

1. General Conclusions

As part of this third 'Survey on the societal foundations of sustainable development in Belgium', detailed interviews were conducted with 71 key figures, representing both language groups equally.

On the Flemish side, we noted that in general, the respondents are relatively well informed about the concept of sustainable development; on the French-speaking side, knowledge of the concept is rather limited. This difference in knowledge on the two sides of the language border confirms our earlier survey (2002) and also corresponds to the perception of several respondents. To the extent that this difference depends in large measure on the sample surveyed, however, it seemed more relevant to group the persons into categories that express thoughts and ideas about sustainable development. Accordingly, it emerges that within the individuals who are most familiar with SD, the 'convinced' and the 'institutionals' are most acquainted with SD. Those persons encounter the concept of sustainable development through various institutions that deal with the problem, of which the FCSD. Another contrast we perceived between social groups was that of generations (although we did not ask respondents their age). Young policy-makers seem to be more sensitive to SD. (This result concurs with the results of surveys on perceptions of the environment.) The youngest also seem more in favour of prohibitions and standards (even in the business world). They also appear more inclined to participate. This observation was made by several respondents: certain politicians or representatives of businesses or of NGOs, aged in their 40s, stated that their older colleagues are less sensitive to SD issues.

Respondents gave quite varied definitions. The aspects cited most often were the following: the three pillars, the long-term dimension and the impact of social activities on other areas.

We noted that most of the key persons interviewed gave a definition strongly influenced by their background: business managers, for example, generally gave a definition in which companies and the economy come first.

The long-term aspect for sustainable development is considered important by respondents: most mentioned this aspect spontaneously. The spatial dimension, with reference in particular to the global level, was less pronounced.

The subjects brought up spontaneously by respondents during the survey were quite varied. The following were mentioned most often: energy, development cooperation, sorting of waste, consumption and production, well-being, natural resources and climate change.

Opinions on the term 'sustainable development' (and not its content) were divided. On the one hand, we observed that a small majority of respondents said they found the concept positive and useful, but on the other a minority expressed a negative opinion. These were mostly respondents very familiar with sustainable development and SD policy. This shows that there are some problems with the concept of sustainable development as a political concept.

The respondents with a negative attitude towards the term SD spoke about it as being a trendy term, consider it to be abstract and vague, and said everyone interprets it on his own discretion.

When the question moved from the *term* 'sustainable development' to its *content*, the division disappeared and all the respondents said they found the subject very important. Based on the responses, we can say that sustainable development is a very consensual concept.

When asked about their objective behaviour in terms of SD and that of their organisation, respondents frequently referred to intra-organisational actions, such as a company's internal environment policy. Some key figures spoke of their participation in policy-making (particularly through consultative councils). Most respondents reached the conclusion that both they and their organisations could and should do more.

In the interviews, we then moved on to the 'three pillars' of SD. Although most of those surveyed said they knew what was meant by this model, each of the three pillars is apparently difficult to describe. As far as the environmental pillar is concerned, half the group of respondents could not make the distinction between 'the environment' and 'the environmental pillar of SD'. This pillar is therefore generally described as 'respect for the environment'.

The persons interviewed also seemed to have difficulty interpreting the social pillar. We heard quite a few different versions. The subjects mentioned most often were: the North-South divide, social cohesion and exclusion, employment and unemployment, management of human resources, and social security.

The economic pillar also seems to be interpreted in many different ways by the persons surveyed. Some respondents spoke of 'an economy that must serve mankind and not vice versa'; others said this pillar was the drive to achieve the greatest economic growth possible and see it as the essential condition for attaining SD. A third group of respondents first referred to the threats of the globalising economy.

Notable for the economic pillar is that differences emerged between the two language groups of the respondents. For French-speaking respondents, this pillar consists mainly of *making the current (non-sustainable) economic system more sustainable*. On the Dutch-speaking side, this tendency also exists but there is also an evenly important tendency that puts pursuing economic growth central. Further analysis is needed to explain this difference between Dutch-speaking and French-speaking respondents. Indeed, it is difficult at this stage to say whether this difference is rooted in the large society or whether in our sample group.

By asking more detailed questions in this year's survey on the social dimension and on governance aspects, we are in a position to suggest hypotheses as to the (non-)perception of the social dimension in SD. The answers to questions on technology are striking on that score. While a majority of respondents thinks technology is a solution for environmental problems (some mentioned certain conditions), we observed little imagination in relation to 'social technologies'. Yet many concerns were expressed over the future of our social security system (ageing and globalisation). Likewise, when we speak of science, we are in fact referring to natural sciences and engineering, not human sciences. Even though human development is said to be the objective of sustainable development, technology is seen as THE solution. The following explanation might be advanced: no player is really associated with technology other than the world of science, which gets a very good score for making a positive contribution to sustainable development.

