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Why the Mediterranean must become a testing ground for the SDGs



The Mediterranean has always been more than a geographical space. It is a shared cultural, economic and ecological system that has, for centuries, connected societies across continents, religions and political orders. From trade routes and migration flows to shared cuisines and intellectual traditions, the region embodies interdependence.

Today, however, the Mediterranean is also a place where global challenges converge with particular intensity: climate change, environmental degradation, forced and voluntary migration, deep social and economic inequalities, youth unemployment and growing democratic fragility. For this reason, advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the Mediterranean is not only relevant – it is urgent.

The SDGs were conceived as the universal framework for addressing the world's most pressing challenges, but their success ultimately depends on how meaningfully they are implemented at regional and local levels. In the Mediterranean, the 2030 Agenda encounters a reality shaped by profound asymmetries: between the northern and southern shores, coastal and inland areas, urban centres and rural communities, but also stable democracies and fragile governance systems. These disparities often complicate collective action. Yet, they also make the region a powerful testing ground for the kind of integrated, cross-sector solutions that the SDGs explicitly call for.

In this context, the recently presented Zadar Declaration on the Mediterranean "Act4the Mediterranean" represents a timely and values-driven response. Grounded in human rights, inclusiveness, democratic participation and the rule of law, the Declaration reaffirms a simple but often neglected truth: sustainable development in the Mediterranean cannot be achieved through isolated policies or short-term fixes. It requires sustained cooperation among public institutions, civil society, philanthropy and the private sector, as well as meaningful participation by local communities themselves.

One of the most pressing areas where the SDGs and the Mediterranean intersect is migration. Too often framed primarily as a security issue, mobility in the region is in fact deeply connected to structural inequalities, economic opportunity and governance failures. Migration speaks directly to SDG 10 on reducing inequalities, SDG 8 on decent work and economic growth, and SDG 16 on peace, justice and strong institutions. A humane and fair approach to migration, as advocated by the Zadar Declaration, recognises migrants not as a burden to be managed, but as human beings with rights, skills and aspirations. When supported by inclusive labour markets, access to services and strong institutions, migration can contribute to social cohesion and economic vitality. Without such an approach, the SDGs risk remaining abstract commitments, disconnected from the lived realities of people on the move.

Environmental protection represents another critical fault line in the region. The Mediterranean Sea is one of the world's most vulnerable marine ecosystems, warming faster than the global average and suffering from pollution, overfishing and biodiversity loss. In this context, SDGs 13 (climate action), 14 (life below water) and 15 (life on land) are existential. Protecting water resources, reducing plastic pollution, preserving coastal ecosystems and ensuring sustainable food systems all require

coordinated action across borders, sectors and levels of governance. Fragmented or purely national responses will inevitably fall short in a shared ecosystem where environmental harm does not respect political boundaries.

Equally important is the need to address persistent socio-economic inequalities across the Mediterranean. Inclusive and sustainable economic development, strongly emphasised in the Zadar Declaration, speaks directly to SDGs 1, 5, 8 and 9. This includes promoting decent working conditions, investing in green and digital innovation, supporting small and medium-sized enterprises, and ensuring fair access to education, healthcare and infrastructure. Particular attention must be paid to the empowerment of women and young people. Their continued exclusion from economic, social and political life is not only a profound injustice, but also a missed opportunity for sustainable growth and democratic resilience in a region where young people make up a significant share of the population.

What makes the Mediterranean context particularly complex and promising is the interdependence of these challenges. Climate change exacerbates migration pressures and resource scarcity. Inequality fuels social fragmentation and erodes trust. Weak participation and limited civic space undermine institutional legitimacy. The SDGs, with their integrated and indivisible nature, offer a framework capable of addressing this complexity holistically. But frameworks alone are not enough.

This is where partnerships become decisive. The iM:PACT programme, initiated by the National Foundation for Civil Society Development (Croatia), brings together Mediterranean partners: Eurac Research(Italy), YouSea Institute – Institute for Sustainable Development and Youth Participation (Slovenia), Fundación Empresa y Sociedad (Spain), Foundation for the Well-being of Society (Malta), Portuguese Centre of Foundations (Portugal) and with Philea and Anna Lindh Foundation as horizontal partners, advancing SDG 17 through cross-sector cooperation.

Importantly, acting on the SDGs in the Mediterranean is not only a regional responsibility. It is a European one. The Mediterranean sits at the heart of Europe's geopolitical, economic and environmental future. Persistent inequalities, democratic backsliding or ecological collapse in the region will inevitably have consequences far beyond its shores. Conversely, investing in inclusive, sustainable and resilient Mediterranean societies strengthens Europe as a whole, reinforcing social cohesion, economic stability and shared values.

The question is not whether the Mediterranean can afford to prioritise the SDGs, but whether it can afford not to. With less than five years left until 2030, the window for meaningful action is rapidly narrowing. Declarations and strategies must now be matched with resources, political will and sustained collaboration across sectors and borders.

The Zadar Declaration's call to Act4the Mediterranean is therefore both a moral and a practical imperative. It reminds us that the region's future depends on choices made today, choices that can either deepen fragmentation or build a shared horizon of sustainability, justice and peace. Making the Mediterranean a living laboratory for the SDGs would not only benefit the region itself but also generate valuable lessons for sustainable development efforts worldwide.

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