



Steunpunt tot bestrijding van armoede,
bestaansonzekerheid en sociale uitsluiting

Service de lutte contre la pauvreté,
la précarité et l'exclusion sociale

Combat Poverty, Insecurity and Social
Exclusion Service

Sustainability and poverty



CONTRIBUTION TO POLITICAL DEBATE AND ACTION

S U M M A R Y

BIENNIAL REPORT 2018 - 2019

**COMBAT POVERTY, INSECURITY AND
SOCIAL EXCLUSION SERVICE**

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Introduction



Two urgent questions: sustainability and poverty

Since the second half of 2018, the climate issue has been at the heart of the public debate. As is evident from the major climate demonstrations, the mobilisation of young people, the many opinion pieces published and the various solutions proposed in reports and in the media, etc. At the same time, we have seen demonstrations demanding more purchasing power and social justice.

A few months earlier, the Support Committee of the Combat Poverty, Insecurity and Social Exclusion Service (hereinafter the Combat Poverty Service) had decided to devote the 2018-2019 Biennial Report to the subject of "Sustainability and Poverty".

As on the occasion of the nine previous reports, this latest Biennial Report is the fruit of consultation with people living in poverty, their associations and various other stakeholders. It is one of the means used by the Combat Poverty Service – an independent and inter-federal public institution – in fulfilling its mission to evaluate the effective exercise of human rights in situations of poverty. In accordance with the Cooperation Agreement concerning the continuation of Poverty Reduction Policy that set up the Combat Poverty Service, this consultation process was conducted in the spirit of the General Poverty Report (hereinafter the GPR). Following each meeting very comprehensive reports were drawn up so that participants could check that their contribution had been well understood and to prepare the next meeting with others, if desired. Citations included in the Report without mentioning the source are comments made during these meetings.

The associations within which people living in poverty come together – represented on the Support Committee of the Combat Poverty Service – had requested a report on this subject at a meeting organised by the Service. They pointed out that persons living in poverty were rarely involved in the various discussions, platforms and initiatives on the future of the planet and its inhabitants. The assumption is that people living in poverty are not aware of ecological challenges and are concerned solely with their own survival. Yet despite their difficult circumstances, people living in poverty do want to have a voice in the debate on the future. Precisely because their future is already under pressure today.

"You often hear it said that people living in poverty are not interested in sustainability, that they are each just trying to survive and that is all. Totally untrue! We must demand our place in this debate and make our own contribution to it. Because we know where the present growth model leads as we are experiencing the consequences and suffering as a result. We must make this clearly understood because we are regarded simply as people who contribute nothing and who cost a lot to society."

The other parties represented on the Support Committee also expressed enthusiasm for and interest in the idea of working on the subject within the Service, seeing this as the ideal opportunity to combine two urgent issues facing our society, that is, sustainability and combating poverty, and to confront the one with the other in a consultation process. During the internal discussions the members of the Support Committee already stressed the fact that sustainability extends far beyond questions of the environment and climate. Reference was made to the definition of sustainable development according to the United Nations (Brundlandt Report). That is,

development that aims to "meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to satisfy their own needs." As such, it is a combination of ecological, economic and social needs.

An intensive consultation process

It was clear from the start that the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) would constitute the consultation framework. At the initiative of the United Nations, the SDGs were highlighted as a political instrument for drawing up a strategy based on sustainability, in the framework of Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development. They have the merit of formulating social goals as well as economic and ecological goals and of being strongly tied to human rights. Fundamental rights also lie at the basis of the functioning of the Combat Poverty Service. In the General Poverty Report and the Cooperation Agreement concerning the continuation of Poverty Reduction Policy, poverty is regarded as a violation of human rights.

Like the various SDGs, sustainability was first considered at length during a first consultation meeting with the various associations within which people in living in poverty come together. This meeting enabled them to make links between poverty and the SDGs, to describe the possibilities and the limits that result and to express their thoughts from the perspective of poverty. Other stakeholders were then invited: social and environmental organisations, institutions and administrations, scientists. Each meeting was attended by between 40 and 50 representatives of these various associations, organisations and institutions.

Several subjects and SDGs were discussed in the course of the following six meetings, held between June 2018 and February 2019. We also reviewed and discussed a number of projects and initiatives developed in Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels under the label of sustainability. These exchanges laid the foundations for a rough outline of what would be the structure of the Report and that was presented to the participants in February 2019. During the next five meetings, between April 2019 and September 2019, a number of proposed texts, organised into three distinct chapters, were then discussed: putting sustainability and poverty into perspective; inequalities; and paths to sustainability. At a final meeting held in October 2019 the participants were able to consider the recommendations in greater depth.

During the consultation we also received contributions from children and young people from two associations: *Centrum Kauwenberg* and *Luttés Solidarités Travail*. Elements of these contributions were included in the text of the Report and [all these contributions](#) can be consulted on the Combat Poverty Service website. We extend our warmest thanks to the children and young people in question for having contributed their point of view on sustainability to the consultation process and to this Report.

We would also like to take this opportunity to stress the energy and personal investment that all the participants brought to the consultation process. The meeting reports, the discussion points and the draft texts were subject to intense group preparatory discussions involving a number of associations. We also remember the personal efforts of the participants from the associations. Some left their rural municipalities early in the morning to arrive in Brussels in time for the start of the discussions and to spend the whole day discussing with participants from other associations as well as with persons from various organisations and administrations. For the latter also, it was both a challenge and a commitment to talk with people living in poverty. I quote one such participant: *"I do not go out into the field and feel I am in an ivory tower."*

Two precise moments also made it possible to widen the debate to include other interested parties. On 17 September 2019, in Eupen, the Combat Poverty Service team was able to present the analyses and recommendations resulting from the consultation with the local stakeholders from the German-speaking Community, at the invitation of the minister responsible for the German-speaking Community and the minister's administration. These local stakeholders in turn submitted their own elements to the German-speaking Community and further enriched our field of analysis. On 24 September 2019, on the occasion of the second

SDG Forum, the Combat Poverty Service organised a workshop on the subject of consultation during which about 25 local stakeholders had the opportunity to respond to the analyses and recommendations.

In all, 147 organisations and 247 persons contributed to drawing up this Report.

Analysis and recommendations in three chapters

In chapter one we trace the main lines of the Report. We first define the concept of sustainability as being the prospects for the future that people living in poverty often do not have. Subsequently, while retaining the same perspective, we look at the sustainable development goals. Children and young people also have a right to be heard. We set out, on the basis of the consultation, the way in which sustainability and poverty interlock and explain how to view one in terms of the other. In this respect we make the link between the social inequalities facing people living in poverty on a day-to-day basis, on one hand, and the social, economic and ecological challenges facing us today, on the other. These are two sides of the same coin, both in terms of the causes of these inequalities and challenges and in terms of the fair and sustainable solutions to remedy them.

Chapter two places the emphasis on the inequalities as revealed in the course of the consultation process. For the participants these are not only inequalities but also injustices. In accordance with SDG 10, aimed specifically at reducing inequalities, the message that emerged from the consultation is that the combat for sustainability is also a combat against inequalities. This chapter covers eight subjects: nature, pollution, energy, water, food and sustainable consumption, healthcare, employment and mobility. These points cover the inequalities facing people living in poverty as well as certain developments that (potentially) exacerbate these inequalities. The order in which the subjects are covered in chapter two is arbitrary. Some subjects are developed more than others, a fact which can be explained by the extent to which the subject may have already been covered by the Combat Poverty, Insecurity and Social Exclusion Service.

Chapter three looks at a number of avenues leading to sustainability, indicating the path to follow in conducting a poverty and sustainability policy. The emphasis here is on ensuring that the authorities assume responsibility for achieving effective human rights and sustainable development goals for citizens. In the course of the consultation one fact clearly emerged: sustainability challenges and policy go hand in hand with the combat against poverty.

Chapters two and three both include recommendations. In addition to its analysis role, the Combat Poverty Service is also charged with formulating recommendations for the attention of the various governments, parliaments and advisory bodies.

To leave no one behind

By way of conclusion, a number of the principal points of the Report are formulated. The fact that this is done under the title of *to leave no one behind* is a deliberate choice. This is the fundamental message of Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development. It formulates concisely the evaluation criteria on the basis of which any policy in the field of sustainable development and combating poverty must be evaluated.

Follow-up

The Biennial Report was published a few months after the May 2019 elections and the formation of most of the governments. An ideal moment therefore to contribute to the formulation of policy at all levels of government at the beginning of the legislature. The participants in the consultation insist that the analyses and recommendations set out in the Report must be incorporated in the debate and the political action, in accordance with the commitment given by the various authorities in the Cooperation Agreement concerning the continuation of Poverty Reduction Policy. With this Report, the "Integration in Society" and "Sustainable Development" interministerial conferences, the various governments and parliaments, as well as the competent advisory bodies, have at their disposal a work basis that should permit the development of an ambitious policy for sustainability and poverty with a view to realising human rights and the sustainable development goals.

The Combat Poverty, Insecurity and Social Exclusion team

Chapter I – Sustainability and poverty in perspective

This chapter traces the main lines of the Biennial Report. The social inequalities that people living in poverty confront daily and the social, economic and ecological challenges that we all face today form two sides of the same urgent challenge.

“Sustainability means giving each person a vision of the future and not remaining trapped in the here and now.”

We begin this chapter by looking at the way people living in poverty give meaning to sustainability. For them sustainability means prospects for the future that most of them do not have. Every day they renew their efforts to push on and to give their children a better future. But these efforts often come up against situations of uncertainty that they have to overcome. Many of them are unemployed for example, or if they have a job it is part time, temporary or low paid. Many have health problems and a precarious housing situation. For people living in poverty it is as if neither their present nor future life is sustainable in the sense of being 'certain' or 'stable'. *“The only sustainable thing is the poverty”*. At the same time a better future does not only mean a better life for oneself but for everybody and for the planet. *“What affects the planet affects us too”*. The consultation participants refuted the preconception that *“people living in poverty are not interested in sustainability but are just trying to survive and that is all. Totally untrue!”*

During the consultation the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) served as a framework for reflections on sustainability. Participants saw a lot of connections between the SDGs and poverty. When poverty is described in terms of the violation of fundamental rights - such as education, equality, health, energy, work (as reflected in various SDGs) -

combating poverty cannot remain limited to the first SDG of zero poverty but must also be integrated into all the SDGs. That is the only way to leave no one behind. It was also pointed out that the SDGs propose a "closed model". Many participants criticize the free market system and its consequences, namely social inequalities and climate and environmental disruption. *“Our economy produces waste in nature and in humans”*. The *Centrum Kauwenberg* and *Luttés Solidarités Travail* organisations that work with children and young people are also concerned with the issue of sustainability and presented the results of their reflections and/or proposed actions at a consultation meeting.

