



STRENGTHENING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN THE EU

Recommendations from the EEAC Working Group on Sustainable Development as a contribution to the review of the European Sustainable Development Strategy and the preparation of the EU Spring Council in 2004

Chairmen's Paper, November 2003¹

1. Where we are: Europe's Strategy for Sustainability as Unfinished Business

The EU Sustainable Development Strategy (EU-SDS) is a moving asset: The Lisbon and Gothenburg European Councils conclusions and the Johannesburg commitments² are forming the politically binding essence of the EU-SDS, with the Gothenburg conclusions defining its environmental dimension while the 6th Environmental Action Programme (6EAP) and the Cardiff integration process supplement the environmental dimension of sustainable development in Europe. Also of relevance for European sustainable development policies were the Commission Spring Reports and the Commission's Communication "A sustainable Europe for a better world", which the Gothenburg Council draws upon. These documents are intertwined and refer to each other, making it difficult to pinpoint content and scope of a European Sustainable Development Strategy.

The following recommendations focus mainly on strengthening the environmental dimension of sustainable development in the EU Sustainable Development Strategy and in the regular annual cycles of review, while not overlooking the economic and social dimensions.

¹ EEAC Working Group on Sustainable Development is co-chaired by Derek Osborn, Member of the UK Sustainable Development Commission (UK SDC) and Dr. Günther Bachmann, Secretary General of the German Council for Sustainable Development (RNE).

² UN-World Summit on Sustainable Development 2002, Plan of Implementation, Johannesburg

2. Positive Features and Shortcomings

The EU-SDS has a number of positive features. The EU-SDS provides a general and comprehensive framework for sustainable development in the EU. It is a widely appreciated effort to set guidelines for political leadership at the highest level and it shows consistency to the extent that it repeats and underlines features of primary importance, e.g. decoupling of economic development and resource consumption and reform of environmentally adverse subsidies. The EU-SDS calls for the implementation of specific measures within specified timeframes. It recognises the need to take action deemed necessary in the pursuit of sustainable development, such as to reach an agreement on the energy tax directive or the directive on environmental liability. Some of these concrete measures begin to flesh out the more abstract overall framework of the strategy. In sum, the present EU-SDS provides a reasonably balanced mix of long-term targets and specific short-term measures, and is clearly pointing in the right direction for sustainability. Also reflected in the quantity and quality of proposed measures, the Brussels European Council of March 2003 contains positive features, e.g. its call to revive the Cardiff Process and its proposals to increase maritime safety. The review and co-ordination process, as envisaged by EU-SDS, has positive elements. The EC, comprised by the Head of States and Governments, reviews the EU-SDS, including its environmental dimension. The annual rhythm ought furthermore to offer a regular opportunity to assess progress.

However, the EU-SDS and its current status has several shortcomings:

- **Outdated concepts and insufficient attention to the environmental dimension.**

Although the Barcelona European Council calls to give equal attention to all three dimensions during policy-making and decision-taking processes, environmental considerations have apparently not been as high on the political agenda as their economic and social counterparts. The EU-SDS still has a strong focus on economic policies, as reflected by the economic bias of the Spring Reports, in particular the 2002 Report. In addition to this shortcoming, the EU-SDS economic dimension is driven by traditional policy issues. The way in which social welfare and economic growth are looked upon is short term orientated and follows the concept of adding environmental policies as a follow-up to economic progress. This is an outdated concept. Sustainability needs economic policies to reflect criteria such as intergenerational justice and the long-term assessment of capital and natural stocks. Primary features of the EU-SDS such as decoupling fall short in many cases and lack timetables and roadmaps. Also, the revival of the Cardiff Process still has not succeeded.

- **No stimulation for public understanding, no leadership.**

The EU-SDS has an additive rather than integrative character. The strategy is scattered over several documents and lacks an accessible and understandable message, which considerably weakens its impact on everyday decision-making. This format does not stimulate public participation. Its messages have received extremely limited public attention, and even among small expert circles its influence has not been great. Accordingly, the EU-SDS does not provide the necessary leadership and its impact on public debate is limited. So far, the EU-SDS has not strengthened civil society engagement.

