

Advice on the European Union strategy for sustainable development

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Belgian Federal Council for Sustainable Development

Federale Raad voor Duurzame Ontwikkeling | Conseil Fédéral du Développement Durable
Aduatukersstraat 71-75 | rue des Aduatiques 71-75
1040 Brussel | 1040 Bruxelles

☎ 02-743.31.50

📠 02-743.31.59

✉ mail@frdo-cfdd.fgov.be

🌐 <http://www.belspo.be/frdocfdd/>



Federal Council for Sustainable Development (FRDO-CFDD)

Advice on the European Union strategy for sustainable development

- own initiative advice
- prepared by the *federal plan* working group
- endorsed by the general assembly of 24 April 2001 (see annex 1)

1. Context and summary

- [1] In June 1992, the *United Nations Conference on Environment and Development* took place in Rio de Janeiro. The conference adopted *Agenda 21* as an action programme for the 21st century, with political measures at social, economic and environmental level. Five years later, the United Nations established an action programme on the future implementation of Agenda 21. This programme stipulates, among other things, that each signatory must, by 2002, elaborate a sustainable development strategy (*Programme for the Further Implementation of Agenda 21*, paragraph 24). In December 1999, at the Helsinki Summit, the heads of state and government of the European Union (EU) invited the European Commission to prepare a proposal for a strategy for sustainable development (SSD) for the Gothenburg Summit of June 2001. As a first step, the European Commission published its *Consultation paper for the preparation of a European Union strategy for Sustainable Development* (document SEC(2001)517, 27 March 2001, 57 p.; references are to pages of this paper). With this analytical document, the Commission hopes to stimulate discussion and to receive comments from other EU institutions and civil society by 30 April 2001. In May, the European Commission will draft a political proposal. Finally, the European Council will adopt the SSD at the Gothenburg Summit on 15 and 16 June 2001.
- [2] The Federal Council for Sustainable Development (FRDO-CFDD) is a broadly-based advisory council that issues advices to the Belgian federal authority concerning federal sustainable development policy. In 2000, the FRDO-CFDD gave its advice on the preliminary draft of the first Belgian federal plan for sustainable development – to be considered the Belgian SSD (advice 2000-02). The FRDO-CFDD has already drafted several advices on themes specific to the EU, for example on the Sixth Environment Action Programme (advice 2000-04), on the Green Paper on greenhouse gas emissions trading (advice for 2000-09) and on the Communication on the precautionary principle (advice 2000-13). Moreover, in most of the FRDO-CFDD's other advices, the European political level is addressed directly or indirectly. The FRDO-CFDD now believed it important to draft an advice on the EU SSD.
- [3] In this advice, the FRDO-CFDD first makes several general remarks on the EU SSD and then answers a number of questions from the European Commission's working document. In general, the FRDO-CFDD adheres to a large extent to the EU working document, which nonetheless is only a first step in the preparation of the SSD. However, the FRDO-CFDD also calls attention to a few basic problems.



2. General remarks on the European Union strategy for sustainable development

- [4] The FRDO-CFDD considers the fact that the EU is finally working on a SSD positive. According to the FRDO-CFDD, the *Consultation paper for the preparation of a European Union strategy for Sustainable Development* provides an interesting but incomplete analysis. The document constitutes an initial foundation for the SSD.
- [5] The FRDO-CFDD regrets that the EU did not begin preparation of a SSD sooner after Rio+5. The FRDO-CFDD appreciates that the Commission wants to stimulate discussion with its document and that it has invited all interested parties to respond. The FRDO-CFDD nonetheless maintains that the consultation period is too short. The time between the publication of the (English version of the) discussion paper and the deadline for the comments is barely one month. This is not enough time for the FRDO-CFDD as such to draft an advice. The FRDO-CFDD also fears that the preparation of the EU SSD has not been made sufficiently well known to stakeholders or the public.
- [6] The FRDO-CFDD endorses the European Commission's proposal to incorporate the environmental dimension into the Lisbon process, which already encompasses economic and social issues (page 13). In Lisbon, the EU has "set itself a *new strategic goal* for the next decade: *to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion*" (Presidency Conclusions, 23 and 24 March 2000, no 5). The SSD adds environmental objectives to these aims. According to the FRDO-CFDD, the main challenge for the SSD is to constitute a coherent set of economic, social and environmental objectives. The FRDO-CFDD emphasises that the SSD must not result in the EU's current achievements in the areas of economic, social or environmental policy being called into question. The strategy must continue to build on what the EU has already achieved in these areas. This does not signify, however, that the FRDO-CFDD applauds all the decisions taken and results achieved so far.
- [7] The FRDO-CFDD considers it important for the EU to assume responsibility for sustainable development at the highest political level. Consequently, the FRDO-CFDD is satisfied with the conclusions of the Stockholm European Council of 23 and 24 March 2001 providing for the inclusion of sustainable development on the agenda of the annual spring meeting of the European Council (Presidency Conclusions, no 3, 50 and 51).
- [8] The FRDO-CFDD emphasises that the adoption of the EU SSD by the European Council of Gothenburg in June 2001 does not constitute a finishing point, but a point of departure. The FRDO-CFDD reserves the right to draft an advice on the EU SSD at a later date.
- [9] The FRDO-CFDD notes that in its working document, the European Commission refers only in passing to the precautionary principle and to Communication COM(2000)1 on this subject (page 53, point 4.7). The FRDO-CFDD is of the opinion that the precautionary principle deserves greater emphasis in the EU SSD. According to the FRDO-CFDD, the European Commission should have mentioned the precautionary principle in the summary and introduction and could also have turned its attention to it among the main problems.
- [10] The FRDO-CFDD notes that the European Commission's working document focuses on policy changes within Europe. The FRDO-CFDD is of the opinion that the lack of an international dimension constitutes a serious shortcoming. According to the FRDO-CFDD, this contradicts one of the basic principles of sustainable development, that is, equity in the fulfilment of the right to development. Moreover, the EU is evading its responsibility as an industrialised region that has to a great extent damaged the environment and perpetuated unsustainable modes of production and consumption.