“We cannot regard sustainability as a matter for the experts. We can only find sustainable solutions if everybody is involved. What is more, people living in poverty are privileged partners as they are the first to suffer the consequences of climate and environmental change. If they are not involved they will be abandoned once again.”

Climate and environmental change and its unequal impact on vulnerable groups put the connection between social, economic and ecological inequalities into sharp focus; for people living in poverty it is also about injustices.

Today, it is people living in poverty who are the first to suffer the consequences of climate and environmental changes and to a greater degree than others. In Belgium it is the link between inequality and pollution that is most striking. People at the bottom of the social ladder are more exposed to pollution, both inside and outside the home. They are also more vulnerable to the

consequences of this exposure as they are often in poorer health due to their precarious living conditions. In addition, many people living in poverty have reduced recourse to healthcare due to the varied obstacles in their way if they want to go to the doctor or the hospital or to pay for care or medicines.

Yet people living in poverty are proportionally less responsible for global warming. The lower your income the lower your consumption and the smaller your ecological footprint. This austerity is usually out of financial necessity and can be taken to the degree that health and dignity are threatened. When the sparing use of water leads to hygiene problems, then illness and social exclusion are not far away. To really be able to choose for sustainable consumption a redistribution of wealth is essential. *"People must have the means to consume well and to avoid waste."*

People living in poverty often have fewer levers with which to make sustainable choices, a second form of inequality, due to insufficient financial resources or limited room for manoeuvre: poorly insulated housing that is difficult to heat, no access to public transport and therefore having to use an old car ... As a result, it is difficult if not impossible for them to assume their individual responsibility for the environment and climate. Yet changing individual behaviour is strongly emphasised in the public debate as well as in policy. It is only when the structural causes of inequalities are tackled and people are able to realise their rights (to income, housing, education, health, etc.) that everyone will be able to assume his or her responsibilities.

We also see that policy maintains and sometimes even strengthens social and environmental inequalities. Policy-makers have little knowledge of and take little account of the specific situation of people living in poverty and their thrifty lifestyle. There are people who are so frugal with energy and water and who have such a low consumption that they are regarded with suspicion and suspected of social fraud. Also, many policy measures supposed to encourage ecological behaviour and sustainable living take such a form - the granting of subsidies

and tax benefits - that it is the more prosperous citizens who benefit most. Given the investment required these measures are not easily accessible for people living in poverty and principally benefit citizens who have the financial resources to make the initial investment. People living in poverty experience this as a major injustice. *"The rich have rainwater tanks and solar panels, live in a green environment and adapt their home for the needs of an electric car. Not just their quality of life but their well-being increases also. They make savings at every level but then take a plane five times a year to go on holiday. So what about their ecological footprint? And what about people living in poverty? What does the government do for them?"*

At the same time measures to deter polluting or energy devouring behaviour – such as increased diesel prices and the introduction of low emission zones in some towns - are proportionally more punitive for people living in poverty. By prohibiting some polluting actions without offering an affordable alternative the access for people living in poverty to a decent and well heated home, mobility, services, etc. is even more limited. *The measures taken are to the detriment of people living in poverty. Take old cars that are banned from towns, for example. Who drives such cars? It is all very well to demand change but people living in poverty do not have the freedom to adapt."*

During the consultation the question was raised as to why we do not go further with certain sustainable measures, such as home insulation. It is as if this has only now become an urgent (climate) issue when these are in fact measures that from a human rights perspective should have been taken long ago in the interests of people living in poverty.

"The goal that nobody should live in poverty is fundamental and non-negotiable."

At the political level, the SDGs are today the most global instrument in meeting the challenges of sustainable development. They were laid down in a [Resolution](#), Agenda 2030, adopted by the UN General Assembly on 25 September 2015. All the UN member states pledged to achieve these Sustainable Development Goals. Admittedly, the

SDGs were not drawn up in the form of obligations but of goals as they were not enshrined in a binding legal instrument. But they aim to "*realise human rights for all*" and the goals in terms of human rights have been laid down in treaties and conventions of a binding nature. It is this link with human rights that make the SDGs a powerful instrument. It is by making progress in combating poverty that a sustainable future becomes possible for all.

According to the Federal Plan Bureau, Belgium needs to increase its efforts to combat poverty to reach the target set, that is, a 50 % reduction in the proportion of the population at risk of poverty or social exclusion. Present policy will not achieve this. The various stakeholders stress the need for a strong policy to put into practice the sustainable development goals and human rights on which they are based.

Chapter II – The combat for sustainability is a combat against inequalities

This chapter takes a deeper look at the question of social, economic and ecological inequalities as well as the connections between them, the outlines of which we traced in the previous chapter. For the consultation participants these are not just inequalities but also injustices. People living in poverty suffer more quickly and to a greater extent from the consequences of environmental and climate change despite contributing less to the causes. In addition, they are less equipped to protect themselves against these changes and often benefit less from measures taken the framework of environmental and climate policy.

The poorest are today already coming up against the limits that changes in society will impose on us all. These are not only environmental and climatic issues - such as the exhaustion of natural resources or access to nature, energy and water - but also certain developments, such as flexibilisation, privatisation, digitisation and individualisation. In some cases these developments bring progress and opportunities, but at the same time they have negative consequences that are felt in various areas of life, such as consumption, healthcare, employment and mobility.

In this chapter we consider in more depth the seven themes mentioned above. The order in which we discuss them is random even if they are closely inter-related. In previous biennial reports the Combat Poverty Service already looked at energy, water, healthcare and employment. The consultation on the subject of sustainability gave us the opportunity to explore new subjects, namely nature, consumption and mobility. On each occasion the inequalities confronted by people living in poverty are evoked, as well as certain developments that (potentially) accentuate such inequalities. In accordance with the SDG 10 call for

'reduced inequalities', the message that emerged from the consultation is that the combat for sustainability is inherently a combat against inequalities. As ultimately everybody will experience the effects of current changes it is important to find the right solutions for all, in the short and long term. To this end, for each point we formulate a number of recommendations by way of conclusion.

1. Nature and green spaces

During the consultation, members of the associations within which people living in poverty come together stressed the importance of nature and green spaces, both for children and adults: *"When you live in cramped social apartments, with no space and no garden, the proximity of green spaces is essential."* Protecting ecosystems, wild species and the many balances they provide is a major but vital challenge for the years to come, given the degree to which we depend on nature and the many life forms it harbours. Many studies have shown the incredible impact of nature on human health.

Access to nature and green spaces takes different forms but the path is strewn with obstacles for people living in poverty. First of all, people living in poverty often have no garden and in most cases have to count on green spaces present in the public space if they are to benefit from nature. An outing to a park or wood costs time and energy and *"people living in poverty are busy surviving"*. Non-access to these activities can also be due to social barriers and a feeling of being excluded from certain places or certain initiatives. What is more, other simple pleasures associated with nature are often inaccessible for people living in poverty. It was revealed during the consultation that in a lot of

social housing there is a ban on placing flower boxes on facades, on growing vegetables on the balcony, on creating a communal vegetable patch in a section of the lawns or on owning a pet. As to living in the countryside, this is a much more feasible solution for families with a car and the access to goods and service this provides.

In addition, in Belgium as elsewhere, green spaces are increasingly threatened. In Flanders, for example, the artificialisation or paving over of land is continuing *"at the rate of six virgin hectares lost every day"*.

Green spaces are also very unequally distributed in Belgium. Brussels may boast more than 8,000 hectares of green spaces, but 70 % are on the city outskirts and just 10 % in the city centre. Lacking in 'proximity' nature and green spaces, the population has to travel to have access to them, principally from the country's major urban centres. Mobility issues are therefore also at the heart of difficult access to nature for people living in poverty.

The inequalities of access to nature are reinforced by another phenomenon: privatisation of the public

space in general and of green spaces in particular. The consultation participants who live in poverty deplore the way a small number of people have appropriated spaces and their resources: *"How much nature remains accessible? There is barbed wire everywhere"*. For people living in poverty, *"nature in the major towns does not amount to much: a bit of green in the middle of the car exhausts"*. Especially as other privileges, such as enjoying one's own garden or being able to go away on holiday to enjoy nature, are very often beyond their reach.

The consultation revealed that people living in poverty, like the other consultation participants, are aware of and concerned about the destruction of nature. For them the 'right to nature' goes together with 'the rights of nature'. Several discussions spoke of the need to move away from a 'utilitarian vision' of nature and to recognise nature's own rights. We note that the rights of nature are an increasingly topical and frequently discussed subject. A process for *'dialogue and reflection on a life in harmony with nature'* has been initiated at UN level.

The Combat Poverty Service makes the following recommendations:

- Respect international commitments in the field of nature protection so that in the long term everyone can benefit from this nature.
- Limit urban sprawl and preserve non-artificialised land.
- Develop and equip public spaces so that they are open to the public and become places where people can come together to strengthen social cohesion.
- Award greater importance to the role of nature when laying out public spaces by investing in the most deprived neighbourhoods.
- Include systematically the issue of greening in all construction or renovation projects, both for public buildings and social housing. Green the existing (social) housing stock by permitting and supporting initiatives designed to green facades, roofs, balconies and other spaces.
- Support associations that create a social link and enable people living in poverty, whether children, young people or adults, to renew contact with nature.
- Inform citizens of the existence and accessibility of green spaces.
- Ensure that green and public spaces are accessible by public transport.

