

The network of
**European Environment and
Sustainable Development Advisory Councils**



Dr. José Manuel Durão Barroso

President-designate
European Commission
Rue de la Loi 200
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Ljubljana/Berlin/London, 21 October 2004

Dear Dr. Barroso,

Professor Franc Lobnik, Chairman of the network of European Environment and Sustainable Development Advisory Councils (EEAC), wrote to you on 28 July sending you information about some of EEAC's work during the past four years. We now write again on behalf of the network to congratulate you on your assumption of office as President of the Commission, and to urge you to make a strong commitment to sustainable development one of the defining features of your new Commission.

In this context we want to highlight the potential significance of the current review of the European Sustainable Development Strategy and the exciting opportunity that it offers for moving Europe decisively forward towards the goal of sustainability: With that vision in view we want here to draw attention to some of the key issues that it needs to address, and to offer the assistance of our network and its members in the process of the review and its implementation.

The challenge of sustainability and the opportunity for Europe

The establishment of a more sustainable pattern of development for Europe in the future is one of the central tasks of the European project. By this we mean a harmonious, integrated and well-balanced pattern of economic development that takes into full account the social and environmental dimensions and the needs of future generations as well as the present. Many of the global challenges to sustainability including persistent poverty in many parts of the world, the impacts of growing populations in some areas and ageing populations in others, unsustainable patterns of consumption and production, climate change and loss of biodiversity are at a critical stage.

Sustainable development is a *unifying* concept, that can unite different political movements and interests in their attempts to deal with "people, planet and profit" in a responsible way. It is well based in European social and political traditions. It has a direct relevance to the concerns of all generations, particularly the young, for the future. It provides a good conceptual framework within which responsible businesses can innovate and relate their products and services to the emerging needs of their markets and avoid societal conflict and unwanted side effects. This is an important reason why many large European companies nowadays consider there to be a good business case for sustainability.

Over many years Europe has been at the forefront of domestic and international progress on many of these issues. But in the past two years since Johannesburg the collective European commitment to sustainability sometimes appears to have faltered or to have been diverted by other more immediate concerns. There is a golden opportunity for the new Commission to present itself as the champion of the transition to the more sustainable future, and to help Europe recover its leadership role on the whole sustainability agenda. Europe needs to be both a leading exemplar of good sustainability policy and practice within its own boundaries and a powerful friend and advocate of sustainability around the world.

There is an immediate opportunity to advance this agenda in the revision of the European Sustainable Development Strategy, which is currently in progress. Although there have been achievements, it is widely felt that the previous strategy was not as comprehensive and decisive as it should have been, and was poorly followed up and implemented both at European and at national level. Recognising the urgency and severity of the global challenges it is vital that the new strategy sets out a much clearer path towards sustainability and that it is much better communicated and promulgated so as to engage all parts of society throughout Europe in its implementation. It will require firm commitment and determined leadership from all the European institutions to achieve this, but the initiating role of the Commission will be one of the most important elements in achieving the necessary breakthroughs.

EEAC has studied the effectiveness of national and European strategies for sustainable development over the past two years and will shortly be publishing a substantial research report on this. Drawing together the emerging findings we have already offered advice to the European Institutions on the way forward in the form of the Kinsale challenge, which we adopted at a conference in April 2004 during the Irish Presidency. We attach a copy of this document, which we believe remains very relevant to the task of revising the Sustainable Development strategy. That challenge emphasised the importance of a number of key points including:

1. The need to integrate different subject strategies within the overall sustainable development framework, and in particular to follow through the Gothenburg and Cardiff summits so as to give the annual Spring Summit review (the Lisbon process) a broader sustainability context.
2. The need to achieve a mutually supportive relationship between the European and national sustainable development strategies.
3. The need to engage all parts of civil society to play their part in shaping and implementing the strategy.
4. The need for the strategy to follow through on Johannesburg commitments so that Europe can play its full part in advancing sustainability in other parts of the world.

Following the adoption of the Kinsale challenge representatives of EEAC have been encouraged by your predecessor to have useful meetings and exchanges with the Secretariat General, and with DG Environment. We have also been glad to make a contribution to the valuable work of the Economic and Social Committee, which has delivered a very important opinion on the approach to the strategy review.

We are glad to note that the Commission has initiated its own work on the Strategy review with a wide ranging questionnaire to elicit views and ideas from interested parties across Europe. This is already building interest and engagement with the process from around Europe, which is encouraging for the process. Several of our EEAC members (i.e. individual national advisory councils) have submitted their own detailed responses to this questionnaire.

Recently reviewing the position together at a meeting of the whole network in Berlin we have summarised many points of common concern in the attached notes. They illustrate the extent of agreement about the approach that should be adopted to the Strategy review amongst a wide cross section of expert opinion and civil society organisations.

In sending you this material we wish to reemphasise the four fundamental points of the Kinsale challenge that should be central to the creation of an effective strategy for the future.

