

EEAC series
Background study no. 2 (2005)

Sustaining Sustainability

a benchmark study on national strategies towards
sustainable development and the impact of councils
in nine EU member states



EEAC
the network of
European Environment and
Sustainable Development
Advisory Councils

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commissioned by the EEAC Working Group Sustainable Development
January 2005

Executive Summary

Sustaining Sustainability is an inside story on the state of the art of national strategies for sustainable development in nine EU member states, with a particular focus on the role of national councils for sustainable development (SDC) in producing and implementing SD strategies (SDS). Such councils have been created by national governments, stimulated by the Agenda 21, with the purpose of fostering dialogue for SD among stakeholders, and between stakeholders and government, as well as monitoring progress and encouraging initiatives. The study was financed by the participating councils and supported by EEAC, the European network of advisory councils for environment and sustainable development. All 6 countries in the European Union with a well-established SDC participated (B, D, FIN, IRE, P, UK), plus three countries with environment or other councils engaged in the SD agenda (HUN, NL, S). 7 countries have a SDS and one is currently developing one; some have already seen at least one revision phase. With an in-depth approach the study attempts to look behind the curtains of SD processes.

THE GOVERNANCE DIMENSION

Most striking, though not surprising, is the underlying governance dimension that turns out to be of greatest relevance for SD policies. In other words, the processes themselves need most attention: Moving towards sustainable development is a process, and most countries meanwhile characterise it as a “learning” process. Such an insight in a way is already a result of “learning” that SD strategies cannot be implemented like a “plan”, but need flexible approaches on the government side with at the same time firm and accountable objectives, and ideally also quantitative targets.

IMPROVING HORIZONTAL AND VERTICAL COORDINATION AND INTEGRATION

Moving towards such a leadership attitude requires significant adjustments in sectorally organised governments: the need of mechanisms for coordination and improving policy coherence must not be underestimated. This also applies to vertical linkages to the regional and local level. So far this has only been a focus in Scandinavian countries, which have a strong overall “bottom-up approach”. Belgium and the UK, with (quasi-)federal structures, have paid some attention to the regional level. Several countries have chosen leadership and coordination by the Prime Minister in order to enhance commitment in the individual Ministries, with the Ministry for Environment typically maintaining the role of a driving force. Coordination on the “highest” level is considered as beneficial for progress and policy coherence, given a certain degree of dedication.

FOSTERING OWNERSHIP, TRANSPARENCY AND INVOLVEMENT

At the same time SD strategies need to foster ownership, actions and commitment in all parts of society. Local authorities and initiatives play an

important role in this respect, and with respect to building and implementing a SDS the messages and influences should find both ways, “up” and “down”. Though most participating countries have realised that stimulating civil society, interest groups and the private sector is one key success factor, efforts still need to be intensified, and potentials for state incentives, including financial ones, should be considered. The North-Western political culture of governments being amenable to dialogue and involvement of civil society (in rather corporatist settings with a stakeholder focus) has spread across Europe at least as an accepted approach. In some countries though the doors have only opened a foot, with still deficient information flow and consultation mechanisms. These situations typically correlate with a relatively low degree of self-organisation of civil society. In such cases government support would be helpful.

SD COUNCILS AS VALUABLE MECHANISMS

SD councils are a specific mechanism for fostering dialogue among different stakeholders, which has the potential for innovative approaches and solutions, and for achieving (unexpected) agreements. With their rather unique position of being established by governments, but being independent in their deliberations, they provide a potential for bridging the often perceived gap between government and non-governmental actors, and for transporting collective views and knowledge of civil society to the government. With the exception of one or two countries the results of this study suggest that the independent, deliberative type of SDC is preferable over a government-led and/or very representational one: such a setting is more supportive for opening minds and horizons, as a prerequisite for innovation. All examined councils are valued both by government and stakeholders, and have a record of accomplishments, mostly including: with some success in having guarded the holistic view, the wider influence of councils’ discussions, thinking and results into the council members’ organizations, innovative approaches in communication and encouraging activities of civil society, and achievements in selected policy fields.

REVIEWS OF SD STRATEGIES

The reviews of national SD strategies are in many cases not performed in a transparent and systematic way, which applies both to monitoring progress and revising priority fields. For the former in most cases a set of indicators is so far missing. In a comparative view national SD strategies present a puzzle of issues, targets and indicators, but this does at least show progress across a broad range. An in-depth comparative analysis of national priority fields, targets and indicators is needed. At the same time this situation of variety shows that quantity does not automatically translate into quality. This result underlines the importance of having a high-quality process for identifying priority areas.