2. Energy

Energy is essential for heating, cooking, lighting and the use of electric appliances. The subject of energy was evidently raised during the consultation on sustainability given the close link between policy to combat poverty and climate and energy policy. One of the SDGs is also concerned specifically with the right to energy, in terms of access to "affordable and clean energy" (SDG7).

The energy bill has a major impact on household budgets, in particular for those on low incomes. A number of people are unable to pay their energy bill. In Flanders and Wallonia, payment difficulties can result in a budget meter being fitted (end of 2018: 41,042 budget meters active for electricity and 27,686 for gas in Flanders; 70,368 budget meters active for electricity and 31,933 for gas in Wallonia). When there is no more credit left and in cases where the budget meter has a guaranteed minimum supply, the customer is assured of a certain quantity of electricity (10 amperes) but this must be reimbursed at the time of the next top-up. In many cases the budget meter for electricity does not have this guaranteed minimum supply. In 2018 this was the case for 22% of budget meters in Flanders, or 9,265 meters, and for the vast majority of budget meters in Wallonia. Note that for technical reasons a minimum supply is not possible for budget meters for the gas supply. These budget meters without a guaranteed minimum supply are a particularly major concern as if you do not have the money to top them up then you are without electricity and gas. This amounts to a 'self-disconnection'.

Payment problems can also result in households having their power supply cut off. In 2018 there were 1,642 electricity disconnections and 1,504 gas disconnections in Flanders; 7,086 electricity disconnections and 4,199 gas disconnections in Wallonia; and 970 electricity and gas disconnections in Brussels. The consultation also drew attention to homeless people and families who have no access to energy. Their access to energy is linked directly to a vigorous housing policy

that can provide affordable housing in sufficient quantity.

People living in poverty often live in poor quality housing, mostly with lamentable 'energy performances'. There are various ways to remedy this problem of poor quality housing and energy performances - insulation works, energy-saving appliances, photovoltaic panels, heat pumps, etc. – but these are not affordable for low income population groups. The situation is even more difficult for tenants. Landlords often have little enthusiasm for carrying out such works due to a problem of split incentive: the investment must be made by the landlord but all the benefit goes to the tenant through the reduced energy bill. In recent years the various authorities have embarked on actions to support energy savings. But these are often difficult for people living in poverty to access. Grants suppose prefinancing, for example, or sometimes people are unaware of their existence or do not succeed in submitting an application. This same problem of prefinancing applies for tax deductions. In addition, some households do not have sufficient income to benefit from tax-deductible expenses anyway. A few years ago the tax credit instrument was applied at a federal level but was subsequently abolished. In recent years various stakeholders have developed third-party payment and working capital systems. Under such systems a third party intervenes, in the framework of prefinancing for example.

A number of developments in the energy field that have the effect of maintaining or even accentuating existing inequalities were raised during the consultation: privatisation of the energy market (complexity of comparing prices, relative strength of suppliers in the face of vulnerable consumers), digital meters (and the need to keep an eye on the social obligations of the public service, possible wider application of prepaid principle), initiatives such as grouped energy purchases, citizens' energy cooperatives, projects for collective solar panels, etc. (but people living in poverty have little access to these).

In the various human rights initiatives we find no explicit mention of a right to energy independently of a number of other rights, such as the right to decent housing or the right to the protection of a healthy environment, both guaranteed by article 23 of our Constitution. The importance of energy - as a fundamental right – was stressed in particular during these consultations. This also supposes a

guaranteed minimum supply by virtue of the respect for human dignity. We therefore call for this fundamental right to energy to be strengthened and made effective in practice. Given the importance of the energy issue in the environmental debate, we consider it particularly pertinent to look at how access to energy can be guaranteed for all.

The Combat Poverty Service makes the following recommendations:

- Make explicit reference to the right to energy in the Constitution, as an element in the right to decent housing. Support any initiative to strengthen the right to energy, at European and international level.
- Invest massively in affordable quality housing in both the private and social rental sector.
- Establish a solid link between housing policy and policy for rational energy and water consumption with special attention to vulnerable households living in poverty.
- Pool different financial resources (regional, federal, European) for ambitious renovation projects on a large scale, in cooperation with the various stakeholders and in the social economy in particular.
- Imperatively avoid disconnections due to payment difficulties.
- Guarantee a minimum energy supply, including when budget meters are in place.
- Ensure that individual meters are fitted and accessible in all kinds of housing.
- Make energy-saving measures accessible to all, through a global approach with prefinancing, direct inclusion of financial incentives and a tenable payment plan, while taking real savings and available income into account. The local authorities can play a support role in this through a municipal or intercommunal window, in cooperation with the local actors.
- Undertake an in-depth study of the financing of energy-saving measures by a third-party investor, working capital... and support experimental models.
- Establish stricter energy performance measures while avoiding the possible negative impact on people living in poverty (such as the risk of rent increases) through an *ex ante* analysis of the targeted measures.
- Ensure that electricity and gas supplied through the budget meters of distribution network managers come from green sources, without increasing the tariffs. As public actors the distribution network managers can in this way play a model role.
- Strengthen the position of consumers in a vulnerable socio-economic situation in their relations with energy suppliers through solid regulations and support for organisations that inform and accompany vulnerable consumers.
- Provide more support for consumers in a weak socio-economic position in the search for information on energy supply, through local housing windows, regional and federal information services, a Belgian web portal for all energy and water sources in the three regions. Be attentive to problems of (digital) illiteracy and invest continuously in a personalised approach.

- Examine the various components of the energy bill and how they should be financed. Look at whether it is possible to finance certain components (energy-saving grants, for example) out of general resources (taxation) rather than by the customers as a whole.
- Reduce VAT on energy bills to 6% as a basic commodity.
- Increase recourse to financial assistance measures (social tariffs for gas and electricity, Fuel Oil Social Fund, Gas and Electricity Fund, minimum gas supply) through clear information, proactive initiatives and an analysis of the conditions and procedures for granting assistance.
- When introducing a digital (budget) meter and prepaid systems, make an *ex ante* and *ex post* evaluation of possible impact on situations of poverty. This to at least maintain the protection based on public service obligations.
- Support the participation of persons living in poverty in collective initiatives (citizens' initiatives, cooperatives, etc.).

3. Water

Water is vital. It is impossible to survive without drinking water but it is also necessary for our sanitation needs and to prepare meals. Water and sanitation are explicitly included in Agenda 2030: "Ensure availability of water and sanitation for all" is the stated SDG 6. Although this sustainable development goal seems to be addressed principally to the population of the South it is also pertinent in the European and Belgian context.

Decisions to disconnect a water supply following payment difficulties are made within our three regions: 682 disconnections in Flanders (disconnection following the opinion of the local advisory committee), 339 in Wallonia and 1,014 in the Brussels-Capital Region (2018 figures). The Walloon authorities – and Flemish authorities from 1 January 2020 – have also decided to install flow restrictors in case of payment difficulties. These flow restrictors limit the supply and use of water to a certain flow rate that is equivalent to 50 litres an hour in the two regions. The argument put forward by the authorities to justify the installation of flow restrictors is that it avoids having to cut off the water supply and in limiting consumption also limits the water bill. In the Walloon Region and Flanders their introduction met with considerable criticism. During the consultation the emphasis was placed on the fact that a flow restrictor in fact amounts to

cutting off the water supply. The flow restrictor was seen as particularly problematic in terms of the right to water and to sanitation. Payment problems must be managed through support and debt mediation and not with a flow restrictor.

As to saving water, the options for people living in poverty are often limited; these options are unequally distributed. The installation of a rainwater tank can permit major savings. Research carried out by the *Centrum voor Sociaal Beleid* (Social Policy Centre) and the *CEBUD* (Centre for Budget Advice and Budget Research) showed that households with rainwater tanks reduced their water bill by 27 % or 60 euros a year for a person living alone and by 45 % or 216 euros a year for a couple with three children. However, for a low income household it is almost impossible to finance a rainwater collection system. While for tenants it is highly unlikely that a private landlord or social housing company would make such an investment. Other water-saving measures and domestic appliances (washing machines) have a clear impact on the water bill, reducing the cost of water consumption by 44 % or 96 euros a year for a person living alone and by 77 % or 372 euros for a couple with three children. These electric appliances with low water consumption are the most expensive to buy and thus beyond the budget of low income persons. Another problem is the presence of collective meters (a single meter for several flats) that does not allow you to monitor

personal consumption. These collective water meters are mainly found within the Brussels-Capital Region and in towns in Wallonia and Flanders.

In recent years water bills have increased in Belgium's regions, giving rise to payment problems. In Flanders, the total water bill for an average household (2.33 persons, 84m³/year) increased from 201 euros a year in 2005 to 408 euros a year in 2017 (103 % increase). During the same period, the price of water increased in Wallonia from 289 euros a year to 529 euros for a consumption of 100m³ (83 %) and in Brussels from 161 euros to 252 euros for an average consumption of 70m³ (56 %). By way of comparison, the increase in the health index – the reference for changes in wages and social benefits – was just 24 % during the same period. The water bill for households on the lowest incomes has a relatively greater impact on their overall budget. The Flemish Region introduced a social tariff during the previous parliament as a

result of which a number of groups benefit from an 80 % reduction in their water bill that is granted automatically. Research shows that this social correction also succeeds in reducing considerably the risk of unaffordability within the target group. In the Walloon Region and Brussels-Capital Region there is a Social Fund that the CPAS (social assistance centre) can draw on to assist in the payment of water bills as well as to undertake minor technical repairs.

At local and regional level there are initiatives designed to strengthen the right to water and to make it a reality in the field. At international level also, measures have been taken for the right to water and to keep water supply in the public sector. In several countries the water sector is already being privatised. Belgium can play an international support and motor role, especially in terms of exercising surveillance over a water supply that remains in the public sector.

The Combat Poverty Service makes the following recommendations:

- Include the right to water and sanitation in the Constitution.
- Support all European and international initiatives to strengthen the right to water, universal access to water and sanitation by providing drinking water fountains and sanitary facilities (accessible 24h/24 in towns and villages).
- Encourage the restaurant industry to respect these rights by making tap water and toilets available free of charge.
- Guarantee a minimum water supply that makes it possible to live in dignity while taking household composition into account.
- Assess in terms of human dignity the practice in the Walloon Region and Flemish Region of introducing and using flow restrictors by involving people living in poverty, their associations and the various actors. Invest as a priority in supporting and accompanying the households concerned.
- Foresee a social tariff for water, granted progressively depending on income and combined with an automatic application. It is important for this automatic application of the social tariff to operate through existing statuses.
- Foresee a social fund for water making it possible to intervene – on a case-by-case basis – in the event of payment difficulties and for minor technical repairs.

