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Localizing the 2030 Agenda at the Regional Level through the European Cohesion Policy: An Application to the Region of Sardinia †

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Abstract: The 2030 Agenda represents a natural framework to guide the post-COVID recovery process. However, the assessment of the effectiveness of sustainable development-oriented policies is still a challenge, and addressing this problem is now more urgent than ever. Fondazione Eni Enrico Mattei and the Autonomous Region of Sardinia launched a research project aimed at developing a model to assess the extent to which the operational programs co-financed by the EU under the Cohesion Policy are sustainable in terms of SDGs. The method developed allows policymakers to direct spending toward investments to better pursue the 2030 Agenda targets. The paper presents the key features of the model and its results applied in the Sardinian context.

Keywords: sustainable development; 2030 Agenda; SDGs; European Cohesion Policy; localization

1. Introduction

In September 2015, with the adoption of the 2030 Agenda and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), 193 UN Member States decided to make an important commitment: to leave no one behind.

With regard to the 2030 Agenda and its localization, of considerable interest is the role of European institutions and, in general, the stakeholders involved in the definition of the EU Cohesion Policy 2021–2027. In fact, the institutions involved in the definition of the Cohesion Policy have highlighted the importance of the UN 2030 Agenda SDGs and their strategic significance for the future of the European Union. Since the 2016 European Commission Communication on the 22nd of November [1], the European Union, with its Member States, has been fully committed to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs, as reiterated in the conclusions of the Council of the European Union "*A sustainable European future: The EU response to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*" [2] and the European Commission's reflection paper "*Towards a Sustainable Europe by 2030*" [3]. The latter clearly affirms the role of the Union in the definition of the 2030 Agenda and sets the goal of fully integrating the SDGs into the EU strategic framework and policies. Right after, the von der Leyen Commission decided to integrate all the SDGs into its six Political Guidelines.

As noted by the European Court of Auditors [4], despite the EU's commitment to sustainability and the Sustainable Development Goals, the European Commission fails to report on or monitor how the EU budget and policies contribute to sustainable development and the achievement of the SDGs. As a result, the Commission is currently looking into the adoption of a mechanism to track the EU budget in terms of SDG spending [5].

In fact, it is crucial to develop tools that can provide an overview of how investments contribute to the Union's strategies, including the 2030 Agenda. The assessment of the effectiveness of sustainable development-oriented policies has always been a challenge, and addressing this problem is now more essential than ever, especially in the current emergency.

In this context, the present study aims to implement a sustainability assessment model to study the extent to which the operational programs co-financed by the EU are sustainable in terms of the UN 2030 Agenda SDGs, taking into consideration the significance that the SDGs have for the EU and the central role of Cohesion Policy for the SDGs' achievement.

The paper is divided into two parts: the first section describes the assumptions and the theoretical framework of the model developed and its update; the second section reports the results of different applications of the model, referring to the Sardinia European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and European Social Fund (ESF) 2014–2020 Regional Operational Programmes (ROPs). The conclusions follow.

Despite being designed and built specifically for the 2021–2027 programming period, the model can be applied to current ROPs (as well as national OPs) to validate previous findings and detect any reorientation effect of spending following the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. Materials and Methods: The Assessment of the Contribution of the Cohesion Policy to the SDGs

Before going into the details of the model, the next sub-section outlines the main aspects of the Cohesion Policy for the 2021–2027 programming period, as described in the recently approved EU Regulations [6–10].

2.1. The European Cohesion Policy 2021–2027

The Cohesion Policy intends to improve the European Union's economic, social, and territorial cohesion as well as remedy the inequalities between countries, regions, and cities.

This policy is one of the most horizontal and cross-cutting policies of the EU, contributing to the majority, if not all, of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. Furthermore, fundamental cross-cutting principles and objectives, such as sustainable development, eliminating inequities, promoting gender equality, integrating gender perspectives, and combating discrimination, are mainstreamed at all levels of policy implementation [3].

The EU Cohesion Policy is financed through the EU's long-term budget, the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), with resources amounting to EUR 373 billion for the programming cycle of 2021–2027 [11].

The European Structural and Investment Funds are specifically used to execute the Cohesion Policy by distributing the resources provided under the MFF. In particular, the structure of MFF for the 2021–2027 programming period was revised and simplified as described by the Regulation (EU) 2021/1060 (Common Provisions Regulation, CPR) [10], which establishes common rules applicable to the following funds: the Cohesion Fund (CF), the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF), the Asylum and Migration Fund (AMIF), the Border Management and Visa Instrument (BMVI), the Internal Security Fund (ISF), and the Just Transition Fund (JTF).

