

## "Lessons from the Assessment of the EU's Sustainable Development Strategy"

### Introduction

At the beginning of August, members of my staff in DG Environment sent an e-mail to Mr. Hontelez informing him of the launch of the public consultation on the review of the European Sustainable Development Strategy. While we were sure that we would get a reply, we did not expect it to come so quickly. Only seconds later we received an email saying *"We have identified your message as spam. It will not be delivered"*.

Fortunately, the EEB had already sent us an advance copy of their draft assessment of the Strategy's implementation in June, which I had seen, and I am very pleased to have this opportunity to exchange our views on this important subject. Leaving aside the occasional electronic and other glitches in the relationship between the EEB and the Commission, I do believe that overall our co-operation has been constructive and very stimulating.

The EEB assessment of our Sustainable Development Strategy's implementation was critical about what the EEB sees as a lack of progress in delivering what had been promised in 2001. Or to put it another way, the message might have read: *"We have identified your strategy as useful, but overall you have failed to deliver what you committed to in 2001"*.

This morning, I have been asked to speak about *'Lessons from the Assessment of the EU's Sustainable Development Strategy'* and to give you a first insight into the responses we received during the consultation. But I am afraid I have to disappoint you - the Commission has not yet reviewed the Strategy, so I cannot discuss our observations. We expect work on the review to start later this month. While this will still happen under the current Commission, it will be up to the new Commission to discuss the contents of the review and decide on its final orientations.

Also, the stakeholder consultation is still ongoing. It is scheduled to run until the end of October, so I cannot yet talk about the comments we have received. Instead, I will tell you what will be the main contributions to feed into the review - and how I personally view successes and failures in implementing the EU's Sustainable Development Strategy.

### The review of the SDS

Although the Commission has not started its review yet, much preparatory work has been going on. I know this a somewhat dry topic, but I believe it will interest you to hear what the four main inputs to the review will be:

1. Firstly, a task force of the European Statistical System lead by Eurostat has, over the last two years, been developing a set of sustainable development indicators that will allow us to quantify progress. These indicators will be used to underpin the Commission's review.

2. Secondly, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) has produced an excellent opinion on the Sustainable Development Strategy. The opinion is comprehensive in its scope and it does not shrink from raising a number of important - and at times uncomfortable – questions. It also identifies a number of major barriers to sustainable development in Europe and makes valuable recommendations for the revised Strategy.

3. Thirdly, as I mentioned, we have the public consultation on the review of the Strategy, which was launched at the end of July and will run until the end of October.

Let me use this opportunity to thank the EEB for its early assessment. Its analysis has been particularly useful in identifying some of the main problems in delivering on our 2001 commitments. It also provides constructive proposals for setting future priorities for the coming five years. I am therefore grateful for the effort you put into preparing this detailed, critical, yet constructive assessment.

Cynics might of course claim that public consultations are sometimes just a “tick the box” exercise, where the Commission prepares a document, puts it on the internet, collects the responses, ignores them, and then carries on as before!

Let me say one thing about this particular consultation: there is no Commission proposal yet. We are consulting at a very early stage in the review process, and before the Commission has produced its own assessment. This will allow us to fully incorporate the many ideas and recommendations that are put to us. I believe that in this sense this consultation is a first and that what we are talking about is true participation in the spirit of the Aarhus Convention.

4. Finally, I would like to mention the forthcoming Stakeholder Forum which we are organising jointly with the European Economic and Social Committee on the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> of November. I am sure that the Forum will provide an excellent opportunity to discuss these issues in detail, and I hope that many of you will attend the meeting.

All four of these inputs, along with the conclusions of conferences such as this, will feed into the Commission’s own assessment of what has worked, what has not, and where we go from here.

### **What the review will do**

Now, how will the review be structured and what will it do?

Although my crystal ball is looking a little cloudy, I can predict that the review will have a retrospective section that makes a quantitative - and I emphasise *quantitative* - assessment of progress since 2001. It will also have a more forward-looking section that will set the priorities for the next five-year period, and bring together all the commitments made since 2001. This is because we clearly need to better incorporate the international dimension, and what is going on in the Member States. That is how the EU Strategy links to national sustainable development strategies in the Member States.

## **Personal assessment of progress since 2001**

While waiting for the official assessment, I would like to give you my **personal assessment** of how the EU Sustainable Development Strategy has performed and what shape it should take in the coming five years.

## **Structure and aims of the SDS**

The adoption of the EU SDS in Gothenburg in 2001 was the start of a journey for the European Union. As you are aware, it has been a long and winding road with more than its fair share of ups and downs. Moreover, we are still far from reaching our journey's end.

Sustainable development is a complex concept. While we do not know the precise recipe for achieving sustainability, we do know what is unsustainable. As a result, the EU's journey has not been so much towards a fixed objective, but rather away from unsustainability - unsustainable use of chemicals, unsustainable greenhouse gas emissions, unsustainable resource use, etc.

So, not surprisingly, the Strategy mentions a number of key unsustainable trends that pose a serious threat to our current and future well-being, such as climate change, rapid transport growth, threats to human health and unsustainable natural resource use. For each of these key issues the strategy proposes headline objectives and a series of policy measures.