- Continue to develop support measures for installing a rainwater tank and water-saving household appliances, including for tenants in the private and social sectors. Stimulate and oblige social housing companies to invest in a sustainable water use (rainwater collection and recuperation).
- Foresee the possibility of a water audit with information made widely available to the target group and social workers to ensure alignment with the energy audit.
- Make it obligatory to install individual meters so that residents can see and monitor their water consumption.
- Draw the attention of social organisations to the existence of under-consumption and its negative consequences for health.
- Use consumption data primarily to identify problems (such as water leaks) and thereby guard against payment problems.
- Develop a social policy and clear legislation on the subject of water leaks.
- Continue to repeat campaigns on tap water quality with specific efforts to reach people living in poverty (with clear and accessible information).
- Provide a free analysis of water quality.
- Prohibit as much as possible the use of plastic in the industry and distribution system so as to prevent water pollution, among other things.

4. Nutrition and sustainable consumption

Whether sustainable or otherwise, access to sufficient food of quality is a real difficulty for people living in poverty.

First of all, for the more than 300,000 people who benefitted from food aid in Belgium in 2018 freedom to choose one's diet is extremely reduced. A freedom that is reduced considerably more again when it comes to sustainable food: access to local and organic products, for example, depends even more on the resources of each individual, such as a decent income, mobility facilities, access to the Internet and participation in social life.

To reduce inequalities in accessing sustainable food we are seeing the increasing development of mutual aid networks and many initiatives and actions, especially at local level. However, in many cases these are not accessible for people living in poverty who may even be excluded from them. For example, people living in social housing are often not allowed to touch the lawns and other green spaces made available to them and face problems if

they want to grow vegetables and fruit on their balconies. Also, certain initiatives, such as collective vegetable gardens, are not easily accessible for the poorest and may even be discouraged in their case due to suspicions of social fraud: *"We are now afraid to do anything for fear of being accused of working on the black."*

What is more, people living in poverty have a clearly reduced freedom to turn to sustainable or more energy efficient products whether in choosing and buying textiles, household products or domestic appliances. A purchasing behaviour that is often looked down on by the rest of the population. People living in poverty have to turn to the least expensive products. Products that, whether food, clothing or even toys, are often the most polluted and the most polluting.

During the consultation, the participants called particular attention to the inequalities and developments present in combating waste as well as the waste recovery and management systems.

A growing number of initiatives and even legal obligations are designed to combine the combat against waste with the combat against poverty. The sustainability goals are often evoked to justify, for

example, measures to recuperate unsold food. The consultation participants condemned what is in reality the 'non-sustainable' character of this system: recuperating unsold food cannot be considered as a structural measure in the combat against poverty.

Also, the management, sorting and conservation of waste can prove particularly complicated for people living in poverty *"who live in cramped accommodation and who have difficulty conserving their household waste until the refuse collection next comes round"*.

Another development is that networks for recuperating unsold, discarded or second-hand items are increasingly structured and known to the population than before, this contributing to a positive strengthening of the circular and sharing economy. At the same time, initiatives launched

initially by the least privileged sometimes become less accessible to them. One example is the second-hand shops where prices have increased in recent years due to their growing popularity among all sections of the population. Paradoxically, these developments sometimes make these networks less accessible to people living in poverty if they do not want to go to an association, if they do not have a smartphone or benefit from a less dense social fabric.

To guarantee that everybody can participate in the transition to a more sustainable nutrition and consumption, it is essential to maintain a good social cohesion and support for local mutual aid networks in the field. More structural political measures also need to be put into place to guarantee a sufficient income for all to live in dignity.

The Combat Poverty Services makes the following recommendations:

- Ensure the right to quality food and the freedom to choose a sustainable consumption through structural measures to combat poverty, in particular by guaranteeing a decent income for all.
- Consider food aid as an emergency short-term solution and not as a structural solution.
- Subsidise sustainable food and make it accessible to people living in poverty.
- Promote a healthy and sustainable diet in school while being careful not to stigmatise.
- Increase awareness among the sustainable food sector stakeholders of the need to provide access to sustainable food for all (price, mobility).
- Authorise participation in citizens/collective projects, such as collective vegetable gardens, for people on benefits.
- Authorise and promote the creation of sustainable citizens' initiatives in social housing, such as vegetable gardens and the greening of balconies.

5. Healthcare

The consultation participants see a sustainable future as closely linked to good health, of people and of the planet. However, due to their difficult socio-economic circumstances (in terms of housing, work, education, environment, etc.), people living in poverty are at greater risk of poor health than people with a higher standard of living. This in turn makes them more vulnerable to climate and environmental changes that have a greater impact on their health and well-being. Then there is the fact that they are more exposed to such changes. They also do not have equal access to healthcare, whether preventive or curative. By delaying or abandoning care, the continuity of their care pathway is jeopardized with even bigger health problems as the result.

"The poor can never have sustainability in healthcare. Either they have recourse to emergency care or they go through the CPAS to request a health card to have access to a doctor. For the poorest, access to care depends on services, so they do not have access like other citizens."

In theory, Belgium has no problem with access to healthcare. Compulsory health insurance is now virtually universal and covers 99% of the population. However, the consultation showed that cost is and remains one of the biggest obstacles to healthcare access for people living in poverty. There are regulations such as the (social) third-party payer and Increased Participation to remove these financial obstacles but not everyone can exercise their right to this intervention. In addition, compulsory health insurance is insufficient to cover the cost of medicines, dental care, mental health care and other services. As a result, many people delay care or run up healthcare debts. Then there are people who fall outside the mainstream healthcare system as they have not kept up with the

compulsory insurance payments or have no access to it because they do not have legal residency.

Access to care providers and hospitals also poses problems for people living in poverty. They do not always find a doctor who applies the contractual fixed fees in the neighbourhood or one who can be reached easily by public transport; there are waiting lists for an appointment with a specialist; they must first show that they can pay the hospital bill before receiving care; care providers have insufficient knowledge of the circumstances of vulnerable patients which can lead to the wrong approach or treatment, etc. *"My debt mediator cancelled my hospitalisation insurance at the start of my collective debt settlement. He now tells me that there is not enough money for me to have an operation so I have also cancelled my check-up consultations at the hospital."*

Thanks to scientific and technological progress the medical world and healthcare are fast evolving. At the same time, there is great concern in the field about the accessibility and the cost of care due to a number of trends. Privatisation, for example, is in danger of making access to healthcare dependent on whether or not people have hospitalisation insurance. Digital technology – doctors' appointments exclusively online, self-managed medical records, electronic communication between sickness funds and their members, etc. threatens to exclude people. *"Digitalisation is constantly gaining ground, for healthcare too. What about people who don't have a computer?"* Reorganization of the healthcare sector seems to be leading to a de-institutionalisation that ignores the fact that not everybody is able to travel easily, has a fixed and solid social network enabling them to bounce back or lives in conditions conducive to recovering from an illness. In terms of sustainability the guarantee of continuity for a health route is essential.

The Combat Poverty Service makes the following recommendations:

- Permit everyone to live a healthy life in a healthy environment by placing the emphasis – in the framework of the coordinated combat against social and health inequalities (*health in all policies*) – on quality care that is direct and accessible and best adapted to the patient so as to guarantee care continuity.
- Apply correctly the existing third-party payment system, extend it as quickly as possible to all a GP's' patients and expand it to include all first and second line healthcare providers.
- Aspire to achieving the highest possible take-up of the Increased Intervention.
- Put into place a policy that is socially fair in terms of medicines. Healthcare providers should be encouraged to only prescribe medicines when necessary. They should also be obliged to propose a generic variant of a medicine that is of equal quality. There should be international and European regulations compelling pharmaceutical companies to invest their profits in accessible healthcare that is affordable to all.
- Sufficiently expand the availability of medical centres, ensuring a good geographical distribution in the town and countryside.
- Increase cooperation between the CPAS (social assistance centres), the mutual insurance companies and 0.5 line (intermediate care line) medical services, so as to regularise the position of members regarding compulsory health insurance.
- Extend compulsory health insurance cover to include medicines that are today still regarded as comfort medicines, psychotherapy, dental care, hearing aids, spectacles, transport for sick people, etc.
- Facilitate access to emergency medical care and generalise the existing good practices of the CPAS, organisations in the field, mutual insurance companies, etc.
- Inform patients continuously, clearly and in time so that they understand the real cost of medical care. When people encounter payment difficulties in the course of their medical journey, adapted follow-up by the care provider, in cooperation with the CPAS and social services, is appropriate to avoid debts.
- During the continuous training of care providers place greater emphasis on the complexity of poverty situations (physical, psychosocial and emotional dimension) and social inequalities as they impact on health.
- Invest more in medical personnel, first and second line, so that there are enough qualified care providers able to devote the necessary time to the preventive and curative care of patients.
- Support (local) cooperation between the various care providers, professionals active in related sectors, accompaniers and emergency staff, with the emphasis on (the involvement of) the patient. Additional efforts are needed when the first line care needs to be supplemented with second line care or when out-patient care needs to be accompanied by residential care.
- Invest more in prevention and promoting good health by developing projects and instruments beneficial to health in cooperation with people living in poverty
- Evaluate the impact of reforms in the healthcare sector (first line and hospital) on people living in poverty, on their health and on their access to care (*ex ante* and *ex post* evaluation).
- Devote the time and resources saved by digitisation to personal contact, care and support for vulnerable groups.

- Take financial decisions on the basis of social justice and equality in the field of health rather than the reverse. Invest in compulsory health insurance as a key element in our social security so that private hospitalisation insurance becomes superfluous. Also invest in strict rules governing contractual fixed fees and fee supplements.

