

Federal Council For Sustainable Development (FCSD)

(FRDO-CFDD)

Recommendations for the sustainable development policy of the new federal government

- Advice on own initiative
 - Prepared by the workgroup on Strategies for Sustainable Development
 - Approved by the general meeting of 25 June 2010 (cf. Annex 1)
 - The original language of this advice is Dutch
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1. Context

[1] The Federal Council for Sustainable Development (FCSD) has in regard to the elections of 13 June 2010 formulated a number of important points for the attention of the future federal government concerning the general policy for sustainable development. To that end, the Council points to governance and the institutional aspects of sustainable development, whilst for more specific recommendations as to content, it refers to the advice papers it drew up during the previous legislature in such areas as climate and energy policy, the Belgian presidency of the EU, cooperation for development, taxation, mobility, etc.

[2] The Council has indicated that all too often, sustainable development is still considered a synonym of environmental policy, whereas it is actually an integrated approach to the economic, social and environmental dimensions of development – an approach that examines the issue from a broader spatial (world dimension) and temporal perspective (not only in the short- but also the medium- and long-term).

2. Advice

Context: The challenge of the current crises

[3] The FCSD has noted that we are currently confronted with different, often inter-related crises: there is the financial and economic issue, accompanied by unemployment and the recent budget deficits, as well as crises concerning the climate, energy, biodiversity, poverty, the scarcity of raw materials, etc. The new government will have to pursue efficient policy in all these areas, given the pressing nature of the problems on the one hand and the budget restrictions on the other. A policy of business as usual will simply not do: an economically efficient, socially justified and ecologically sustainable transition policy is needed to secure employment, tackle the problem of the ageing population, deal with the consequences of climate change, etc. and in so doing arrive at a low-carbon, social and innovative welfare state.

An integrated approach, with a long-term vision

[4] This transition policy must entail an integrated approach to the different aforementioned crises concurrently at the national, EU and world level. To that end, it is essential to integrate short-term measures in a long-term vision of a society that secures the prosperity and the well-being of all, without exceeding the capacity of our planet. It makes no sense to propose policy solutions for economic, financial and budgetary recovery in the short term that would entail even more serious problems in the future. The Council consequently called for a *sustainable new deal* at its annual forum for 2009: a structural, integrated, future-oriented response to the current crises.

[5] A long-term vision is now part of the amendment of the Sustainable Development Act of 1997, and the FCSD is delighted that this approach is henceforth institutionally embedded. The Council has for that matter always underscored the importance of such a vision of the future in the medium- and long-term, and has itself been active on this front as well. For instance, the FCSD devoted its annual forum 2008 to a future vision of our energy system by 2050, and the study on public support for sustainable development that the Council commissioned in 2009 was geared to future scenarios. The Council has taken note of the fact that it will be involved, together with the other actors of the Act of 1997, in the development of the long-term vision, as set out in the "Explanatory Memorandum" to the draft legislation of 11 February 2010 (Lower House Doc. 52 2238/006).

Towards a transversal governance model

[6] The FCSD considers that sustainable development, enshrined in an integrated manner in the short-, medium- and long-term, has too seldom been the point of departure for federal policy in recent years. The previous legislature pushed through a number of institutional reforms and took policy decisions in this direction, but the overall image cannot really be called positive. Sustainable development is not yet a priority for the entire government, has no guiding influence on the mainstream policy, and does not constitute a cross-sectional issue in the different policy areas (cf. the most recent policy notes of the federal ministers). Nevertheless, the transition to a more sustainable development model requires that sustainable development goals be set in each of the policies pursued by the Government: economic policy, poverty and social inclusion, employment, pensions, public health, taxation, product standards, research, transport, energy, cooperation for development, international affairs, etc. Rather vague declarations of principle are not in short supply, but since the Sustainable Development Act of 1997, the concept has been used and expanded almost exclusively by the competent minister or secretary of state in an effective manner. Coherence is called for: other policy strategies must support the sustainable development policy, whereby inconsistencies must be detected and dealt with.

[7] The Sustainable Development Act of 1997, which was amended this year, created a framework of institutions and processes for sustainable development, such as an inter-departmental commission, a cycle of plans and reports, etc. The FCSD has nonetheless noted that this framework generates only meagre added value for the time being. The observation made by the Court of Auditors in its report on the "coordination of the federal sustainable development policy" of 2005 is still valid: "*Both the instruments (plans and reports) and the actors for the coordination of the federal sustainable development policy (the Interdepartmental Commission for Sustainable Development (known by the Dutch/French initials "ICDO/CIDD), the Federal Planning Office and the Federal Programming Service for Sustainable Development) play a marginal role in the administrative and policy-making process of the State.*" The government does not seem to have given priority from the outset to the third federal sustainable development plan, the preliminary draft of which had been disclosed to the population and the civil society already in 2008. The plan was finally to enter into force on 1 January 2010, but is still not publicly available, let alone being implemented. The FCSD has consequently asked the new government to conduct an in-depth and participatory assessment of the way in which the sustainable

development framework is used in our country and of the inadequate procedures and actions that ensue.

