

Contribution John Hontelez, Secretary General EEB, at the ECOSOC/Commission hearing on the Sustainable Development Strategy, 27/4/01

Session on the **Commission's final proposal** on the Sustainability Strategy and the **Göteborg European Council conclusions**.

For environmental organisations there is much at stake in Goteborg. For us Sustainable Development is a logical concept, for at least 15 years, since the Brundlandt Commission produced its famous report, but even before it was clear to us that traditional environmental policies and technological innovations only cannot reverse the trends of increasing depletion of regional and global natural resources and biodiversity and penetration of toxic manmade substances into the eco-systems and human bodies. And in 1992, finally, it was clearly recognised by the governments of the world, at the Earth Summit, that in the industrialised countries of the world, **unsustainable consumption and production patterns are the main cause for the problems**. So realising structural changes in the economy and to a certain extent changes also in our culture, which is increasingly affected by commercial incentives, is essential. And as we are talking about societies that have to make difficult choices we need to ensure that the outcomes will have visible positive impacts for the quality of life for people.

Environmental organisations have succesfully campaigned for the inclusion of sustainable development in the Amsterdam Treaty, and since then we continued to make proposals and create pressure leading towards the Helsinki initiative.

The EEB saw immediately the potential of "Helsinki" and, mostly in cooperation with others, we have tried to stimulate the work within the Commission. We have had many discussions, on all levels. In September last year we produced concrete proposals on how the Strategic Objectives of the Commission for 2000-2005 could form the core of the Sustainable Development Strategy, a document called "Shaping the New Europe, Working towards sustainable development". Second title was "a leading role for the European Commission" and about that we have become more and more pessimistic throughout the process. So far, the Commission has shown no leadership at all, and if Goteborg fails, it bares a large responsibility for that.

In fact, we have taken up the task the Commission neglected. We have organised discussions with the Swedish Presidency, national governments, stakeholders on what the Strategy should look like. Most recent result is a publication with 17 contributions from different stakeholders. It shows that there is remarkable agreement to be found among people with different backgrounds and interest. And today I want to present you some common conclusions of these stakeholders, including environmentalists, church representatives, trade unions, industry, agriculture, etc. The paper on the table follows the questions from the Commission. It is too long to present it entirely, and I encourage you to read it. In this contribution I go straight to the end of it, where we answer the question on "*What specific objectives would you like to see included in the EU strategy for Gothenburg? What arrangements should be foreseen to ensure their implementation?*"

We propose the overall objective to be: *"To become the most resource efficient economy in the world, combining high standards of living, good public health, strong social inclusion and cohesion and a high quality environment with the long term objective of reaching levels of resource use and environmental impact that are in line with the carrying capacity of the European and global environment – taking into account the need to share environmental resources equitably to allow sustainable development for all the world's people."*

We formulate *Specific long-term objectives, in brief:*

1. Energy and climate

*Reduce fossil fuel consumption in the EU with 90% by dramatically increasing energy efficiency of production and consumption and realising the transition to a predominantly renewable energy supply in the Union.*

2. Public health

*Minimise the risks of dangerous substances in the environment and food and maximise access to health services and information.*

3. Management of natural resources

*Halt the decline of habitats, natural stocks and the extinction of species; protect the character of rural areas. Increase the resource efficiency of production and consumption by a factor 10.*

4. Poverty and social exclusion

*Minimise persistent income poverty, achieve maximum convergence in education and employment between social groups, regions and member states.*

5. Ageing and demographic trends

*Realise a transition to pension systems that are transparent, fair, fulfilling pensioners' needs and enabling sustainable and responsible investment; realise the necessary conditions for a useful, flexible and attractive working life for the elderly.*

6. Mobility and land use

*Realise a stabilisation of the total distances travelled – with a transition to an access-oriented approach with optimised land-use planning, application of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), clean technology, etc. Support regional and local production and consumption.*

These are objectives for the 6 areas the Commission intends to work with. We have added two more that we think cannot be absent:

7. Global interdependence

*All policies in the Union should have at least a neutral and preferably a positive impact on sustainable development in societies in the rest of the world.*

8. Accountability to Citizens

*Ensure that citizens can hold businesses, governments and other institutions accountable for sustainable development in a democratic manner.*