6. Employment

"Without work, it is difficult to take up your place in society." A person's social – and financial – status depends a great deal on his or her job. For many people living in poverty work is often precarious and does not allow them to project themselves sustainably into the future.

Poverty is generally associated with not having a job. As such, these people also have to confront prejudices such as the tendency to label an unemployed person as lazy and not looking for work. For the consultation participants, the deconstruction of these stereotypes that are structurally linked to people living in poverty is essential if we are to launch a sustainable combat against poverty.

The unequal access to employment for people living in poverty is due to a number of reasons: In general, a lower level of training, education out of step with the world of work, the shortage of jobs for people with low skills, discrimination, mobility and finally the material conditions people living in poverty often find themselves in. For this latter reason, the increasingly degressive unemployment benefits and calls to move further in this direction is causing concern among the consultation participants and researchers.

Having a job is not always enough to escape poverty. To envisage a future, the job must be a 'decent' one. Yet people living in poverty often have access to 'second class' jobs. Many people living in poverty have to make do with extended or successive temporary jobs and the insecurity that results. This situation is in total contradiction to sustainability as it offers no prospects for the future. Part-time work can be a useful springboard to a better job but provided it represents a genuine choice on the part of the worker. Women are over-

represented, for example. In Belgium, 45 % or almost half of all female employees work part time compared with 9.5 % among male workers.

The world of work tends to demand that workers be more flexible and comfortable in a more digitized and automated environment. These are developments that arouse fears among the consultation participants that people living in poverty, whose opportunities are already minimal on the current job market, could find it even more difficult to find a job in the future. As to job creations in new sectors such as Deliveroo and Uber, studies show that people living in poverty do not gain access to jobs of this kind and that those who do fail to acquire adequate social rights in terms of social security.

At a time when the search for profit is being called into question as a guiding principle, voices are being raised for society to be organised differently, with the needs of the community as point of departure. In France, we have seen the emergence of the Zero Long-Term Unemployed Territories, an initiative of the *Mouvement ATD Quart-Monde* (ATD Fourth World) France. Their transposition to Belgium warrants consideration, even if there is consensus among the consultation participants that people must retain freedom of choice, contrary to the community service schemes envisaged by politicians for the unemployed or those on minimum income benefits (RIS).

In the framework of discussions around SDG 8 ('Decent work and economic growth'), the participants looked at a different form of growth: a more sustainable growth that would place technology and the economy in the service of the environment and the social. The social economy, in its approach that is not necessarily accompanied by a search for profit, provides a response in this respect, believe the participants. What benefits

people living in poverty benefits everyone. With this in view, the principles of the social economy could be applied perfectly well to the regular economy, to guarantee sustainable employment that has a meaning for everyone. The creation of quality jobs in the framework of sustainable

activities - in the social economy as well as in the regular economy – could make it possible to reconcile these environmental, social and economic considerations.

The Combat Poverty Service makes the following recommendations:

- Give real priority to the creation of sustainable jobs of quality in the social economy, as well as in the new economies (circular, landscape management, new energies, recycling), and provide the necessary training.
- Apply social clauses in public works contracts so as to reserve a part of the work for the social economy.
- Study the transposition of the 'Zero Long-Term Unemployed Territories' to Belgium, while retaining the project's initial philosophy, involving all the actors, and seeking comprehensiveness while maintaining the voluntary nature of this approach. Study the benefits to society and to the individuals concerned.
- Invest in equal opportunities in education for children living in poverty so as to increase their chances of access to a quality job and prospects for the future.
- Train young people and adults in (digital) literacy and the new technologies, in particular by also granting them access to affordable equipment and software.
- Develop and generalise existing practices in workplace support and employment and well-being pathways. Envisage their application in different regions and communities.
- Conduct high quality scientific research, on a quantitatively sufficient basis, into the professional pathways of people living in poverty.
- Combat all forms of discrimination in access to employment.
- Invest in a crèche system accessible for children aged 0 to 3 from vulnerable households, with the aim of facilitating the search for employment.
- Keep better check on the application of the regulations on time limits on temporary work so as to ensure that workers have effective access to a permanent employment contract when they are entitled to one.
- Enable unemployed who find a job to continue to enjoy certain advantages available to them by virtue of their unemployed status during a certain period.
- Develop a status that enables workers in the 'new' jobs to acquire correct social security rights.
- Assess the system of unemployment benefits that decrease over time in terms of vulnerability and effective labour market access. Then adapt the system on the basis of this evaluation. First work on improving access to decent jobs

7. Mobility

Mobility was an underlying subject that ran throughout the consultation and one that is of growing importance in the everyday life of Belgians. It is in fact an essential link in the exercise of fundamental rights as well as in the process of transformation to a sustainable society. For people living in poverty, mobility problems take many and serious forms and are a genuine handicap when exercising many fundamental rights, such as education, family life, work, housing, healthcare and culture.

These difficulties of access result in part from the inequalities inherent in town and country planning. People living in poverty are concentrated in urban centres. They do not always have the means to move home and to leave their social housing to be closer to the commodities of everyday life, their work or their families. Mobility inequalities are also present in regard to transport: 19 % of the Belgian population, thus around two million people, face 'poverty linked to transport'. These inequalities are present in regard to the different means of transport.

Firstly, many households living in poverty do not own a car, out of financial necessity rather than choice, at a time when the car continues to be the means of access to employment, rights and participation in family and social life. At the same time, people living in poverty are more exposed to the nuisance of cars and the pollution they cause, such as poor air quality. During the consultation debates a number of avenues were explored for reducing the omnipresence of the car. In all cases, such measures would have a disproportionate impact on people living in poverty and need to be accompanied by measures to strengthen solutions for transport accessible to all.

For persons living in poverty, public transport is the principal means of transport available, if not the only one. Provided it exists. Here too, there are

many difficulties due to the poor geographical distribution of the supply that poorly serves the outskirts of towns and rural areas, as well as the reduced or absent service outside of peak hours. It is therefore essential to develop public transport availability within an efficient and sufficient network.

As to the bicycle, this is a useful means of transport, beneficial to health and relatively cheap. On the other hand, it does only permit relatively short journeys and has certain safety risks due to the inappropriate planning and road layout. People living in poverty again face specific problems such as a generally poorer state of health and the inability to store and secure a bicycle in their social housing.

Finally, in recent years new means of transport have emerged and with them new ways of getting around. These include the appearance of electric bicycles or scooters in towns, the many smartphone applications to encourage car sharing, alternative means of transport, or multi-modal travel. Some of these developments depend on the use of new technologies, including smartphones, and are aimed principally at people with a dense social network and the ability to communicate easily. In general, it is becoming increasingly difficult to travel if you do not have a bank card or Internet access and this penalizes people living in poverty. In reality, we are currently witnessing a shift from the public to the private when it comes to responsibility for ensuring mobility. Increasingly, each individual is expected to be mobile through private means, possibly in combination with public transport. This shift from public infrastructure to private resources, which is coupled with the digitisation of services, increases inequalities and is causing concern among the consultation participants who fear that, yet again, the poorest will be left behind. The development of these alternatives to the car is positive progress but only if they become genuinely attractive and accessible to the population as a whole

The Combat Poverty Service makes the following recommendations:

- Approach town and country planning from the perspective of sustainable mobility.
- Maintain and strengthen proximity services.
- Revitalise villages, and make an *ex ante* evaluation of initiatives on the basis of situations of poverty.
- Favour measures aimed to reduce the use of the car without creating more inequalities.
- Create 'quiet neighbourhoods' protected from traffic.
- Review car-salary taxation.
- Strengthen public transport supply.
- Coordinate the supply and fares of the various transport companies.
- As much as possible, make social benefits for public transport automatic.
- Generalise the possibility of buying a monthly rather than annual season ticket at a reduced rate for public transport.
- Inform public transport customers correctly by also circulating printed information and maintaining, even increasing, service at the ticket window.
- Retain the ability to buy transport tickets in cash.
- Improve the quality and security of the cycling infrastructure.
- Support people living in poverty in the purchase and use of bicycles. Also teach cycling at school and within organisations.
- Develop facilities for storing bicycles in social housing, especially in apartments.
- Create a favourable policy and regulations for car sharing systems and other means of transport.
- Create a social tariff within car, bicycle or scooter sharing companies so as to make them accessible to all.

Chapter III – Paths to sustainability



In previous chapters we made the link between social, economic and ecological challenges and examined them more closely at work in various areas of life. The social dimension of sustainability clearly merits particular attention. This not only to avoid the most vulnerable sections of the population being more seriously affected by the consequences of present changes but also so that we can all assume our responsibility for a more sustainable future. Due to their (financially) vulnerable situation, people living in poverty often lack both the freedom and the levers with which to make (more) sustainable choices, whether in terms of diet, mobility or heating. As they also suffer the very real effects of the close interconnection of various areas of life, they suffer more from the negative effects of certain political measures.

This chapter looks at the different roads to sustainability, indicating the path to follow for a fair sustainability policy and a sustainable poverty policy. Starting with the responsibility of the public authorities to achieve human rights and the sustainable development goals for all their citizens, we will discuss the need to effectively grant these rights, expand on a number of elements of good governance and look at the conditions that must be met for sustainable initiatives that are accessible to all. Subsequently, we will explore a number of avenues to finance a fair sustainability policy. Under this latter point the emphasis will be placed on dialogue and participation, two essential elements in the various phases of political action. For each point an important place will be given to recommendations addressed to the different governments, parliaments and advisory bodies.

1. The state's responsibility for sustainability

The many issues involved in the field of sustainability raise the question of who bears responsibility for them. At the political level, the Resolution 'Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development' adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 25 September 2015 set the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for the year 2030. Here, it is the Belgian State, thus the federal state and the federated entities, which committed to achieving these goals.

The SDGs were drawn up with the aim of providing a reference framework not only for states but also for companies, communities and individuals. They were drawn up in the form of goals and not obligations as they are not enshrined in a legally binding instrument. On the other hand, the SDGs are fundamentally oriented towards realising the fundamental rights enshrined in international or European texts. Rights that are indeed laid down in binding pacts and conventions, such as the [European Convention on Human Rights](#), the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) and the [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#). Although the state is not legally bound to meet the goals set by the United Nations resolution on SDGs, it is bound to respect international and European commitments on human rights. As a result, the necessary political will and measures to build a sustainable world do in practice confront the states with their obligations to realise human rights.

