

Foreword

A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE FOR EUROPE

This study concerns the future of Europe - and how civil society can be better involved in shaping that future. How can we create a future that is sustainable? There are many definitions of sustainable development. The Brundtland Report's classic formulation speaks of meeting the needs of today while protecting the rights of future generations. Sustainable development involves advancing the well being of society as a whole, remedying injustices or inequity, and protecting the planetary resources and environment that sustains us all.

There are many features of today's world that are profoundly unsustainable in this sense. Finite resources are being depleted at an unsustainable rate. Greenhouse gases and other forms of pollution pose immense problems for the future. Poverty and injustice persist in many parts of the world. Neither our political leaders nor society as a whole have yet fully grasped how very much more needs to be done in engaging society in facing up to the large and urgent challenges of sustainability.

Globalisation is having an ever-growing impact. Problems no longer arise in one country alone and cannot be solved by individual countries acting alone. Greenhouse gases and pollutants spread from one country to another. Trade and investment flows accentuate poverty in some places even as they produce growing wealth in others. Co-operation between countries and between business and other sectors of society is essential to manage these forces in a more sustainable way.

The international community first made a substantial effort to engage with this challenge in a comprehensive way at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. Heads of Government from around the world adopted Agenda 21, which mapped out the actions that would be needed to move towards sustainability. The Johannesburg Summit in 2002 reaffirmed the commitment to the overarching goal of sustainable development, and the determination of countries to create and implement meaningful strategies to guide their own transition towards sustainability.

The European Union and its members have been among the leaders in promoting sustainable development policies at Rio and at Johannesburg, and within its area have made some significant progress over the past three decades on some aspects of sustainability. But we have no grounds for complacency. Taken as a whole Europe is one of the major contributors to greenhouse gas emissions in the world, and we are in danger of falling short of our Kyoto commitments to reduce them. Through our trade we are contributing to the loss of natural resources and biodiversity in other parts of the world. We have our share of poverty and injustices within our own society. We have as much need as anywhere to create powerful sustainable development strategies to guide our societies towards a more sustainable future.

The European record is however still very patchy. Some countries have created sustainable development strategies but even where such strategies exist the machinery for implementing and monitoring them is often inadequate. Other countries have so far made less progress even in initiating a national strategy process. At the European level the existing strategy is too little known and has not been as powerful a driver of progress as it should have been. The current review of the EU Sustainable Development Strategy ought to provide an opportunity for creating a more effective and potent strategy for the future that will engage all the main actors in society as well as governments in its implementation.

National councils for sustainable development exist in around 10 EU member states, some more on regional or interstate level. They give political advice and involve civil society and stakeholders engaged in sustainability issues. Of course the existence of such a council cannot by itself guarantee the effective engagement of civil society in the implementation of sustainable development. But the existence of a council does at the least ensure that significant sectors of civil society are engaged in debates about sustainability issues and are able to keep the subject and the challenges alive with each other and with their government. It is no accident that in general the most effective sustainable development strategies in Europe have been created in countries that have active councils engaged in the sustainable development agenda.

The Working Group Sustainable Development within the network of European Environment and Sustainable Development Advisory Councils (EEAC) decided in 2003 to commission a study of the way in which these councils have been established and operate in nine European countries, and how they contribute to the creation of effective national sustainable development strategies, and to their implementation and monitoring. This study was carried out by Dr Ingeborg Niestroy, and we now have the honour and pleasure to introduce her important report. On behalf of the Working Group we thank Dr. Niestroy for the immense work and the intensity of research that has produced this report. We also thank Philip Dale, until recently with the UK Sustainable Development Commission, for his editing efforts.

The participating national councils contributed funds to the study and facilitated the research work in their own countries, and we are all grateful for this support without which the study would not have been possible. We also extend our thanks to all the people in the participating countries who devoted their time to ensure an accurate fact-finding.

Dr Niestroy's report shows that councils vary significantly across Europe in their constitution and in their scope and effectiveness. She draws a number of important conclusions about the way in which the role and effectiveness of national councils might be reinforced and consolidated in the future.

In this introduction we should like to emphasise five crucial messages, which we see as emerging from her findings:

- The participation of stakeholders and civil society in all aspects of sustainable development needs to be fostered and spread more widely. National councils for sustainable development can contribute significantly in this process, and we strongly recommend that countries, which do not at present have such councils, should consider creating them, and that those which already have them should nurture them and ensure that they are properly resourced and supported.
- National councils need to be structured in such a way that they can address the whole sustainable development agenda, and can have access to all parts of Government and to Parliamentary committees and other bodies that need to be involved. One of their most important roles is to facilitate and enlarge the opportunities for civil society engagement with sustainable development processes and decision taking. They can also sometimes play a valuable role in brokering agreements between conflicting groups in contentious areas of the sustainability agenda.
- Governance for sustainability is crucial. At national level sustainable development requires the integration of policy and action across many different Government Departments and many different sectors of society. It cannot be made the responsibility of a single Minister or Department acting alone. It requires a strongly political process to secure a common purpose and ownership of the sustainable development agenda between different parts of Government and different parts of society and co-operative working to deliver results. Leadership, policy coherence and coordinating mechanisms are crucial. All of these themes are equally important at European level where all the European institutions and the different Directorates of the Commission need to be involved.
- There is insufficient linkage between the EU sustainable development strategy and national strategies. In a globalising world strong and mutually supportive strategies are needed at both levels in order to deliver sustainability. There ought to be significant opportunities for the EU and national sustainable development strategy processes to be better co-ordinated and reinforce one another. The review of the European Sustainable Development Strategy should provide the opportunity to achieve this better co-ordination and coherence.
- Also at the European level we need stronger arrangements to engage appropriate civil society groupings with the creation and implementation of the new European Sustainable Development Strategy. This might either be a new role for the European Economic and Social Committee, or for a new and independent advisory council or sounding board. However this is structured it would be desirable also to foster appropriate linkages between any European level advisory bodies and the national councils for sustainable development so as to promote better coherence and understanding between everyone involved with sustainability issues at European and at national level.

EEAC has set out its own vision for a European sustainability process and promulgated it widely in the Kinsale Challenge that was agreed by EEAC representatives in 2004 during the Irish Presidency. Dr Niestroy's detailed analysis provides further support for many of the recommendations in that challenge. We commend it for close attention by all those who are concerned to ensure that sustainability is placed at the core of Europe's future.



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