The methodology presented here was developed considering only the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+).

In general, the 2021–2027 Cohesion Policy focuses on five policy objectives [10]:

1. a more competitive and smarter Europe by promoting innovative and smart economic transformation and regional ICT connectivity;
2. a greener, low-carbon transition toward a net-zero carbon economy and resilient Europe by promoting clean and fair energy transition, green and blue investment, the circular economy, climate change mitigation and adaptation, risk prevention and management, and sustainable urban mobility;
3. a more connected Europe by enhancing mobility;
4. a more social and inclusive Europe implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights;
5. a Europe closer to citizens by fostering the sustainable and integrated development of all types of territories and local initiatives.

The majority of the ERDF investments are focused on the first two goals; ESF+ investments, on the other hand, are entirely focused on the fourth goal.

The five aforementioned objectives are then divided, for the ERDF and the ESF+, into further specific objectives: 23 and 13, respectively. The latter is pursued through investments traced into intervention fields. Each Member State and region chooses the intervention fields that best serve its objectives on the basis of its strategic choices, taking into account country-specific recommendations, challenges identified in the Integrated National Plans for Energy and Climate, principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights, and, where appropriate, the National Recovery and Resilience Plans.

Furthermore, the operations/interventions financed by both the ERDF and the ESF+ must be in line with the European objective of promoting sustainable development, taking into account the SDGs of the UN 2030 Agenda, the Paris Agreement, and the "*do no significant harm*" principle.

2.2. The Methodology

As previously stated, the Commission is now looking into adopting a system for monitoring the EU budget in terms of the Sustainable Development Goals [4,5].

In particular, the European Commission has already established a framework to calculate the contribution of European Structural and Investment Funds to climate change goals [12]. This method, based on the Rio Markers system [13], consists of assigning a weight to each intervention field, determining whether and how the ESI Funds affect climate change mitigation and adaptation goals.

In this context, a recent study [14] commissioned by the European Parliament's Committee on Budgets showed how the Commission's methodology often leads to an overly "generous" estimate of the climate-relevant expenditure in several of the intervention fields.

In this regard, RAS and FEEM have launched a joint research project specifically aimed at developing and implementing a model for assessing the sustainability of the Regional Operational Programmes (ROPs) [15,16]. The project took inspiration from the model developed by RAS in the Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) procedure of the 2014–2020 ROPs [17], in line with the methodology introduced by the European Commission [12].

The methodology is intended to be a valuable tool to assist decision-makers in identifying the most effective programming options with regard to the 2030 Agenda SDGs.

The authors investigated the interconnections between the 169 targets of the 2030 Agenda and the CPR funds' 182 intervention fields [10] (in the above-cited previous publications [15,16], only 143 intervention fields were considered in the analysis) through the creation of three matrices: the first one captures the type of impact, classified as null, indirect, or direct; the second one describes the orientation and the magnitude of the impact (negative or positive; null, very low, low, medium, and high); and the last one is the product of the aforementioned matrices.

In general, the development of the model has implied the steps represented in Figure 1; for further details on the methodology see [15,16].

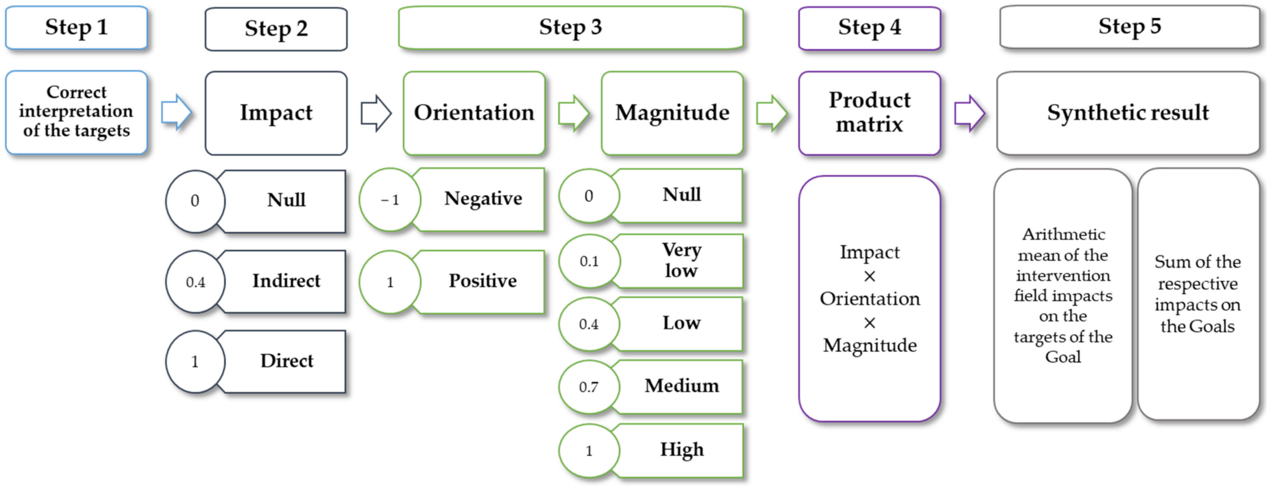


Figure 1. The model-building process. Sign "×" stands for "multiplied by".