BALANCING THREE GOVERNANCE DIMENSIONS

All in all, the complex, overarching, holistic SD policy needs to find a balance between ‘poles’ (extremes) in key governance dimensions. It needs both leadership and ownership, both bottom-up and top-down, both firmness and flexibility, which could be translated as “planning” and “learning”. All of these have their own pitfalls: Ownership and bottom-up must not mean “anything goes”, without a vision and objectives for SD, broken down to concrete measures; emphasising bottom-up must not be an excuse for “business as usual” on the government side; flexibility and ‘learning’ must not lead to arbitrariness, which would undermine accountability. Nevertheless, patience and stamina are required to live through some inevitable aspects of muddling-through. Naturally, each country has a different starting point on the line between the ‘poles’ of each dimension: Given that in some way a balance between the two ends of the spectrum is needed, each country would be well advised to move towards the other end in its future emphasis.

LINK OF NATIONAL SD STRATEGIES TO THE EU SDS AND EU POLICIES

This is even more challenging in the existing multi-level situation: The link of national SD strategies and the EU SDS is currently very loose, or rather: these levels so far have tended to ignore each other (the main exception is Belgium). The European Commission has not looked into national SD strategies when preparing the proposal for Gothenburg, and the survey performed in the beginning of 2004 can only be seen as a starting point. National governments and other actors on the other hand have so far focused mainly on the national dimension: partly for the obvious reason that most national SD strategies were prepared earlier than the EU SDS. But even then in the review of the national SDS the EU strategy is at a maximum just mentioned. Partly it is understandable to concentrate on national matters first, as a way of self-finding, i.e. reflecting on an appropriate approach for SD policies and eventually pouring this into a strategy with a vision, priority fields, objectives and measures. Nevertheless, on the broader side it would have been useful to consider the approach and objectives of the EU and it still would be.

LESSONS TO LEARN FOR THE EUROPEAN LEVEL

From the national level it can be extrapolated: The Commission itself should be much more aware of the governance dimension of SD. Particularly the horizontal coordination has been neglected so far, and the normal styles of cooperation between DGs seem to be not feasible for the SD endeavour. Impact Assessment may be a helpful instrument for increasing policy coherence if designed, according to its procedural character, so as to foster dialogue for improving the potentials of convergence rather than using it as a technocratic tool for modelling only. Also leadership is lacking, and hence a lead coordination of the President and the Secretariat General that is taken seriously, including the provision of enough capacity, would be required. The link of the Lisbon and the SD strategy has to be made more clear. Objectives should be underpinned with quantitative targets. In contrast to

shifts in attitudes in the member states towards more ‘learning’, the Agenda 21 approach of capacity building, ownership and civil society engagement on all levels seems to be not taken up at the European level. Stakeholder consultation so far has been conducted in a rather old-fashioned way that does not stimulate controversial and productive dialogue.

KEY POLICY FIELDS

Reflections on policy fields particularly difficult to make progress in, and requests for EU action in key fields, reveal that the national room for manoeuvre is small. Pressing highlights are climate change and energy policy, transport, and the overall demand for more EU funding in Research & Development.

FUTURE CHALLENGES

For the future a lot remains to do:

- Scrutinising the results of the Commission's 2004 survey on national SD strategies; continuing and deepening this examination.
 - Performing comparative research on:
 - national targets and indicators in place, and the way they are linked and used for monitoring progress, including conditional targets that might be an interesting instrument to better link the national and the EU dimension;
 - different ways of stakeholder consultation and participation;
 - the relation of government programs and SD strategies, and the role of Parliaments with respect to the long-term perspective;
 - the role of social-economic partners for SD processes, and their relationship to SDS and civil society organizations (“other stakeholders”);
 - potentials for improving vertical coordination and integration.
- Overall, the 7th Research Framework Program needs to put innovation into the framework of SD; given the important governance dimension, the share of social sciences has so far been much too low.
- Capacity building:
 - conducting a series of events (“SD marathon”) through all EU member states for discussing the EU SDS and stimulating national actors;
 - supporting existing national SD councils in dealing more with the European dimension.
 - Promoting the establishment of national SD councils to operate in an independent manner.
 - Establishing a permanent sounding board for systematically feeding ideas and actions on the national level into the EU SDS.

The initiative of the national SD councils participating in this study, and their cooperation in the framework of EEAC, should be welcomed as an indicator that after a phase of self-orientation both learning from each other and better linking the EU and national level is taken seriously.