



Statement of the EEAC Sustainable Development Working Group

The Windsor Momentum: The next push-up

Members of the EEAC Sustainable Development Working Group (SDWG) have participated in the sustainable development networking event organised by the UK Presidency at Windsor on 14-15 July 2005 and have agreed the following statement on some of the key issues under discussion.

The SDWG recalls and reaffirms its previous statements on sustainable development in Europe as set out inter alia in the 2004 Kinsale Challenge and in its letter of 10th June 2005 to Heads of Government.

Building on those earlier recommendations and reflecting the outcome of the Windsor event they wish to underline the following points and to draw them to the attention of all actors concerned with the promotion of sustainable development in Europe, and the creation of the new European Sustainable Development Strategy.

The SDS Review momentum

The challenge of sustainability and the task of creating a new European Sustainable Development Strategy (EU SDS) provide a unique opportunity for the European Institutions to give practical effect to their repeated declarations of commitment to the vision of sustainable development. It is vital that this task and the action that needs to flow from it should be put at the forefront of European action during the next twelve months. The institutions must deliver on the Council's stated determination to achieve an ambitious and dynamic revision of the EU SDS that is capable of commanding widespread political and public support throughout Europe.

While fully understanding and supporting the concerns that many leaders are expressing for the state of the economy, employment and competitiveness in Europe and the importance of the Lisbon strategy for bringing about improvements on these issues, the SDWG emphasises the vital importance of pursuing those objectives within the overall framework of a strong and meaningful Sustainable Development Strategy. Innovation, industrial transformation and job creation need to be oriented in sustainable directions.

A dash for economic growth that ignores environmental and social objectives will not only damage society and the environment but will very soon damage economic growth itself – a truly self-defeating or lose/lose/lose outcome. Once the new EU SDS is in place there should be an annual stocktaking of progress with it to provide the context for the annual Lisbon review of economic performance.

The SDWG appreciates the care that the Commission has taken in the preparatory processes for the review of the Sustainable Development Strategy and the wide-ranging consultations they have undertaken during this period. It is important that all this work now be brought to fruition in a Commission proposal or communication as soon as possible. Expectations have been aroused, - the political formations and civil society are all poised to respond creatively and constructively. Let there be no further delay, lest confidence and momentum be lost.

The SDWG believes that the priority issues identified by the Commission together with the seven thematic strategies already cover the most important issues at the current time, and that they should form the main thrust of the Strategy revision and the action to flow from it. In view of recent developments it would however be useful to add the topic of energy and energy security including the efficient use of energy to the climate change discussion. The revised Strategy should also more explicitly address the general topic of moving to more sustainable patterns of production and consumption, implicating the external dimension and the need to minimise the global footprint of the EU on the rest of the world.

The SDWG notes the evidence from monitoring data and other sources that Europe is moving in an unsustainable direction, storing up problems that will be even harder to handle in the future than they are now. The concepts of natural limits and the limitations on the carrying capacity of the globe, and of the ecological footprint that countries or individuals impose on others by their activities are moving beyond the realm of effective metaphor to becoming stark and measurable reality. It should be an urgent task for the new EU SDS to identify clearly and sharply these problematic areas where we are beginning to press against natural limits, and to propose means for bringing them back on course. Targets need to be reaffirmed and in some cases given stronger enforcement measures. New methods need to be brought forward for promoting better performance sometimes by regulatory measures, sometimes by pricing mechanisms and fiscal reform, sometimes by more vigorous promotion and encouragement of best practice.

A call for leadership

The SDWG notes the concern expressed by many members states that action on sustainability should be taken at the most appropriate level, whether that be local, regional, national, European or global, in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity. The SDWG believes however that the Commission should not be too self-effacing in this regard. There are many sustainability issues in Europe that can only effectively be pursued collectively at European level; and there are many others where the EU institutions could play a vital role in encouraging and promoting appropriate sustainability actions at national, regional and local level. Action on the environment and on sustainability is one of the areas in which the European institutions have been most successful in the past, and have enjoyed their highest levels of popular support. Conversely any perception that the omission and the European institutions had lost their appetite or ambition to lead the transition towards sustainability would feed popular disillusion with the European project.