Analyzing the final coefficients (Figure 2) of the developed model highlights how the investments (represented by the intervention fields) supported by the Cohesion Policy cannot be a "one size fits all" solution for the achievement of every 2030 Agenda target. Rather, tackling the SDGs requires the use of a variety of financial tools as well as the implementation of non-economic measures, such as a global framework for both regulations and collaboration.

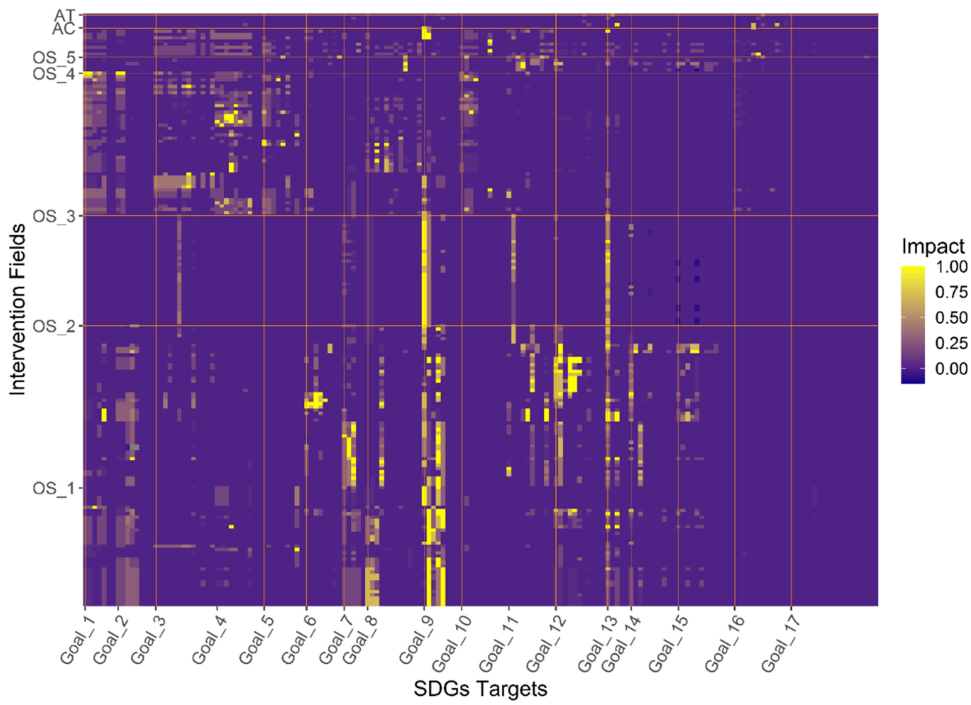


Figure 2. Heatmap for the final coefficients.

Figure 2 shows that most of the intervention fields have low or no impact on the SDGs, especially for Goal 17, "*Partnerships for the Goals*", and Goal 16, "*Peace, justice and strong institutions*". On the contrary, Goal 9, "*Industry, innovation and infrastructure*", is the most impacted one, followed by Goal 13, "*Climate action*"; Goal 7, "*Affordable and clean energy*"; and Goal 1, "*No poverty*".

A very important aspect to point out is that the EU pursues the UN 2030 Agenda's SDGs through a set of policy programs; one of these is the Cohesion Policy, whose objective, as previously mentioned, is to strengthen European regional economies and correct imbalances between them. In this respect, the "global" nature of the 2030 Agenda targets influences the findings: some of the targets refer exclusively to developing nations, whose difficulties are unlikely to be addressed through the European Cohesion Policy.

Going into detail, the following paragraphs explore the results obtained from a matrix built specifically for the Sardinia Region and composed horizontally by the targets of the 17 Goals of the 2030 Agenda and vertically by the 182 intervention fields.

What emerges from the horizontal analysis dealing with intervention fields' contribution is that the field that has the greatest impact on the SDGs is 046, which is "*Support to entities that provide services contributing to the low carbon economy and to resilience to climate change, including awareness-raising measures*". Specifically, this intervention field presents its largest contributions to the achievement of Goal 13, "*Climate action*", and Goal 7, "*Affordable and clean energy*".

