in total) and the SE21 targets/components, which amount to 12 (the corresponding indicator in the updating proposal is 18). Comparative analysis indicates that the 2030 Agenda lacks a goal in the field of culture, however, when comparing the 2030 Agenda with the SE21 targets, it contains separate goals in the fields of education, health, gender equality, urban living environment, institutional development, and global partnership. With this regard, a majority of the 2030 Agenda goals have been formulated in such a way that their targets and indicators cover several SE21 goal areas and components. Therefore, it is neither reasonable nor possible to automatically transfer the 2030 Agenda goals to SE21 without fully abandoning the current structure of SE21, which divides Estonia’s sustainable development into four mutually balanced goal areas. As a general updating principle of SE21, it is recommended to choose an approach in the survey, where the topical extent of the 2030 Agenda goals serves as the basis for expanding not shortening the list of the SE21 targets.

The results of the assessment of the timeliness and relevance of the sustainable development indicators contained in the SE21 strategy and the sustainable development indicators measured by Statistics Estonia (the third analysis task) and the results of the analysis on the indicators of the 2030 Agenda show that it is necessary to thoroughly update the list of the Estonian sustainable development indicators.

The analysis shows that the main problem of the indicators included in the text of the SE21 strategy (67 in total) is the fact that a large part of them are inaccurately formulated within the meaning of the measurement task. There are no realistic measurement options in the case of several descriptions of condition formulated as indicators with regard to the cultural space viability (e.g. the capacity of cultural memory to function as a link between the past experience and the future; the openness of the national culture to new things; enrichment and interpretation capacity in the world’s changing cultural scene, etc.). A total of 20 indicators of SE21 have an important thematic consistency with the 2030 Agenda targets.
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The experts assessed a majority of the sustainable development indicators of Statistics Estonia (69 in total) as relevant (29) or partially relevant (30). In the latter case, the analysis provides specific proposals to specify or expand the indicators. However, the link between a majority of indicators (10) to the conceptual content of the four general goals of sustainable development is weak, and these have been assessed as irrelevant. The reason is that these indicators measure theoretically foreseeable factors arising from the achievement of sustainable development (e.g. productivity, expenses on research and development as the factors of the growth of welfare) and not these goals themselves. Another drawback of the sustainable development indicators system is the fact that it fails to measure the Estonian sustainable development goal areas and their recommended components in a sufficient and balanced manner – the indicators do not fully cover the substantive extent of the corresponding goals. A total of 36 sustainable development indicators have thematic consistency with the 2030 Agenda targets. Thereby, a total of 19 of them have a similar or substantively close measurement task with the corresponding 2030 Agenda indicators.

The indicators used for measuring the 2030 Agenda targets – a total of 241\(^3\) indicators, which is considerably more than the Estonian sustainable development indicators or the SE21 strategy indicators – are divided into three nearly equal groups on the basis of expertise. A total of 75 indicators have been designated as relevant (i.e. also applicable in the Estonian context without major modifications or specifications), 91 partially relevant (i.e. topically important, but require major further development within the framework of the topic, and making the corresponding target measurable in the relevant form for the Estonian context), and 75 irrelevant. Therefore, the transfer and/or adaptation of all relevant (including partially relevant) indicators of the 2030 Agenda to Estonia would refer to the expansion of the system of sustainable development indicators to a great extent.

In order to update the sustainable development strategy, a proposal is made to simplify the strategy text structure and link the sustainable development vision to the policy-making processes in a stronger and more thorough manner by means of mechanisms supporting the implementation of the strategy. The SE21 main text with a simplified structure would include three parts:

- Balanced and comprehensive conceptual approach to Estonia’s sustainable development;
- Goals and targets of Estonia’s sustainable development;
- the sustainable development principles in Estonia.

In terms of the strategy text, this proposal refers to the need to prepare a new text for the strategy, while preserving the general sectoral structure from the text approved in 2005, which divides Estonia’s sustainable development into four goal areas.

The proposal on developing the mechanisms supporting the implementation of the SE21 strategy firstly includes a formally independent comprehensive and single monitoring system of the sustainable development indicators, which complies with the SE21 goals, but remains separate from the main text of the SE21 strategy. Secondly, a proposal is made to develop the functioning system for ex-ante assessments in two directions in order to ensure the implementation of the sustainable development

\(^{3}\) The final proposal of the UN Statistics Committee on the list of sustainable development target indicators contains 241 indicators. Insofar as several indicators are used for measuring two or three 2030 Agenda targets, the number of different agreed indicators is 230 (see http://unstats.un.org/sdgs/indicators/indicators-list/).
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principles to be formulated in the SE21 strategy. First of all, the topical and sectoral extent of the effects should be modified in compliance with the SE21 content, and then it is necessary to direct the focus of sectoral impact assessment to (also) following the general principles of sustainable development – sustainability, sectoral balance and coherence, resilience – and more specific guiding principles (COM, 2005). As the third tool to supplement the SE21 strategy, it is recommended to establish a system of foresight activities involving the topic areas of sustainable development, with its material output being a report on future trends issued on a regular basis. It is important to regularly update the trends in the context of descriptions and conceptualisation. The future trends must be formulated as specifically as possible to ensure that these can be used in ex-ante assessment of policies, if necessary.

A conclusive proposal on the sustainable development indicator groups and indicators is submitted on the basis of the results of analysis tasks and proposals made by the working group experts and in the course of the focus group discussions. The proposal includes a total of 101 indicators, including 24 indicators for measuring the goal of the viability of Estonian cultural space, 32 for measuring the growth of welfare, 20 for measuring coherent society, and 25 for measuring ecological balance.