Also regarding technology, most respondents voiced confidence in technology as the solution to environmental problems but no one pursues this environmental technology nor the opportunities it could offer in addition to environmental advantages (a new economic sector, employment, ...) in greater depth. Although SD is not seen by all as a *threat* to the economy, Belgian opinion shapers are reluctant to go as far as to say that SD is an *opportunity* for the economy.

Quite a large majority of the persons interviewed said society's interest in SD has grown over the last three years. On the other hand, a group of well informed respondents closely involved in policy (mainly politicians and representatives of NGOs) said interest in and the basis of SD were declining, especially in the political arena (parliament, political parties, etc.).

We asked respondents about the social actors involved in SD. Those mentioned most often were: the public powers (in all forms), businesses, consumers and households, NGOs and unions.

Respondents unanimously praised the role played by NGOs in SD: according to most of those polled, NGOs make the most positive contribution to SD. Unions, companies and citizens were given the least positive score by respondents.

For those interviewed, enterprises have the greatest power to change the SD situation, followed by politicians and the media. NGOs are unanimously considered the least powerful players.

By combining the criteria 'positive or negative contribution' and 'influence', we observed that, in the eyes of respondents, businesses and politicians are accepting the least responsibility in matters of sustainable development.

The majority of respondents took the view that participation is very important and that politicians must take unpopular measures in support of SD if this should prove necessary. The question on participation also reveals the extent to which certain decision-makers place little trust in citizens to achieve SD. Those who support participation come primarily from civil society and participation is mainly seen as an instrument of communication by the 'institutional' group.

A large majority of the opinion makers questioned (almost two out of three) have (very) limited knowledge of Belgian sustainable development policy. Only one in six surveyed could be considered to have 'reasonable to good knowledge'. And even this group includes persons who still place a number of elements wrong, such as the federal plan SD.

The respondents who are very familiar with SD policy have a relatively negative opinion on it. The most widespread criticisms are the lack of political foundations for SD and the lack of political courage. As could be expected, the respondents' knowledge of the FCSD is in keeping with that of federal policy. In other words: it is very limited. One respondent out of four knows at least something about the Council's composition and/or responsibilities. The consultative role is virtually unknown.

The respondents who are familiar with the Council generally defend its principle (i.e. the participation of all stakeholders through civil society representative organisations) but added at the same time quite a number of remarks. The lack of impact of policy was mentioned, along with the excessive number of federal structures revolving around SD. The key persons expressed the view that the Council is too seldom in the line of sight and does not sufficiently take on the 'watchdog' role.

1.1 Conclusions by players

This report describes in several sections the views and opinions of the 'groups of persons interviewed'. Each player is also mentioned and judged by other groups. For that reason, in this section we give an overview of a number of conclusions by players. We mention the opinion expressed *by* the player and the opinion of others *on* that player.

These results must be interpreted with all due caution: they are not quantitative or representative. All judgements therefore apply only to our group of respondents and cannot be generalised to the entire social group that is the subject of the discussion.

Politicians have a poor reputation in relation to sustainable development among the opinion makers interviewed: they are often referred to as 'negative players'; they are criticised for being interested only in the short term and for not looking further ahead than the next elections, for being enslaved by public opinion and for not placing sustainable development high enough on the political agenda.

At the same time, respondents emphasised the great power of politicians: if they really wanted to, they could make a significant impact on sustainable development. The respondents nonetheless consider that they do not sufficiently take on their responsibilities in matters of sustainable development.

The knowledge of the politicians interviewed, of SD, federal policy and the FCSD, is – compared to that of most other players – excellent for Flemish speakers and reasonably good for French speakers. Politicians in the group of respondents said they consider sustainable development important. There is apparently a slightly positive tendency in parliaments, but the subject nonetheless remains low on the agenda. This is confirmed, inter alia, by the following quotation:

'The very limited number of members of parliament in attendance for the presentation of the Minister's policy document reveals that there is still very little enthusiasm in parliament for sustainable development.'

The politicians interviewed firmly believe in participation (as an educational resource) and are quite optimistic about the future. They are the most critical respondents on the subject of SD.

The businesses in our sample have moderate to reasonable knowledge of the concept of SD; they never mentioned the global aspect in their definition. They also gave diverging definitions, which often boiled down to a rather narrow, management-type view. But they do support the term. For enterprises, economic growth is the number one condition for the success of SD. At the same time, they see the current situation as positive and are unanimously optimistic about the future. For the business world, technology represents the solution. Knowledge of federal policy and of the FCSD is insignificant in businesses.