During the consultation the demands by the various participants concerning the SDGs corresponded to the positive and negative obligations incumbent on the state in the field of human rights. On one hand, participants living in poverty demand that the state should allow people living in poverty 'to be sustainable' by, in particular, allowing them to put into place the solidarity strategies and networks that are accessible to them. The negative obligations also include the fact of the state not interfering in an unjustified manner in the freedom of people living in poverty to do voluntary work and not interfering in their private life. On the other hand, the participants expect the state to fulfil its positive obligations in respect to fundamental rights, in particular by ensuring a decent income for all, strong public services, social protection that benefits everyone, etc.

The role of the state is all the more important for people living in poverty as their circumstances jeopardize their fundamental rights and, as a result, limits their opportunities to make sustainable choices and to fully exercise their individual responsibility, whether in the field of energy, transport or diet. Thus, the better the state meets its obligations, the more people living in poverty

can contribute at the individual level to a more sustainable society. In this sense, the consultation participants believe that it is important for the state not to delegate its responsibilities to the private sector. Indeed, according to the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, *"Overreliance on the private sector could lead to a climate apartheid scenario whereby the rich would pay to escape overheating, hunger and conflict while the rest of the world would suffer from them."*

Finally, to put into place public policies for sustainability, the state cannot achieve one SDG in isolation, thus without taking into account the other objectives. The improvement or deterioration of one SDG inevitably has an effect on other SDGs. This interdependency is much greater and present among people living in poverty: having access to energy at an affordable price has a direct impact on health, which is not necessarily the case for other sections of the population. When drawing up public policy, it is therefore essential for the state to take this interdependency into account and to pay particular attention to people living in poverty if it is to respect the motto of the SDGs 'to leave no one behind'.

The Combat Poverty Service makes the following recommendations:

- Use human rights as a basis for policy so as to respect the Belgian Constitution and international commitments.
- Make best possible use of existing processes, reports and evaluations and implement their recommendations in the field of human rights.
- Respect the commitments given in the framework of the SDGs, namely *"work tirelessly for the full implementation of this Agenda by 2030"*.
- Take into account the interdependency of the SDGs when drawing up and evaluating (*ex ante* and *ex post*) public policies.
- Maintain and strengthen basic services that are accessible to all and also ensure that information on them is accessible.

2. A policy aimed at effective rights

Once the policy measures for sustainability have been drawn up, it remains for them to be effectively applied and to achieve their goals. Does everybody, the poorest included, stand to benefit from the policies pursued? This question is posed in the framework of a wider problem, namely: the effectiveness of rights and access to rights for people living in poverty. The consultation participants often use the image of an *"obstacle course that people have to complete to assert their rights."*

When drawing up public policies for sustainability there is a need to respond to the needs of people living in poverty in both the short and the long term. Careful consideration must be given to policy implementation, for example by granting financial incentives to certain target publics or by ensuring the communication addressed to them is appropriate. It is also necessary to foresee an evaluation of the effect of policy on persons living in poverty, both before (*ex ante*) and after (*ex post*) application. The authorities must be careful to avoid their policies having a negative effect on persons living in poverty, for example by providing compensatory, transitional or support measures. It is also for this reason that introducing a low emissions zone in Brussels was validated by the [Constitutional Court on 28 February 2019](#).

"A right, you have to ask for it. On paper, the procedures look simple. But without mutual assistance, without human solidarity, somebody who has difficulty expressing themselves is unable to assert a right as fundamental as the right to health." Why do people living in poverty or vulnerable people not succeed in exercising their rights? The non-effectiveness of rights (often designated by the term 'non-take-up') is a reality on a much greater scale than generally imagined and that affects in particular people living in poverty.

The first major cause of the non-take-up of rights lies in the fact that a large number of people living in poverty are unaware of these rights or can no

longer face trying to assert them. Also highlighted is the lack of information from the authorities or lack of knowledge on the part of citizens, as well as the complexity of the laws and procedures. Consultation participants call for caution in regard to the idea that access to justice is primarily a question of education and information. In particular, the political authorities and services must show proof of proactive dynamism in reaching out to those with rights, informing them and helping them have access to them. But to be proactive they need sufficient means. Finally, certain consultation participants say they are discouraged by the fact that the state is not always held responsible when it fails to honour its own obligations.

When a right is not granted by the responsible administration or organisation, or when a right is violated, all citizens have the right to have recourse to the courts to obtain or request redress or compensation. Access to justice is therefore a fundamental instrument in access to rights. On the basis of the consultation and the Service's earlier activities, we can define five lines of action.

First of all, there is a need to provide the citizen with support. The fact of having easy access to information and legal aid is essential in combating the non-take-up of rights. The first line system of legal aid is a good example of this, whether given by lawyers or by associations. A second line of action lies in improving the financial accessibility to justice for people living in poverty. Some second line legal aid reforms as well as increases in legal costs are seriously jeopardising access to justice for those who most need it. Thirdly, administrative, judicial and organisational decisions must indicate in clear language the possibilities for appeal and reasons for the contested decision. A fourth line of action lies in promoting alternative methods of conflict resolution, such as conciliation and mediation. Finally, action in defence of collective interests is a new instrument that opens up many possibilities for the associations. Certain causes or failings by the state require a collective judicial action as citizens living in poverty do not always have the will or the resources to defend themselves.

The Combat Poverty Service makes the following recommendations:

- When drawing up and implementing policy measures, make an *ex ante* and *ex post* analysis of the effects on people and households living in poverty.
- On the basis of the evaluation as described above, foresee transitory, compensatory or corrective measures and sufficient effective alternatives that are accessible and financially affordable.
- Conduct a policy aimed at rendering effective the exercise of rights by establishing at each level of competence a plan for combating non-take-up of rights (e.g.: proactive initiatives, simplification of procedures, automatization of rights, etc.).
- Stimulate and support organisations and services in their reflection on non-take-up of rights in their fields.
- Continue to study the causes of non-take-up of rights.
- Give the courts the means to exercise their role as effective guarantor of rights.
- Support (financially) all the actors who offer first line legal aid services and involve them in organising these services through legal aid committees.
- Improve financial access to justice for people living in poverty: evaluate the application of the new legislation to legal protection insurance, reduce the financial thresholds (registration fees, VAT on lawyers' fees, etc.), evaluate the system of second line legal aid and its accessibility (financial access thresholds, administrative charges incumbent on lawyers and plaintiffs, creation of lawyers' practices specialising in legal aid, etc.).
- Simplify the procedures: reintroduce the irrefragable presumption of lack of resources when obtaining second line legal aid and render automatic free legal aid when second line legal aid is granted.
- Train and increase awareness among the judicial actors to guarantee greater accessibility and comprehension (clear language) for all citizens.
- Also support alternative means of conflict resolution (conciliation, mediation) while paying attention to any relationships of strength that are negative for people living in poverty.

3. Good governance in the long term

During the consultation the importance of the way the government assumes its responsibility in the area of sustainability was singled out for explicit mention. The term "good governance" is often used in the debate on the qualities of government, in the sense of a good management of public affairs over the long term. Agenda 2030 also awards importance to this aspect: SDG 17 ("Partnerships to

achieve targets") calls on various governments to strengthen "*policy coherence for sustainable development*". To do so, cooperation, evaluation and the effectiveness of rights are important.

Poverty is apparent in different fields. The links between them - and the need to work beyond the borders of fields and competences - have been stressed on more than one occasion in recent years. The Cooperation Agreement concerning the continuation of Poverty Reduction Policy - drawn up 20 years ago following an explicit request for a coordinated policy in the General Poverty Report –

includes the commitment by the Federal State, the communities and the regions to coordinate their policy. The Cooperation Agreement created the Combat Poverty Service that, in the framework of its interfederal functioning, can make recommendations regarding the different levels of competence. This Biennial Report on Sustainable Development and Poverty is just one example. Furthermore, the Cooperation Agreement also foresees the holding of an Interministerial Conference on Integration into Society to guarantee consultation between the different governments. However, the undertaking to meet at least twice a year has not been met in recent years as during the previous parliament this conference failed to meet on even a single occasion. The latest report from the Federal Plan Office recommends, in regard to Belgium's results on the SDGs, strong interfederal cooperation for sustainable development, but here too one must conclude that the interfederal cooperation has been at a virtual standstill since the end of 2011.

On several occasions this Report indicates how policy measures - including those on sustainability - can have an impact on people living in poverty. An *ex ante*¹ analysis of this impact is therefore important when drawing up new measures. Governments have developed and introduced *ex ante* tools of analysis at different levels of authority. On the basis of exchanges within an interfederal working group, the Combat Poverty Service has formulated a number of points deserving of attention when strengthening the instrument. A number of concerns relating to this *ex ante* analysis are closely linked to recommendations for a sustainability policy, in particular: a human rights approach to poverty, the integration of a transverse and interfederal perspective based on a diversity of

knowledge, the importance of the public and political debate, etc. The *ex post* evaluation of policy is just as important as the *ex ante* evaluation. Yet the systematic evaluation of policies remains much too limited. The participation of people living in policy and their associations, as well as other stakeholders, is essential when drawing up and evaluating policies. In this context, the consultation participants would like to see attention focus in particular on the recommendations and opinions of existing advisors, structures and organisations.

The importance of the problem of non-take-up of rights was already stressed under the previous point. One possible way of combatting this non-take-up is the automatic granting of rights with attention paid to the different stages: automatic granting of rights, proactive approach to potential beneficiaries, automatic updating of the situation of beneficiaries and simplification of administrative procedures. We want to stress the need to simplify the legislation as complex legislation clearly makes the automatic granting of rights more difficult.