- **Missing link to national SD Councils and Strategies and to civil society.**

The EU-SDS does not contain an adequate mechanism to involve civil society. National Councils for Sustainable Development could provide one useful channel for expanding this engagement. There are now in Europe several national Councils for Sustainable Development, which have often developed from rather scientific, environment-oriented institutions into organisations engaging a broad range of stakeholders, reflecting civil society.

On the national level, some national Councils for Sustainable Development have already recommended establishing linkages between the national SD Strategy in their respective country and the EU. There are examples for issue specific strategies – such as those relating to waste for example – that are driven by the need to meet the requirements of EU Directives. For other domestic goals and targets, conditional targets (a national target is valid only if EU decides to set up a European target, see esp. the issue of climate change) are introduced. However, these examples are somewhat scattered. The lack of a specific strategy for linking EU SD policy to national policies is a serious weakness. For example the liberalisation of the electricity and gas markets will require accompanying measures to ensure sustainability on both national and EU level.

- **Lack of interaction between national and European level.**

Currently, national SD Strategies and the EU-SDS are developing in isolation from each other. There is no formal or informal co-ordination between EU organs and national institutions. Instead, the exchange of ideas between the European and national strategies is primarily based on informal and somewhat coincidental discussions between involved individuals, resulting in limited interaction between the EU-SDS and national SD Strategies. Accordingly, their environmental targets and indicators differ considerably. Only occasionally have these targets apparently influenced each other. Some national SD Strategies envisage an ambitious set of specific targets and timeframes,³ whereas the EU-SDS does not contain these or similar targets and timeframes. There is a current lack of interaction between the European and the national level, the wording of national SD Strategies is often vague and omits specific EU-related commitments and timeframes.

- **A poor long-term and political perspective.**

The strategy does thus not present a consistent approach in line with a long-term and politically binding strategy to cope with the unsustainable trends in economic, social and ecological challenges. Although the EU-SDS takes account of the need to adopt specific measures, it occasionally fails to set measures specific in scope and timeframe. The EU-SDS lacks clear targets to replace old technology, to increase the share of environmentally friendly cars by 2010 or to reduce CO₂ emissions in the order of 60 % by 2050, as proposed by Prime Ministers Blair and Persson in their letter to the Greek Presidency of 25 February 2003.

³ E.g. energy and resource efficiency shall have doubled by 2020 (compared to 1990 respectively 1994), transport shall be reduced by 5 % (goods) and 20 % (persons) by 2020 (compared to 1999), exposure of the population to significant air pollutants shall be reduced by 70 % in 2010 (compared to 1990).

- **Proposed cut in the number of indicators is sidelining the core idea of sustainability.**

The list of more than 40 European indicators (with seven covering the environment) reflects the scattered character of the EU-SDS as these indicators do not necessarily correspond with the areas covered by the SDS and by Member States SD Strategies. Instead of clarifying and streamlining these indicators the European Commission recently proposed to cut the number of environment related indicators from seven to one. The cut is part of an overall reduction of the number of indicators used to measure the Lisbon process.

The cut is sidelining environmental and SD indicators. As a late addition to the Lisbon process the Gothenburg European Council 2001 introduced a list of seven environmental indicators. Now, only the indicator for greenhouse gas emissions remains. The short list categorises two other indicators (energy intensity and volume of transport) as indicators of 'environmental' aspects of sustainable development', but it is doubtful that the implementation of these indicators will set the appropriate context for an adequate environmental assessment.