Enterprises are often mentioned by respondents as negative players in the context of SD. At the same time, they are described as being the players with the greatest power of all. Accordingly, they emerge from the survey as the actors who are assuming responsibility in matters of sustainable development to the least extent. Notable is that businesses among the respondents do not share this view: they consider that they are assuming their responsibilities to a sufficient extent.

The NGOs among the respondents are players particularly aware of the SD issue. They are well informed, giving definitions in which the long term, the environmental impact and the three pillars come first; the global dimension is also stressed. They defend the term 'sustainable development' wholeheartedly. A surprising finding is that the Flemish NGOs questioned firmly believe in technology

as a solution to environmental problems, while the French-speaking NGOs surveyed are less firm believers in technology. Their expectations for the future are matched with conditions: if the political foundations of SD are widened and if politics dares to cut the Gordian knot, then considerable progress can be made.

In our group of respondents, NGOs are seen as the most positive actors with regard to SD; at the same time, their power is considered very limited. With this combination, they are considered as the players which by far assume the greatest responsibility in matters of sustainable development. Many respondents support further enlargement of the influence of NGOs.

The surveyed persons from the media made up quite a heterogeneous group; it is consequently difficult to put a general label on this player. The knowledge of those interviewed from this group is relatively limited; they have a limited concept of the temporal and spatial dimension. They have a relatively optimistic attitude and firmly believe in technology; they find participation rather insignificant. The media do not get good scores from respondents on their efforts as far as SD is concerned. They are considered to have a great deal of influence. We therefore conclude that, according to respondents, the media are not sufficiently assuming their responsibility in matters of SD. The FCSD is not known by this category of respondents.

The union representatives surveyed said they feel ill at ease with SD. That emerges, among others, from this survey, but also from their points of view and actions, which do always clearly reveal whether or not SD is a priority for them.

The knowledge of the union leaders in the group of respondents is good. They defend the term SD. They also firmly believe in the positive role of technology.

Respondents frequently mention unions when asked 'who makes the least positive contribution to SD?'. At the same time, they are considered to have very little power. The unions seem to have an image problem. This may be due to the imprecise position mentioned above. They especially do not know which way to turn on the environmental issue. A trade union representative expressed the problem as follows:

'There really is a defensive reflex on everything related to the environment because this pillar of SD often represents a threat to employment. The union does not always know how to deal with it in the right way. For the social and economic pillars of SD, things are much easier.'

Sustainable development also seems to be a top-down rather than a bottom-up initiative with the trade unions. SD has a place in most congress documents and declarations of principle, although the unions take few initiatives. The trade unions seem to experience difficulties convincing their rank and file members of the interest of SD. Given the doubt among members, leadership does not dare play the card of sustainable development on its own.

Scientists represent a separate player but were not really polled as such; the rectors in the sample did not always speak in the name of science. Science is considered by respondents – after NGOs – as the most positive player.

The senior civil servants interviewed have reasonable though relatively superficial knowledge of SD. A balance among the three pillars predominates in their definition. Most already had a long career behind them before reaching the post they currently hold. This explains the distinction between the civil servants interviewed who have already been in contact with (certain aspects of) SD in a previous activity and those who have not. Accordingly, civil servants form a relatively homogenous group among our respondents. What is surprising is that the senior federal civil servants interviewed also know little about federal SD policy or the FCSD.

Although the administrations are quite often mentioned in the interviews as being one of the negative actors, their influence on SD is considered rather minimal.

At the request of the FCSD, this year we polled representatives of youth organisations and artists. Among all respondents, these persons had the poorest knowledge of sustainable development. In spite of the high level of heterogeneity in these two groups, the representatives of young people and artists have a rather favourable attitude to sustainable development.

1.2 Comparison with previous survey

With the usual precautions, we can attempt to make a comparison with the results of the previous qualitative survey. Since the methodology of this survey is not based on 'representativeness quotas' of the persons polled, we can only identify very general tendencies in attitudes and ideas.

In three years, decision-makers and opinion shapers seem to be a little more knowledgeable about the different aspects of sustainable development. This improved knowledge is nonetheless matched with critical attitudes toward SD policies. A certain lassitude can be perceived with the term 'sustainable development' and the policies implemented in its name. The respondents even give the impression that the authorities have not really managed to develop convincing SD policies.

Even though knowledge has improved, however, most respondents continue to think of SD in terms of relatively separate pillars: the environmental, social and economic dimensions are not really seen as separate when they are perceived in the perspective of SD or when taken apart from it. There consequently remains a crucial question: does SD allow a specific policy to be developed or is it a way of reformulating existing political projects? In other words, how could SD become a principle that underpins policies and not simply a filter used to evaluate projects and achievements?

Several thematic tendencies can also be identified. Themes linked to energy and mobility are mentioned spontaneously more often than three years ago. We also observed more criticisms of the economic system.