In second place in terms of its contribution to the SDGs, we have intervention field 029, "*Research and innovation processes, technology transfer and cooperation between enterprises, research centres and universities, focusing on the low carbon economy, resilience and adaptation to climate change*", followed by field 023, "*Skills development for smart specialization, industrial transition, entrepreneurship and adaptability of enterprises to change*", and field 064, "*Water management and water resource conservation (including river basin management, specific climate change adaptation measures, reuse, leakage reduction)*".

By contrast, the intervention field that contributes less to the achievement of the 2030 Agenda is 180, "*Preparation, implementation, monitoring and control*", which relates to the technical assistance policy objective, targeted at improving the public administration and the program's communication approach; this is a type of transversal tool that the national/regional organization can use.

Another point worth considering is the presence of intervention fields that may have a negative impact on specific 2030 Agenda Goals. For example, investments in seaports have negative impacts on Goal 14, "*Life below water*", and investments in the construction of roads, highways, and railways have negative effects on Goal 15, "*Life on land*".

Regarding the vertical analysis of the Sustainable Development Goals, the most impacted Goals by the Cohesion Policy are Goal 9, "*Industry, innovation and infrastructure*"; Goal 13, "*Climate action*"; Goal 7, "*Affordable and clean energy*"; and Goal 1, "*No poverty*".

Specifically:

- Goal 9, *"Industry, innovation and infrastructure"* is mostly impacted by intervention field 029, *"Research and innovation processes, technology transfer and cooperation between enterprises, research centres and universities, focusing on the low carbon economy, resilience and adaptation to climate change"*, and intervention field 030, *"Research and innovation processes, technology transfer and cooperation between enterprises, focusing on circular economy"*.
- Goal 13, "*Climate action", is mostly affected by field 058, "Adaptation to climate change measures and prevention and management of climate related risks: floods and landslides (including awareness raising, civil protection and disaster management systems, infrastructures and ecosystem based approaches)"*; field 059, *"Adaptation to climate change measures and prevention and management of climate related risks: fires (including awareness raising, civil protection and disaster management systems, infrastructures and ecosystem based approaches)"*; and field 060, *"Adaptation to climate change measures and prevention and management of climate related risks: others, e.g., storms and drought (including awareness raising, civil protection and disaster management systems, infrastructures and ecosystem based approaches)"*.
- Goal 7, *"Affordable and clean* energy", is mostly impacted by field 046, *"Support to entities that provide services contributing to the low carbon economy and to resilience to climate change, including awareness-raising measures"*, and field 053, *"Smart Energy Systems (including smart grids and ICT systems) and related storage"*.

- Goal 1, *"No poverty"*, is mainly impacted by intervention field 164, *"Addressing material deprivation through food and/or material assistance to the most deprived, including accompanying measures"*.

By contrast, considering the Goals less affected by the Cohesion Policy, we found that Goal 17, "*Partnership for the Goals*", was impacted the least, followed by Goal 16, "*Peace, justice and strong institutions*", and Goal 15, "*Life on land*".

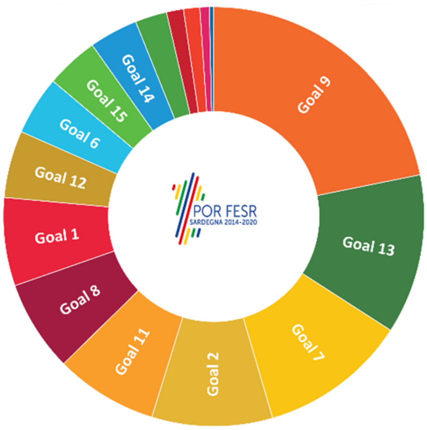
3. Results: Applications of the Model to the Sardinia ERDF and ESF 2014–2020 ROPs—The COVID Effect

The proposed methodology, while planned and built specifically for the 2021–2027 programming period, is easily adaptable to the present programs. In fact, the same method was already applied to evaluate the contribution of the Sardinia ERDF and ESF 2014–2020 ROPs toward the SDGs, starting from the financial monitoring data updated to 31 December 2019 and those updated to 31 December 2020.

3.1. Assessing the Contribution of the Sardinia ERDF 2014–2020 ROP

Through its 2014–2020 ERDF ROP, the Sardinia Region addresses important challenges of sustainable development, investing EUR 930 million in the competitiveness of production systems; the protection of the environment and the enhancement of natural, cultural, and tourist attractions; the promotion of social inclusion; and the strengthening of institutional capacity.