- **Institutional shortcomings and the lack of leadership and co-ordination.**

The European Council's agenda is usually crowded and susceptible to short-term and fundamental changes in line with shifting perceptions of urgency. The 2003 Spring Council was overshadowed by the war in Iraq and almost exclusively perceived as the "Iraq summit". Moreover, the focus of the EC work has been on the economic dimension of the Lisbon strategy. Similarly, the General Affairs & External Relations Council (GAERC), partly due to its workload and political considerations, did not adequately address issues of sustainable development and its environmental dimension. Other issues were usually deemed more important, creating a notable lack of leadership and horizontal co-ordination.

Neither the GAERC nor other Council formations played a prominent role in strengthening the EU-SDS, partly because these institutions are specialised in negotiating proposals. These institutional shortcomings are aggravated by the fact that the European Parliament, generally an advocate of progressive environmental policies, is not an important actor in the field of the EU-SDS. While the EP has commented on the outcomes of the Spring Councils, it has not been formally involved in drafting or even adopting the Council conclusions.

- **Missing focus on enlargement.**

For the past decade, enlargement of the EU has been one of the most dominant and important issues. With great likelihood, enlargement will be the most important item on the 2004 Spring Council's agenda, to be held only weeks before the formal accession of 10 new Member States. However, the EU-SDS has not addressed enlargement in detail. The adoption of the acquis in the new Member States may be expected to have some important positive environmental effects but at the same time enlargement is also likely to have some damaging impacts on ecology in the accession countries and these impacts need to be addressed. Instead, while stressing the positive economic effects of enlargement, the Brussels European Council only refers to the potential benefits of enlargement on sustainable development at the global level, arguing that a Union of 25 would be an even stronger global leader in implementing the commitments of Doha, Monterrey and Johannesburg.

3. Expectations and Recommendations in order to Strengthen Sustainable Development in the EU

Judging from the experiences of national Councils for SD the poor political performance of a SD Strategy may lead to a setback for environmental and SD policies. This seems to be a real danger the EU-SDS is facing. On the other hand, a well drafted and implemented EU-SDS could open new windows of opportunity for a successful and meaningful political move into an era of fully integrated sustainable development which redirects economic growth into paths that take full account both of environmental needs and of social and intergenerational welfare. The Member States' Councils for SD urge the European Commission to make use of these experiences and to open a way to better balancing and defining the content of Europe's SD Strategy⁴. SD Strategies can make a difference.

I. Reflecting Sustainable Development in the EU Convention

We welcome the fact that the objective of sustainable development and the principle of environmental integration were finally restored in the draft Constitution. We support Commissioner Wallstrom's proposal to add a Protocol on Sustainable Development to the future Constitution.

However, in addition to this the Constitution's wording on the policies of the EU needs to be updated. In order to meet the reality of current policies and to allow the EU to deal with new environmental and social challenges we suggest adding the eradication of poverty as a primary objective and introducing a requirement to make the policies of the EU consistent with the principle of sustainable development. The corresponding articles in Part III especially in the field of agriculture, cohesion, transport, energy and trade policies should also be worded in such a way as to reflect this. The concept of sustainable development should also appear in the provisions on environmental policy.

II. EU-SDS should be focused in order to place sustainability as an overarching goal of the Union and to make Europe the world's most eco-efficient area by 2010.

In order to live up to the request of the Barcelona European Council to give equal attention in policy-making and decision-taking processes to economic, social and environmental considerations, the Lisbon overarching goal to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy by 2010 should be supplemented by a new strategic target, according to which the EU should develop into the world's most eco-efficient area by 2010.

We propose the introduction of more ambitious targets and timetables inter alia for decoupling economic development and resources consumption, preserving both natural and agricultural biodiversity and reducing losses of species, shifting energy production to renewable energies and a clean energy supply. The strategy should encourage fiscal reform in order to reduce environmental pressure, stimulate the creation of work and give stronger incentives to

⁴ In February 2001 the EEAC presented a statement of proposals for the EU SD Strategy, *Greening Sustainable Development Strategies*. There are many suggestions in that document which would still be relevant to strengthening and completing the EU strategy.

economic innovation. And it should propose appropriate delivery mechanisms to stimulate the technical innovation and changes of lifestyle required and to encourage ethical investment.