3. Answers to the questions in the European Commission's working document

[11] The FRDO-CFDD was not able to respond in sufficient detail to all the questions in the European Commission's working document. The expertise necessary to address all the questions was not immediately available and the deadline was too short for the FRDO-CFDD, which is a broadly-based advisory council.

3.1. Focus on the six most pressing problems (question 1)

[12] The FRDO-CFDD approves of focusing attention on a limited number of problems. This is, in fact, necessary to make sustainable development operational. The FRDO-CFDD is convinced that the six themes addressed represent important and pressing problems, but does not take a position on the comprehensiveness of the list nor on the question of whether these are the most pressing problems. The FRDO-CFDD is of the opinion that an approach based on these six problems could nonetheless serve as an example for the resolution of other possible problems. The FRDO-CFDD also draws attention to the fact that the EU has already tackled some of these six problems within the framework of other processes, and notes that past work should be taken into account.

3.2. Focus on Europe (question 2)

[13] The European Commission's working document focuses on policy changes within Europe, although it acknowledges that sustainable development constitutes a global objective (page 9). The FRDO-CFDD agrees that the EU itself must undertake steps "at home" to achieve sustainable development and that this may contribute to global sustainable development. But the lack of an international dimension in the EU's working document strikes the FRDO-CFDD as a serious problem. The FRDO-CFDD particularly regrets the lack of a global perspective on themes such as climate change (the document makes no mention of support for developing countries); natural resources, and biodiversity in particular; and poverty.

[14] The FRDO-CFDD suggests determining, within the framework of the SSD, the consequences of political measures and proposals for the rest of the world, and the developing countries in particular – analogous to a study of the impact on other policy areas that the document strongly defends (page 48, point 4.2). The European Commission refers, concerning the EU contribution to global sustainable development, to preparations for Rio+10 (page 9) and to the documents that it will draft within this context. The FRDO-CFDD has high expectations for these documents. The sectoral policy coherence defended by the European Commission (page 51, point 4.5) must, according to the FRDO-CFDD, be extended to international sectors, specifically to international trade, international investments and development cooperation.

[15] The FRDO-CFDD draws attention to several examples of EU practices and measures that have proved detrimental to sustainable development elsewhere in the world. The EU did reduce the extraction of its own natural resources by 13% between 1985 and 1997, but EU's use of resources from outside the Union increased by 11% between 1995 and 1997 (*Total material requirement of the European Union*, European Environment Agency, Technical Report no 55, 2001). So the EU increased its pressure on the environment of other countries. Fisheries provide another example: while the EU has restricted overfishing in its territorial waters, fisheries agreements with third countries frequently contribute to the depletion of their fisheries. The EU also threatens sustainable agriculture in many developing countries with its export-oriented Common Agricultural Policy.

[16] The United States recently announced that it would not comply with the Kyoto Protocol agreements. The FRDO-CFDD maintains that the EU must consequently consider changing its stance in areas where concessions have been made to the United States.



3.3. Relevance to accession countries (question 3)

- [17] According to the FRDO-CFDD, sustainable development is one of the greatest challenges for the accession countries. These countries must also achieve a balance among the economic, social and environmental dimensions of policy. To this end, they must be free to take initiatives, but must also follow rules that promote sustainable development. The accession member states must also respect the existing EU economic, social and environmental achievements.
- [18] Moreover, the FRDO-CFDD asserts that the EU must not shift its social and environmental problems on to the accession member states – or to any other countries – and that the SSD must help the EU to avoid doing so. The EU SSD must clearly indicate whether the objectives apply to the current EU or the enlarged EU.