1. Integration and coherence within the Union

First it is crucial that the strategy be an over-arching one, adopted and led at the highest level in Europe. Within the Commission we regard it as vital that you and your vice-Presidents give a clear lead on the crucial importance of sustainability for the future of Europe. While recognising and applauding the commitment and contribution that have been made by the previous Environment Commissioner and her Directorate General it is important that sustainability should not be regarded as just another name for protection of the environment, but should be seen as a central integrating vision that needs to be led, co-ordinated and communicated from the

centre of the Commission and other European institutions. We believe that this requires the strengthening of some of the central capacity within the Commission to develop and communicate the sustainability approach. It is vital that other sectoral policies and plans be reviewed and if necessary modified to adopt them to the over-riding requirements of sustainability and the sustainable development strategy. The sustainability strategy cannot be conceived as a stand-alone document - sustainability is above all an integrating concept. Arrangements for integrating sustainability into all other processes and strategies review need to be strengthened, and the tools for carrying it out such as sustainability impact assessment need to be much more widely and consistently applied. The implications of a sustainability approach for such subjects as energy, transport, agriculture, fisheries, development assistance, the regional funds and other policy areas have not yet been fully worked through. The strategy should set out a clear route map for advancing this necessary integration.

This integration needs to apply particularly to the Lisbon process for annual review of progress at the Spring Summit. The original Lisbon agenda focused too narrowly on an old-fashioned vision of economic growth as the single central objective of policy. This was corrected in the Gothenburg Summit, which together with the Cardiff Summit focused attention on a broader concept of sustainable development as the over-arching goal, and initiated a wider process of reporting for the Spring Summit. But there seems to be some danger of slipping backwards to a narrower economic focus for the Spring Summit reviews. This would be highly retrograde. The strategy review should be the occasion for deepening and strengthening the Gothenburg perspective of the over-riding priority of sustainability at then level of action of the European leaders and in all other European formations. The indicators of progress to be used should reflect all the dimensions of sustainability. The economic goal of making Europe the most competitive global economy by 2010 should be complemented by the goal of making it the most eco-efficient. Ecoefficiency should indeed be recognised as a central element of competitiveness in the world of the future.

The strategy should also reflect the other major commitment made by Heads of Government at Gothenburg, namely to halt the loss of biodiversity by 2010.

In the Kinsale challenge EEAC have already made suggestions about how the Lisbon process might be better adapted to review progress annually on sustainable development. We should be glad to develop this work further if that would be useful.

2. Stronger Linkages between European and National Strategies

Just as the Sustainable Development Strategy needs to be an integrating instrument within the institutions it needs to provide a framework within which national and local sustainable development strategies can take their place. The previous European strategy did not offer any clear articulation of what needs to be done at the European level to advance sustainability and what should be done nationally. The new strategy needs to address this linkage more systematically and offer a supportive framework whereby the European and national strategies can support and reinforce each other.

It would be useful for the review process to include a systematic examination of where European actions are most needed in order to help advance sustainability at national level. EEAC would be well placed to play a useful part in such an examination.

3. Engaging Civil Society

The new strategy needs to be created in a way that engages the interest, attention and commitment of civil society throughout Europe. It should be based on a wide process of engagement of all parts of society at European and national level, and must result in a clear and intelligible plan of action that can be widely disseminated and understood. It should illuminate and inspire the part that other actors will need to play as well as setting out the Commission's own action plans for achieving sustainability in a form that can be implemented and monitored.

There ought then to be a means of maintaining a regular dialogue with civil society about the implementation and monitoring of the strategy that can engage in regular dialogue with the Commission and other institutions. Recent studies both by the Commission and by our own network show that there are considerable differences between different member states in their level of progress on sustainable development and in the level of public understanding and commitment to it. In the Kinsale challenge we recommended that an independent advisory council or sounding board should be established at European level for this purpose with the appropriate linkages to national councils. In addition it would be useful to build on the excellent work that the European Economic and Social Committee has already initiated in this area, and to encourage them to deepen their engagement with sustainable development issues.

It might be useful to organise a series of discussions with national councils and other representatives of civil society in each member state as to how the European Strategy could best advance and support national strategies for sustainable development and national understanding and commitment at all levels of society to the sustainability agenda. We also recommend a European initiative in the context of the review of the EU Sustainable Development Strategy to promote the formation on national Councils in every country of the Union and to establish informal guidelines as to their mode of formation and operation.

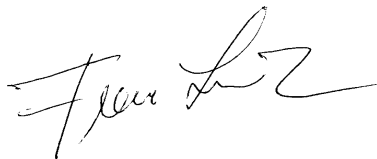
4. The External Dimension

Fourthly it is important that the external dimension be properly addressed in the new strategy. One of the key elements of sustainability is the need to achieve a more harmonious balance between the needs of the developed and developing world. The new strategy should set out more clearly and persuasively than the previous one how Europe intends to address that responsibility in the future.

We hope that these suggestions will be useful to you and your colleagues as you take forward the strategy review. We should be glad to develop these thoughts further at a meeting or in conference format if that would be helpful.

We are sending copies of this letter to all Commissioners, the President of the European Parliament and the Chair of the Environment Committee, the President of the Economic and Social Committee and to the Prime Ministers of the Netherlands, Luxembourg and the United Kingdom as the countries likely to be leading the Council during the review process.

Yours sincerely,



Prof. Franc Lobnik
Chairman of the EEAC Steering Committee



German Council for Sustainable Development
co-chairs, EEAC Working Group Sustainable Development



UK Sustainable Development Commission