We furthermore insist on the leadership of the EU, *"combined with active involvement of civil society:"* And this combination can be realised with:

1. *long term objectives aimed for implementation by 2020, with the obligation to adopt within one year from the Gothenburg Summit more specific (intermediate) targets,*

*indicators, timetables and actions.*

2. *Active involvement of national parliaments, the European Parliament and civil society from now on – making dialogue and genuine consultation and co-operation a general requirement.*
3. *Similar involvement from the accession countries in the process.*
4. *A system of independent monitoring and reporting to the President, the Commission, the Council, the European Parliament and the Member states.*
5. *Commitment from the Council and President of the Commission to annually evaluate the implementation of the Strategy, with the Council and the Commission reporting annually to the European Parliament.*
6. *Policy integration: the objectives set out in this strategy will apply for all EU and member states policies; existing policies will have to be scrutinised for their compliance with the objectives and where they conflict, actions have to be proposed to alter this. New policies will have to demonstrate that they are in line with the objectives. The current Cardiff process for integration is valuable and should continue, including the objectives set out in this strategy.*
7. *Define and outline the most urgent needs for reform of existing EU policies and set up a time frame and general aims for these reforms (e.g. CAP, Euratom, etc.) during the Gothenburg Summit.*
8. *Reinforce and establish mechanisms to ensure that citizens can challenge governments, businesses and other institutions over policies and practices which run counter to their right to enjoyment of a healthy life in a sustainable environment.*
9. *Agree on some concrete first steps which can be put easily and immediately into practice – such as sustainability criteria for public procurement and the requiring all new policy measures to have a sustainability impact statement - to illustrate the vision of the SDS to the general public.*

In the paper you can find a strong plea to explicitly introduce the global dimension in all relevant areas.

I would like to end with some personal comments.

1. It is important that the Commission not just adopts the nowadays popular 3 pillars image of Sustainability. This gives the false impression that the three dimension of social, economical and ecological interests are of similar character and can be traded off against each other. As the European Environment Advisory Councils, called "Greening Sustainable Development Strategies" says it:

*"Neither the resources and services offered by the natural environment nor its unique values can usually be substituted by, or traded for, the economic or social products of civilisation."*

2. Secondly, there is another dimension important, which is the cultural one. Our culture is highjacked by commercial interests. A small example: Mobistar in Belgium announced two months ago that it intends to introduce the throw-away mobile phone here. A device of cardboard, but of course with electronics in it made from different materials and a power source, with which one can phone for 40 minutes and then buy the next one.

Besides the completely un-necessary extra waste problem Mobistar is creating, it is promoting a mentality among people about material goods which runs entirely counter to the objective of sustainable development. And it also shows that it is very dangerous to accept the seductive invitations of business to leave sustainability to them. Without political leadership, expressed in tough regulation combined with strong market incentives we will not manage to live within our carrying capacity.

3. Gothenburg should come with at least one bold and concrete programme, which is "greening the economy". Very short term abolition of environmentally perverse subsidies and promotion of sound subsidies, greening procurement policies, introduction of environmental liability and producers responsibility, and environmental tax reform are essential elements. Environmental tax reform, often heavily criticized in particular by industry, is an inevitable part to get the incentives right, but also to reduce taxation on labour and to raise public means to targeted support to technology innovation.

4. Gothenburg should start a discussion, leading to pertinent results during the Madrid Summit before Rio+10, challenging the dominance of trade liberalisation over other interests. Even the World Trade Organisation's own research shows that liberalisation magnifies environmental externalities such as those relating to over-use of under-priced fossil fuels (which includes climate change). Moreover, the very disciplines of competitive trade have prevented even the EU agreeing energy taxation to internalise these costs. The likelihood of poorer developing countries adopting effective domestic policy in such circumstances is so remote as to be non-existent. Worse still, sustainable economic activities such as organic and low-input agriculture or driven out by indiscriminate, uncontrolled liberalisation.

5. Finally: politicians and business should stop resisting decisions on environmental targets and timetables with arguments about scientific uncertainty and lack of cost-benefit evidence. Are such requirements met for economic and social targets of the EU, like the Euro-criteria, or the 70% unemployment rate agreed in Lisbon. No, they are political targets, to drive processes. Such political targets we need as well to protect biodiversity, safe human exposure levels, greenhouse gas emissions, mobility, etc.