The discussion during the consultation on the subject of good governance made it possible to establish an additional link with the question of the effectiveness of rights. One participant attached to an administration said that when it comes to environmental policy the work is often done on the basis of averages. In reality, policy should consider the most vulnerable (children, the elderly, people living in policy, etc.) as the standard when testing its effectiveness. When a policy is beneficial for these groups it is beneficial to everybody. *"Good governance means concerning yourself with the well-being of everybody and leaving nobody behind."*

The Combat Poverty Service makes the following recommendations:

- Organise an 'Integration in Society' and 'Sustainable Development' Interministerial Conference following this 'Sustainability and Poverty' Biennial Report so that the different authorities can together adopt measures designed to ensure a fair climate policy and a sustainable policy to combat poverty.
- Use the existing instruments in the area of advice, planning and cooperation between the public authorities within the limits of the respective levels of competence and at interfederal level.
- Ensure a systematic *ex ante* and *ex post* evaluation of policy measures in terms of their potential impact on poverty.
- Continue efforts for automatic rights at the various stages (fully automatic, identification of potential beneficiaries, automatic updating of the situation of the individual in question, administrative simplification).
- Combine criteria on the basis of income and status so as to define groups of beneficiaries through various channels. As regards income, award priority to a criterion of progressive income rather than an absolute income threshold.

4. Support for change actors and initiatives

During the consultation, many examples of lifestyle choices, projects and actions aimed at living in a way that shows greater respect for the environment or greater solidarity were shared. Yet initiatives by people living in poverty are not always valued or even tolerated, and the actions or projects of other actors do not always take their experiences and situations into account. Here we will therefore be looking at the conditions for initiatives that are accessible to all. To deepen reflections on these questions, the Report refers to elements that came to the fore in connection with a number of initiatives presented during the consultation.

The way people living in poverty actually live is not generally included in the debate on sustainability. What is worse, their way of life can act against them. The problem of cohabiting, dealt with in the 2016-2017 'Citizenship and Poverty' Report, is one example: People living in poverty who decide to cohabit see their benefits reduced if not stopped, this discouraging any spirit of solidarity. Initiatives

must be conceived, developed and supported on the basis of the questions posed by people living in poverty about the accessibility of inclusive projects for sustainability.

The financial aspects of initiatives is another focus of attention. In the case of a food cooperative, the consultation showed that the higher price of the food sold was a difficult obstacle to overcome. However, the solution of applying lower prices for vulnerable people raises questions among the participants who find it preferable for *"everybody to have an income that makes it possible to live in dignity"*. In a context of sustainability, account must also be taken of the balance between financial accessibility on one hand and environmental and financial criteria on the other, without forgetting a fair remuneration and a certain economic profitability. The consultation participants expressed the fear that this need for profit would create obstacles excluding certain categories of people who face more difficulties. The solution could lie in recourse to public aid. One participant suggested switching agricultural subsidies from traditional agricultural to biological agriculture so as to lower the prices of certain quality products,

thereby rendering them more accessible to people with reduced financial means.

People living in poverty seeking to participate in a project or activity are also very concerned about the question of freedom of choice. The fear is very real that the CPAS (social assistance centre) may intervene in the private life of these people, in the context of a social survey, and with an impact on the assistance provided. Those receiving benefits therefore fear participating in an activity or do not declare it due to the possible consequences.

The great diversity among people living in poverty is another parameter that needs to be taken into account. Not everybody feels the same. An initiative that is accessible and valued by some is not necessarily perceived in the same way by others. People may also be held back by a lack of energy or confidence, a sense of shame or difficulties in using the digital technologies.

The consultation stressed the importance of involving people living in poverty in initiatives from the beginning, of "*understanding what is important*

in their eyes" and the need to establish links between all the sustainability actors.

Every actor, at his or her own level, has specificities and strengths to contribute. By drawing on their qualities, individuals can share their experiences and represent society in all its complexity and diversity. Citizens' initiatives, being both specific and on a small scale, facilitate contact between the persons involved and often seek creative and personalised responses. Companies can also play an important role: the social responsibility of companies implies the development of new practices that take the general interest into account. As to the authorities, they have a role to play as facilitator and support: by organising, for example, exchanges between the different initiatives they can favour changes of scale for projects. Together, these various actors have major levers with which to offer sustainable support for initiatives and to guarantee their development and continuity.

Finally, structural measures remain essential to providing an adequate response to the ecological, social and economic challenges we face.

The Combat Poverty Service makes the following recommendations:

- Stimulate initiatives by reflecting on their accessibility to people living in poverty, with the help of the following criteria: a correct price, freedom of choice, assimilation of the situation and experience of the persons concerned and their involvement from the start.
- Make the rules governing voluntary work more flexible for those living on benefits.
- Encourage economic concepts with a social aim, based on partnerships. Give thought to models that can compensate for the reduced financial capacities of people living in poverty through public grants and/or an increased contribution by consumers with higher resources.
- Encourage the sharing of experience and networking of initiatives at all levels (individuals, citizens' initiatives, companies, public authorities).
- Encourage and support financially local initiatives and synergies that are in line with a logic of sustainable development.
- Develop structural measures and a global strategy in the long term that integrate and award the same value to small-scale projects as to social entrepreneurship.

5. Financing sustainability policy

To implement effective measures, financial resources are needed. The objective of this point is to stress the importance of adequate financing for sustainability policies and to examine what forms financing can take.

"Policy is not neutral. The risk of inequalities is great. To combat this risk, a redistribution is necessary, through taxation for example. There is a need to seek the resources there where they are to be found." There is unanimity among the participants in saying that a better distribution of wealth is needed.

First of all, taxation must be made fairer. In a fair society, it is the strongest shoulders (the multinationals, large companies, wealthy individuals) that must bear the heaviest burden. In general, preference should be given to progressive tax rates rather than linear or flat taxes, such as VAT and other levies. These disadvantage people living in poverty more than others as by definition they have a much more limited budget.

In the framework of environmental protection and the [Paris Agreements](#), it is generally recommended to introduce a carbon levy (CO2 tax) to reduce carbon consumption. In Belgium, a national debate on a carbon tax is continuing, with the aim of examining its financial impact and whether it has the support of the population. It would seem appropriate to be very cautious when setting linear taxes on consumption as without compensatory measures they will have a negative impact on existing inequalities in regard to people living in poverty.

The participants are in agreement with the 'polluter pays' system if that means that the major polluters pay and this is not to the detriment of people living in poverty.

As stated above, the tax system is used by the authorities to influence the behaviour of citizens and companies. Sometimes by discouraging 'bad'

behaviour but sometimes also be encouraging 'virtuous' or 'sustainable' behaviour. In the latter case, the instrument used is that of tax exemptions or tax-deductible costs. In practice it is the above all the wealthier citizens who make use of this tax instrument. What is more, if your income is below the tax threshold it is impossible anyway to benefit from these advantages. One method that could offer an effective solution to this problem is that of the distributable tax credit by which people on insufficient incomes receive a sum from the tax authorities to compensate for the value of the tax benefit they miss out on.

The transfer of wealth through inheritance is an additional inequality that must be stressed. An increase in inheritance tax on large inheritances is a possible avenue for combating growing inequalities. Finally, the consultation participants also spoke of the combat against tax havens and tax fraud. According to the participants, this combat must be organised in a coordinated manner at European level to avoid fiscal competition between the Member States and companies 'fleeing' with a further rise in unemployment as the result.

With a view to sustainability, there is a need to avoid non-sustainable activities from obtaining finance. To do so, measures can be imposed against financial resources obtained through banks. These financial resources can also be allocated to stimulating sustainable activities and to financing the social component of the climate transition. It is the public stakeholders that, more even than private individuals and companies, bear the responsibility for bringing their financial resources to bear in the sustainable balance. Furthermore, research has shown that sustainable investments yield a better return than others in addition to offering greater stability.

Climate change and social inequalities are a global problem that will require global action. At Belgian and at European Union level, the creation of a climate bank must make it possible to free the funds necessary to implement sustainability policies.

The Combat Poverty Service makes the following recommendations:

- Use taxation for more sustainability and fairness by favouring progressive taxes to linear or flat taxes.
- Introduce distributable tax credits in the case of systems providing tax exemptions or deductions.
- Introduce the globalisation of income (from labour and from wealth) when taxing individuals and companies.
- Combat tax loopholes.
- Combat tax fraud by giving the tax authorities and the courts the means to do so.
- Support a policy of sustainable investment by prohibiting public bodies from investing in non-sustainable financial products while stimulating private investors to invest in sustainable financial products and supporting associations that inform citizens on the sustainability of financial products.
- Finance the necessary structural policies through recourse to the European Investment Bank and the future climate bank.

6. Policy dialogue

The General Poverty Report (GPR) already made the point that the life experiences and knowledge of people living poverty are essential to "*the global organisation of society*" and that these people should be regarded as partners. Today, people living in poverty and their associations are demanding to participate in the debates on the future of our society and our planet. Yet they are often not involved, also not when it comes to sustainability. The UN special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights sounded a warning: "*People living in poverty are already excluded from decisions that concern them, and political inequalities place them on the fringes of the climate response.*" Here we will look at two important conditions to permit genuine participation: time and partnerships.

Firstly, time is very important for various reasons: to bring people together, inform them, create a climate of mutual confidence, learn to speak and to listen, adopt a collective voice, undertake a common analysis, engage in dialogue with the political decision-makers, make proposals and argue a case, monitor implementation of the said proposals and evaluate their effect.

Yet time is also short, both for people living in poverty – who do not always freely dispose of their time – and for the associations and organisations in the combating poverty sector who are seeking to organise sustainable participation. Today these are coming under pressure, due to the emphasis on efficiency and thus economies, but also due to the worldwide trend to limit the room for civil society organisations that defend fundamental rights

People living in poverty also fear that their participation will be individualised and manipulated. Yet their voice is more than an individual voice. It is often the fruit of a collective process, of a common reflection, of a shared analysis that takes shape within the associations and organisations that give people living in poverty a free space where they can come together, find a common voice and acquire the skills, trust and confidence to make this voice heard.

Ideally, the participation takes place at each stage in the political cycle. But many forms of participation are limited to an occasional contribution, a kind of formality or administrative requirement that must be met and that has no follow-up.

Participation is only really sustainable if the contribution stemming from the participation

process is truly taken into account and effects change. One member of an association within which people living in poverty come together explains that *"it is certainly important to stress the fact that the poorest want to have their say, but the question goes much further than permitting involvement and participation. For people living in poverty it is hope for real change, a guarantee of a better world for all that is at stake."*

"Alone, you achieve nothing. You have to create partnerships to overcome conflicts. All heads turned in the same direction with a view to respecting fundamental rights."