Involving the prime minister and parliament

[8] The FCSD nonetheless believes that in order to arrive at a more transversal policy, sustainable development cannot fall under the sole purview of a single minister or secretary of state in the new federal government. Sustainable development must in fact constitute the leitmotiv of the next governmental agreement, whereby each minister will then have to impart this vision in his general policy note for his specific area, paying particular attention to the impact of decisions on other areas. It is the prime minister's responsibility to secure such a transversal approach and consequently, the FCSD believes that it would be a good idea to have sustainable development included in the competencies of the prime minister in the government, which is responsible for policy as a whole.

[9] The Council considers it vital for parliament to be likewise more involved in the definition, implementation and assessment of the sustainable development policy. That is why it asks the prime minister to come and explain the sustainable development policy of his government to parliament every year on the basis of general policy notes, and that an annual parliamentary debate be organised on this issue. Greater commitment on the part of members of parliament, in their capacity of representatives of the people, can actually provide a broader base for – and confer greater authority on -- the sustainable development policy.

A sustainable development policy impact assessment (known by the Dutch/French initials DOEB/EIDDD) for a horizontal policy integration

[10] The DOEB/EIDDD can prove a useful instrument for promoting an integrated approach at governmental level. The federal government had previously decided to introduce the DOEB/EIDDD test for a number of decisions taken by the council of ministers, although this has been applied to a very limited extent hitherto. The FCSD notes that the DOEB/EIDDD is henceforth legally embedded in the policy by the Act of 1997, but underscores that the government must now commit itself to implementing the DOEB/EIDDD procedure in a more appropriate manner. The next step would consist of assessing and, if necessary, adapting this instrument. Furthermore, the conclusions of the DOEB/EIDDD must be seriously integrated in policy. In this regard, the Council calls for maximum transparency in the DOEB/EIDDD procedure, for example through an "impact assessment website," as is the case at EU level. The different implementation steps (screening, scoping, assessment) could be featured on this website.

Better coordination between policy levels

[11] An effective DOEB/EIDDD procedure can lead to horizontal policy integration (between policy areas). In addition to a "horizontal" integration, a strong "vertical" integration is also needed in our country in order to arrive at an efficient sustainable development policy. A national sustainable development strategy has been in the making since 2005, but it seems to register little progress. Because of the complex distribution of sustainable development competencies in our country, it is crucial to interconnect policy areas at different levels better in a global and integrated manner. Similarly, other specific "national" initiatives relating to sustainable development are implemented late if at all, or remain limited to an inventory of what each level does or to the highest common factor concerning the objectives. The public authorities must analyse the frequent failures of national actions and take measures to improve the cooperation

between the different levels of power. The principle of subsidiarity must be complemented by the “principle of mutuality.”

Sustainable development indicators

[12] The bill amending the Act of 5 May 1997 stipulates that the long-term vision “*propose also a set of indicators to render account on the attainment of these objectives*”. The FCSD finds that such indicators are necessary for the short term, as measuring instruments are needed to be able to pursue a sound policy: indicators to assess the policy on a regular basis, but also to gauge the actual situation, identify non-sustainable trends, draw up future scenarios and forecast the impact of measures. The Council has already taken initiatives on this front, in particular with two advices on indicators (FCSD 2007a15 and 2004a01).

A sustainable development policy cannot be limited to principles, intentions and general objectives. Integrated and long-term objectives must lead to a step-by-step plan with short-term actions and interim objectives.

The government must set an example

[13] The government must moreover set an example. The FCSD appreciates the initiatives taken by the last legislature on energy efficiency in public institutions, in particular through FEDESCO, and is urging the new government to continue these efforts, particularly by extending the third investor principle. Furthermore, the new government should pay sufficient attention to a “sustainability consolidation” in government procurement, all the more so as Belgium is one of the least efficient EU Member States in this area. Public invitations to tender can actually constitute an important stimulant for sustainable production and consumption and help bring innovative products on the market in this area. The FCSD therefore asks that the federal action plan for sustainable procurement 2009-2011 be strictly followed so that the objectives can be actually achieved. A serious commitment to effective governance making efficient use of means and resources also constitutes an important contribution to sustainable development.

Participation of stakeholders and the FCSD

[14] To conclude, the FCSD underscores that not only governmental authorities, but also the stakeholders must assume their responsibilities to arrive at sustainable development. For sustainable development requires an innovative approach where companies and citizens cooperate. The “*sustainable new deal*” referred to in § 4 provides a concrete interpretation thereof as a collective response to the current crises by all social forces. The FCSD can make a contribution as a multi-stakeholder forum through advice and other initiatives, such as roundtables with ministers, forum days and, as of this year, a sustainable development “press prize.” Finally, to guarantee the continuity of its operations, the FCSD calls on the new government to address the composition of the new council as a matter of urgency, as provided in the amendment of the Sustainable Development Act of 1997, approved this year by Parliament.