The results of the application of the model to the Sardinia ERDF 2014–2020 ROP confirm the vocation of the Programme (Figure 3): it is, in fact, more oriented to certain SDGs, namely Goal 9, "*Industry, innovation and infrastructure*"; Goal 13, "*Climate action*"; and Goal 7, "*Affordable and clean energy*".



(**a**)

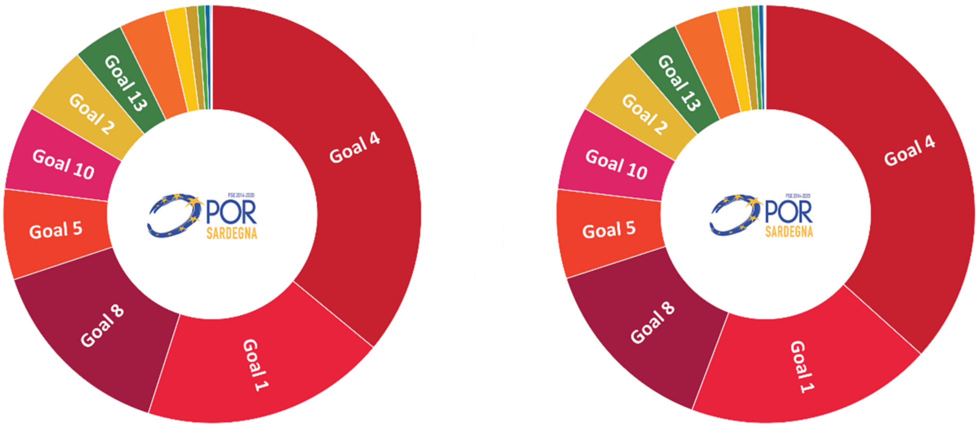
(**b**)

Figure 3. The contribution of the Sardinia ERDF 2014–2020 ROP to the 2030 Agenda SDGs: (**a**) the data here are updated to 31 December 2019 [18]; (**b**) the data here, by contrast, are updated to 31 December 2020 [19].

In 2020, the implementation of the program was inevitably conditioned by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Managing Authority, thanks to the new regulatory framework launched by the European Union to allow a timely response to the SARS-CoV-2 emergency, was able to redirect resources amounting to over EUR 100 million to the support of actions to combat the crisis, directing them toward the most affected sectors and the purchase of medical devices and equipment. These results are clearly captured by the tool developed and can be seen in the advancement of Goal 3, "*Good health and well-being*", from the twelfth position (Figure 3a) to the eleventh position (Figure 3b).

3.2. Assessing the Contribution of the Sardinia ESF 2014–2020 ROP

The Sardinia ESF 2014–2020 ROP, conversely, with its financial allocation of over EUR 440 million, invests in employment; social inclusion; the fight against poverty, education, and training; and institutional and administrative capacity. The results, again, confirm the purpose of the Programme: the Goals that are most impacted are Goal 4, "*Quality education*"; Goal 1, "*No poverty*"; Goal 8, "*Decent work and economic growth*"; Goal 5, "*Gender equality*"; and Goal 10, "*Reduced inequalities*" (Figure 4).



(**a**) (**b**)

Figure 4. The contribution of the Sardinia ESF 2014–2020 ROP to the 2030 Agenda SDGs: (**a**) the data here are updated to 31 December 2019 [20]; (**b**) the data here, by contrast, are updated to 31 December 2020 [21].

In 2020, the reprogramming process resulted in a total financial rescheduling of over EUR 86 million going toward specific actions and objectives closely related to the COVID emergency. However, given the timing of the implementation of these interventions in 2020, it has not yet been possible to fully grasp the effects in terms of expenditure trends (as, on the contrary, was accomplished for the Sardinia 2014–2020 ERDF ROP). In this case, comparing Figure 4a,b, we found that there were no significant deviations in the results, which thus only confirms the vocation of the Sardinia 2014–2020 ESF ROP. The different applications presented here show how the two ROPs impact different Goals, as they cover different policy objectives within the Cohesion Policy.

4. Conclusions

The research reveals that the Cohesion Policy's investments cannot be a "one size fits all" solution for achieving all the SDGs. Instead, a combination of different financial tools as well as the adoption of non-economic measures, such as regulations and partnerships, are required.

This methodology is a tool capable of capturing the type and number of investments financed by the EU through all European policies that contribute to the SDGs.

Obviously, the support of these investments toward the 2030 Agenda must also be investigated in terms of actual results. Further analysis and evaluation are called for, along with the monitoring of the performance indicators connected to the SDGs and the related data collection.

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