The subject of 'sustainability' gives the Combat Poverty Service the opportunity to also involve actors from the environmental and nature sector in the debate on poverty. Creating partnerships is not, however, an easy thing, especially between partners who do not yet know one another (well), such as poverty organisations and environmental organisations. The political actors must also forge partnerships - not only with the social stakeholders but also between themselves, that is, between the various fields and political levels – so as to overcome the social and ecological challenges.

The Combat Poverty Service makes the following recommendations.

- Use the knowledge and experience of all citizens, including people living in poverty, to build fair and sustainable policies at all political levels.
- Invest the necessary time, energy and resources in dialogue and participation, during the various phases of the political process, so as to make efficient use of all the value added.
- Recognise the added values of civil society organisations and associations that bring together several groups of citizens, including people living in poverty, and support them.
- Consider participation as a process that is valuable in itself, one that promises a useful result that must be effectively taken into account
- Use existing instruments as much as possible, such as the Biennial Report and its monitoring procedure.

Conclusion: *'To leave no one behind'*



In 1999, with the Cooperation Agreement concerning the continuation of Poverty Reduction Policy, combating poverty became a central political issue, following the General Poverty Report (1994). Twenty years later, in 2019, we see that the goals set in this field in recent years have not been achieved. Europe 2020 aimed to reduce by 380,000 the number of persons in Belgium living in poverty and social exclusion by 2020. A group that has remained virtually stable since the launch of the [Europe 2020 strategy](#) (2,250,000 today compared with 2,194,000 in 2008). While the number of persons exposed to the risk of poverty is today higher than when systematic monitoring was introduced (16.4 % compared to 14.8 % in 2005).

Today there are vibrant calls for a strong policy in the field of sustainability and the environment in particular. This Report represents a plea to place the combat against poverty at the heart of this policy.

Climate and environmental changes are not only a cause for concern in themselves but also create new social inequalities and strengthen existing inequalities. People living in poverty are exposed more than others to the consequences of climate and environmental changes. Take pollution for example, which is particularly acute in the neighbourhoods they live in. With a more fragile health, they are also more sensitive to these changes.

We are all too aware of some of these inequalities. The gap in terms of healthy life expectancy remains flagrant for example. Others remain in the shadows: the presence of natural spaces and access to them are also problematic for people living in poverty, due both to the few green areas or public spaces in their immediate living environment and to their problems of mobility.

The levers making it possible to adopt sustainable behaviour and to make sustainable choices, in particular a decent income, are lacking in situations of poverty. Energy efficient domestic appliances, quality food and sustainable or fair trade clothing are all virtually beyond their reach.

The poorest reap (practically) none of the benefits from measures designed to promote sustainable development. Few home owners or tenants on low incomes are able to benefit from grants for energy saving measures as they find it difficult to prefinance these investments or are unaware that such grants exist or how to go about obtaining them. This policy can even have negative consequences for the poorest people, such as in the case of banning polluting vehicles in cities.

Yet their environmental/ecological impact – their ecological footprint – is often less than that of the average citizen. During the consultations people living in poverty observed that they often had a lifestyle that reduces their ecological footprint. They are pioneers of water and energy savings and of reuse, even if this is often out of necessity and because they have no choice. The discussion of the questionnaires on the ecological footprint sparked fierce indignation within the group. When you live in a social apartment block with a group energy meter (shared with others), you cannot choose for green energy. A question on vacationing on a cruise ship meets with incredulity among a public who are scarcely if at all able to go away on holiday. Such tools for raising awareness illustrate to what point the average citizen and communication addressed to that average citizen are remote from the day-to-day reality of poverty.

Apart from climate and environmental change, social inequalities are further reinforced by certain developments in certain areas of life. In the energy sector we find that privatisation is compromising the right to energy: consumers find it difficult to know where they are with all the complex tariff structures and files on

unpaid bills are sold to international companies that issue uncompromising demands. The omnipresence of the digital in our society creates obstacles to using various means of transport, making appointments with the doctor or specialist, installing or using digital energy meters and budget meters, etc. When it comes to mobility, the citizen is increasingly left to his own resources to find solutions to his problems.

These inequalities and their interdependency are of a structural nature and were identified as injustices by the consultation participants. During the consultations it soon became clear that any combat for sustainable development is also a combat against these inequalities. In other words, poverty is a wall erected in the path of sustainability. There is a prevailing sense of urgency, not only for climate and environmental policy but also for the policy to combat poverty. The social and ecological goals coincide. The construction and renovation of sustainable housing – for home owners on low incomes and for social and private sector tenants – contributes not only to respecting the right to housing for all but also improves the health of those who live in them and brings many opportunities for creating quality jobs while reducing energy consumption. Better public transport improves access to basic services but also reduces gas emissions.

With Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the United Nations created a reference political framework for moving towards greater sustainability. The first goal concerns the elimination of poverty (*No Poverty*) and is more ambitious than the Europe 2020 goal. At the same time, the guiding principle for achieving these goals was established: 'to leave no one behind'.

The paths to greater sustainability – which we propose in this Report – are all closely linked to this principle.

In recent years the poorest have scarcely been heard in the debate on environmental and climate change and on the essential policy in this field. We believe and are too quick to conclude that it is a subject that is of no interest to them. When in fact they want to take part in the debate on the future of the planet that is also their planet and their children's planet. *"You often hear it said that the poor are not interested in sustainability and that they are each just trying to survive and that is all. Totally untrue! We must demand our place in this debate and make our own contribution to it. Because we know where the growth model leads as we are experiencing the consequences and suffering as a result. We must make this clearly understood because we are regarded as people who contribute nothing and who cost a lot to society."* In the various phases of the political process and in the various sustainable initiatives in the field the involvement of people living in poverty and their associations is crucial. The path to sustainability is a path of dialogue, collaborations and partnerships – especially with the poorest.

Human rights are a fundamental framework for a sustainability policy. In both the General Poverty Report and the Cooperation Agreement concerning the continuation of Poverty Reduction Policy, poverty is defined in terms of human rights violations. A human rights perspective in combating poverty increases the essential responsibility of the public authorities and their various commitments under the Constitution and international human rights treaties. The sustainable development goals are a political reflection of human rights.

Achieving human rights for all also means combating the non-take-up of rights in the sense of 'to leave no one behind.' Among other things this supposes that the authorities and organisations must give thought to this problem of the non-take-up of rights in their field of action and this requires proactive initiatives, such as increased intervention in healthcare, the maximum possible automatic granting of rights and effective access to justice. Rights must also translate into accessible basic services, in financial and other terms. Whether for energy, water, employment, healthcare or mobility, it is always the demand for universal services that is expressed, with particular support for those in a vulnerable situation so that they can effectively benefit from these rights.

Targeting sustainability also means investing in people. Today people are expected to adapt their behaviour and opt for a sustainable lifestyle but you have to have the means to do so. In general, the poorest people lack all freedom of choice and the ability to assume their responsibility. For example, it is very difficult to opt for sustainable development when you are on a tight budget and dependent on food parcels. In the previous consultation on citizenship within the Combat Poverty Service we had already indicated to what extent freedom of choice is essential for a citizen and how a decent income – one that permits sustainable choices – is a crucial element for this. Associations within which people living in poverty come together also requested that attention be paid to how people living in poverty are viewed. The stereotypes with which they are often confronted, for example suspicions of fraud that they have to refute, complicate their efforts to move out of poverty. This is also an aspect that must be taken into account by the public authorities and various stakeholders who play a part in combating poverty.

Investing in people also means supporting sufficiently the life path of people and the exercising of their rights, with opportunities for human contact and personal support. This Report includes many examples for the different fields discussed: pathways to training and jobs, with special attention paid to aspects of well-being, housing counters, energy and water suppliers providing accessible information, an intermediate health line to bring people back into the mainstream care system, accessible information on mobility supply, and support for people having problems paying water and energy bills, etc. The public authorities are not the only ones who must not leave anyone behind as this is also a mission for the various sustainability stakeholders and initiatives. Certain criteria mentioned in this Report could fuel reflection on the ways in which such projects, for example cooperatives and shared economy initiatives, can also constitute a stage on the path to sustainable development for people living in poverty.

A sustainability policy also implies good governance in the long term. Policy evaluation is particularly pertinent in the framework of the 'leave no one behind' goal. An *ex ante* evaluation of the potential impact on poverty of political projects and regulations, involving the poorest and relevant stakeholders, is important for being able to correct policy in time. But an *ex post* evaluation – after a period of implementing measures – can also help to monitor the degree to which human rights are effectively exercised in situations of poverty. There is a need to upgrade existing tools and procedures used in the area of advice, the drawing up of policy and inter-federal cooperation.

All this requires sufficient financing. The consultation demanded fair taxation, a grouping of national and international (financial) forces and more financing and investment in sustainable activities.

Between February 2018 and November 2019 the Combat Poverty Service organised an intensive dialogue on sustainability between persons living in poverty and their associations, social and environmental associations, representatives of institutions and of administrations and scientists. The participants in this consultation – coming from more than 140 organisations and institutions – have high expectations for the political response to the Biennial Report and to the recommendations it formulates. Its publication is an opportunity to bring together the Integration in Society and Sustainable Development Interministerial Conferences so as to pursue a common policy on sustainability and poverty, 'to leave no one behind'.

The 17 Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations



Goal 1:

End poverty in all its forms everywhere.

Goal 2 :

End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture.

Goal 3

Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages.

Goal 4

Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.

Goal 5

Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.

Goal 6

Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all.

Goal 7

Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all.

Goal 8

Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all.

Goal 9

Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation.

Goal 10

Reduce inequality within and among countries.

Goal 11

Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.

Goal 12

Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns.

Goal 13

Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts.

Goal 14

Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development.

Goal 15

Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss.

Goal 16

Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.

Goal 17

Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS



¹ Also see [factsheet on ex ante evaluation](#) on the Combat Poverty Service website.

Biennial report 2018-2019


Sustainability and poverty

Contribution to political debate and action

SUMMARY

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