We appreciate the emphasis of the Sustainable Development Round Table of independent experts reporting directly to Romano Prodi on developing a specifically European way of reshaping and enhancing the cultural, economic and social rationale for welfare systems while modernising them to reply to the growing requirements for environmental sustainability.

III. European SD policy needs a sounding board.

The impact and successful implementation of the EU-SDS strongly depend on its acceptance in civil society. It is vital for the EU process towards a more sustainable development to provide strong links with civil society and to deliver at EU level a stronger expression of the environmental options as a driving force for sustainability. Therefore, the EU should establish, complementarily to the national Councils for Sustainable Development, an EU Council for Sustainable Development which should make good use of the Member States' experiences in involving national SD Councils. Its task should be to facilitate and encourage the exchange of experience and it should contribute to the agenda setting and monitoring of the EU-SDS while enforcing strategic assessment mechanisms and participation processes and linking of national and European SD policies.

IV. Linking national and European level of SD policies.

The EC should promote a stronger link between EU-SDS and national SD Strategies. A more institutionalised but still informal exchange of positive experiences and best practice examples between the EU- and national SD Strategies would be an important step towards making the SD Strategies more visible in public perception. Furthermore, better co-ordination between the national and European level would improve the quality and implementation of the EU-SDS, as policies on sustainable development are increasingly determined at EU- and implemented at Member State level.

We also recommend to better link European efforts to the Johannesburg Plan of Action, e.g. with the UN Decade on Sustainability and Education and with the developing of the EU's ten-year commitment to sustainable consumption and production.

V. Delivering solutions instead of words.

Independent political comments from outside the European Union frequently perceive the EU-SDS as a programmatic paper that is strong in words but very poor in delivering the European contribution to the Millennium Goals, the Monterrey Promises or the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation. As to the global challenges of sustainability the consistency of EU policies and the Union's decision making capability are often challenged.

Within the current process for preparing meetings of the European Council and for co-ordinating implementation of the EU-SDS, the interests of the environment and the global challenges are not sufficiently represented. Respective mechanisms to remedy the current shortcomings should be considered. A high level group on sustainable development under the

auspices of GAERC could be an appropriate entity to address the lack of political leadership and co-ordination. Equally important, the EP needs to be engaged more closely.

The conclusions of the Brussels European Council should form the basis for an enhanced and strengthened Cardiff-Process, providing goals, indicators, timeframes, monitoring, and expanding the Cardiff-Process to other policy areas such as education and employment, while taking advantage of the foreseen annual stocktaking. The effort to establish an appropriate set of indicators needs to be renewed. The current shortlist does not provide a suitable instrument to review the European progress in sustainable development.

VI. Focusing on enlargement.

On the eve of the accession of 10 new member states, the EU-SDS needs to address specific environmental problems arising from enlargement, in particular the increase in traffic. Enlargement is a unique opportunity to strengthen sustainable development in the whole of Europe, as the EU-SDS provides a frame to address concrete issues, such as land, water and waste management or reforms of the structural fund in light of environmental considerations. To seize this unique opportunity, the information flow between the old and new Member States has to improve.

VII. Communicating Sustainability.

The EU-SDS should be promulgated more widely and in a much more accessible format so as to become leader and focus for efforts throughout Europe. Accessibility and visibility are essential features to improve public participation and to enhance the political weight of sustainability policies. The EU-SDS has to move away from its current abstract and inaccessible format. Instead, it needs to be compiled in one accessible document. Its focus should be on concrete measures to illustrate and deliver the ideas of sustainability, and on binding targets and timetables to provide clear guidance for public discussion and decision-making. Visible and easily comprehensible measures as leitmotiv for EU-SDS, e.g. sustainable consumption and production patterns, are important tools to "link sustainable development to real life of people".