But the Strategy - and this is arguably the more ambitious part of it - also calls into question the very way that we make policies. It urges a new approach to policy-making that ensures that policies are designed to work together more coherently in order to enhance welfare both in the EU and globally.

In this sense, the 2001 Strategy is a first serious attempt by the EU to take an integrated and holistic approach to policy-making. It aims to provide an overarching framework for better policy coherence and to strike the 'right' balance between the economic, social and environmental dimensions.

With this review we will for the first time pause and look back to see how far we have come since setting out along the path to sustainable development in 2001.

## **Progress made**

Without prejudging the results of the review, it is clear that there have been some achievements, in three main areas.

1. Firstly, we've taken steps to improve coherence between our internal policies and our international commitments. The introduction of impact assessment in the Commission has made us more aware of the multiple effects of policies. The ongoing reforms of the EU's common agricultural and fisheries policies represent a move towards greater sustainability and away from distorting subsidies. Efforts still need to be intensified, but we are definitely on the right track.
2. Secondly, we have developed various policies to enhance sustainability within the EU. Let me give you a few examples:
  - The EU is the global leader in implementing the Kyoto Protocol and reducing emissions. I am especially pleased by EU ratification of

the Kyoto Protocol, and the successes of the European Climate Change Programme, including initiatives such as the Emissions Trading Directive;

- Once adopted, the EU's new EU regulatory system for chemicals, REACH, will make a decisive contribution towards ensuring the 'sound management of chemicals', which is a requirement from Johannesburg. And our Environmental Technologies Action Plan (ETAP), launched in January, will help remove barriers to the development and use of more efficient environmental technologies.
- In a new strategy to promote sustainable use of resources, we aim to examine the whole lifecycle of natural resources and to identify the uses of resources with the greatest potential for environmental improvement. A similar strategy is being developed to improve waste prevention and recycling, and Integrated Product Policy seeks to reduce the environmental impacts of products throughout their lifecycles.

3. Thirdly, we have improved our capacity to deliver on our international commitments. Let me give you four examples here.

- First, we are increasing our levels of official development aid. The European Commission is closely monitoring progress by Member States towards the Monterey commitments. Our latest report shows that, not only that are we on track, but we are towards the top of the class of OECD countries.
- Second, we are spending aid more effectively. We are doing this by ensuring improved coordination of development cooperation policies, by untying aid, and participating in the Heavily Indebted Poor Country Initiative.
- Third, we are actively supporting the reform of international institutions, for example by reviving the Doha WTO negotiations, which are aimed at taking account of the needs of developing countries in international trade.
- Last, but not least, we launched three major Partnership Initiatives in Johannesburg: the EU Energy Initiative (EUEI), the Forest Action Plan, and the EU Water Initiative (EUWI). The latter is the EU's major contribution to meeting the WSSD goals on water and sanitation, and truly departs from "business as usual".

### **Failures**

So I hope that you will agree that we have made some progress towards sustainable development in the EU and globally. But I am well aware that we are only at the start of what I called a "long and winding road".

There are areas where progress has been unsatisfactory. Many of the trends in energy, transport, environment and health, and biodiversity are still unsustainable.

To a certain extent this lack of progress is not surprising, given the fact that many of these are considered to be 'slow burn' issues. We knew in 2001 that change would not happen overnight. But there are also a number of areas where not only have we not met our objectives, but we have not even turned the corner yet! For

example, carbon dioxide emissions from transport have increased by 20% since 1990 and this trend is continuing.

I believe that one of the major challenges to meet when it comes to sustainable development is to create both a societal demand and firm a political commitment for it. And we still have a long way to go to explain to the wider public and decision-makers that the concept works – and how it works – in other words, that human welfare will continue to increase only if we put equal emphasis on the three dimensions of sustainable development.

### **Expectations for the revised SDS**

Now, what do I expect from revision of the EU's Sustainable Development Strategy? I don't think that we will see a large-scale change in the current strategy.

I believe most of the objectives set out in 2001 are still valid, although of course there may be a few more to add. And where we have failed to meet an objective, we will need to employ new measures and policy tools. But the objectives themselves remain as valid today as they were in 2001. In fact, you could even argue that given the lack of progress on meeting certain targets, such as the percentage of electricity from renewables, the EU now faces an even steeper challenge.

The way that we approach this review will not only set a precedent for future reviews, but it will have a large influence on the EU's priorities during the next Commission term and beyond. This is why it is essential that we have a comprehensive and full review - and that we use it to reinvigorate sustainable development in the EU. We must also push to ensure that the review is completed in time, so that the 2005 Spring European Council can discuss the Lisbon mid-term review, the new financial perspectives and the sustainable development review at the same time.

### **Conclusions and wider political context**

I believe that the Sustainable Development Strategy review can be an opportunity:

- to ensure a renewed, high-level political commitment to sustainable development;
- to put the environment back on the political agenda; and
- to reinvigorate the sustainable development approach to policy-making in the EU.

In the current economic and political climate of sluggish economic growth and fears regarding EU competitiveness, this won't be easy, but I think that if we use the right arguments and establish the right alliances we can still succeed.

I firmly believe that sustainable development is the only way in which we can ensure continued human welfare and a fair distribution of our wealth, and, now that my mandate as European Commissioner for the Environment has come to its end, I can only promise that I will continue to stand for these principles with unchanged and, if possible, even stronger commitment.