The new EU SD Strategy could be particularly important in providing an encouraging framework for the further development and strengthening of national Sustainable Development Strategies. This should not take the form of a detailed blueprint for all national strategies but could usefully indicate areas in which mutually supportive action at EU and national (and regional and local where appropriate) levels will be needed. It could propose methods for promoting this kind of effective co-operation.

The SDWG regards it as being crucial that the revised Strategy be brought forward by the Commission as a whole and be fully integrated into the work of all the DGs. The Sustainable Development Strategy and its monitoring and implementation should continue to be co-ordinated from the Secretary General's Department, with supporting machinery comparable in scale and influence to the structures established for the Lisbon strategy work.

Similarly the Strategy needs to provide a context for the work of all the Council formations and to be adopted with the full support of the Council itself. There also needs to be a process to generate interest and commitment to the Strategy in the Parliament.

The final version of the Strategy needs to be a single document incorporating the internal and external dimensions and adopted by all the EU institutions. Popular versions of it should be produced, and promulgated widely throughout Europe in forms that are comprehensible, and

show how Europe is seriously taking account of sustainability, and how it is preparing to modify or adjust all its other programmes and policies in the light of the sustainability challenge. It would be desirable to place the Sustainable Development Strategy at the heart of the Commission's overall Communications Strategy, and to ensure that there are adequate funds for communicating the sustainability message and the thrust of the Strategy throughout Europe. Such a fund might for example be used to support innovation at local level or amongst industry with award schemes or other means of stimulating interest and support.

Monitoring and accompanying the process

The SDWG strongly supports the emphasis being placed on reporting and monitoring in the Commission's preparatory papers. The previous EU SD Strategy did not have sufficient visibility and had inadequate procedures for reporting and monitoring. In principle the SDWG is supportive of many of the ideas that have been canvassed in so far as they will help to maintain momentum and continued political and official engagement on sustainability issues. In particular it supports the suggestions for:

- an enhanced reporting mechanism by member states and by the Commission itself: Reporting should not be too comprehensive and onerous, but should concentrate on core issues, and should be innovative in methodology, considering for example such new methods as rating or ranking performance on particular issues, exchange of best practice examples etc.;
- improved monitoring systems: Monitoring should include the compilation of sustainability indicators, but should not be confined to this. It should include a broad dialogue involving civil society and leading to an assessment of political momentum, the degree of public engagement and involvement, and the adequacy of measures taken;
- a peer group review process, provided that it is established on sufficiently rigorous, demanding and transparent lines and does not simply become a mechanism for the peer countries to derive some mournful consolation for their common failure to achieve sustainability objectives. Such a process should include a reporting scheme for its follow-up, so that both the reviewed and the reviewers might see the results of their common labour;
- a regular annual cycle of review and refreshment of the process within a five-year cycle between one major strategy revision and the next.

The SDWG notes that in several EU member states the process for creating and monitoring Sustainable Development Strategies is invigorated by the active participation of Sustainable Development Councils that are able to use their expertise and positions of influence to comment on key issues publicly and privately and to keep progress under active review and in the public eye. EEAC reiterates its previous recommendation that the creation of the new EU SD Strategy should be made the occasion for creating a mechanism or body that gives experts and stakeholders at European level a similar role.

The SDWG notes with interest the suggestion for the establishment of a new network of members state officials with responsibilities for sustainable development. If such a network is established EEAC would be pleased to co-operate with it in planning future events and a work programme that would contribute to the advancement of sustainable development throughout Europe.

Windsor/Brussels; July 2005

Representatives of the following EEAC councils support this WG statement:

Belgium	Federal Council for Sustainable Development, FRDO-CFDD Flemish Environment and Nature Council, MiNa-Raad
Czech Republic	Government Council for Sustainable Development, RVUR
Finland	Finnish National Commission on Sustainable Development, FNCSD
Germany	Council for Sustainable Development, RNE German Advisory Council on the Environment, SRU
Hungary	National Environment Council, OKT
Ireland	Irish Sustainable Development Partnership, Comhar
Portugal	National Council for Environment and Sustainable Development, CNADS
Sweden	Environmental Advisory Council, MVB
UK	Sustainable Development Commission, UK SDC

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