3.4. Causes and remedies (question 4) and practical measures for policy integration (question 5)

- [19] The FRDO-CFDD's opinion is that in its working document, the European Commission presents a correct but incomplete analysis. The EU's document rightly points out several bottlenecks that constitute obstacles to a coherent policy at EU level (page 45, point 3.2). The EU SSD must nonetheless indicate in more detail how the various instruments must be put into concrete action. At institutional level, the FRDO-CFDD considers it important for sustainable development to be addressed at the highest political level. Putting sustainable development on the agenda of the spring meetings of the European Council constitutes a good approach. According to the FRDO-CFDD, simplification and clarification of many processes and strategies are, however, highly desirable. Moreover, agreements on the way in which political decisions may be transposed into practice are necessary. In this regard, the FRDO-CFDD wants to draw attention to the Belgian federal institutional framework established in the law of 5 May 1997 on the co-ordination of the federal sustainable development policy. Finally the FRDO-CFDD wants to emphasise that the development of a practical political mechanism to arbitrate among various interests (page 51, point 4.5) is crucial. The FRDO-CFDD considers it necessary for the EU to cover these points in detail in the SSD.
- [20] According to the FRDO-CFDD, the achievement of a balance among economic, social and environmental considerations is a necessary condition for policy integration. In the case of social and environmental considerations, measures to catch up may be necessary.

3.5. The role of other actors (question 6)

- [21] The European Commission stresses the importance of information, education and participation (page 54, point 4.8). The FRDO-CFDD agrees with the Commission on this point. The FRDO-CFDD considers it important to strengthen dialogue and consultation and improve procedures in this area. According to the FRDO-CFDD, both social dialogue and consultation of organised civil society have a role to play; yet the difference between the two must be recognised. The FRDO-CFDD believes that reflection on the organisation of social dialogue on sustainable development at EU level is required. The FRDO-CFDD notes that on this subject, the EU's working document refers to the possible creation of a sustainable development "council" (page 52, point 4.5), without clearly stating what it means by this term. Clarifications are therefore necessary. Moreover, the FRDO-CFDD feels that it should first be determined whether and to what extent existing fora can play a role in social dialogue on sustainable development at EU level. The FRDO-CFDD wants to contribute to this process of reflection and to this clarification. The FRDO-CFDD is considering to organise an international seminar on social dialogue as concerns sustainable development at EU level in the autumn of 2001, during the Belgian EU Presidency.



3.6. Minimising costs, seizing opportunities (question 7)

- [22] Over the (more or less) short term, a sustainable development policy creates not only winners, but also losers. The EU document observes in this respect that measures must be taken to ensure that those who have to adapt "do not suffer unnecessary costs" (page 12). As far as the FRDO-CFDD is concerned, this phrasing is vague and it should be stated that accompanying measures are necessary. The fact that the FRDO-CFDD approves of certain *principles* of the EU working document does not mean that the FRDO-CFDD agrees with the European Commission's *phrasings*. This is also true for what is said about a "win-win(-win)" policy.
- [23] The EU's document defends a "cost-effective policy" and a fight against pollution by those producers, "who are in the best position to reduce [it] at relatively low cost" (page 48-49, point 4.2 and page 51, point 4.4). The FRDO-CFDD points out the risk that some producers might be exempted from making any effort to protect the environment. The FRDO-CFDD insists that, in a long(er)-term perspective, *all* producers must be encouraged to use energy and other raw materials more efficiently and make the investments necessary to do so.

3.7. The role of the European Union (question 8)

- [24] According to the FRDO-CFDD, promoting policy coherence is an important task incumbent upon the EU. Another EU responsibility, in the FRDO-CFDD's view, is to address the problem of lack of information, as concerns pricing and labelling for example. Moreover, the FRDO-CFDD feels that the EU must ensure that supranational law, which imposes set standards, leaves states the opportunity to take further steps on their own.

3.8. Most urgent steps (question 9)

- [25] The FRDO-CFDD's opinion is that, within the framework of a SSD, the EU must above all strive to provide clear objectives and indicators, to promote transparency and communication, and the application of prices that reflect real costs. Preferably, this last measure should be applied at an international broader than EU level, and be based on a uniform calculation method. And when determining real costs, economic, social and environmental considerations must all be taken into account.



Annexes

1. Number of members with voting rights present or represented at the general assembly of 24 April 2001

- the 4 president and vice-presidents
- 5 of the 6 representatives of non-governmental environmental protection organisations
- 3 of the 6 representatives of non-governmental development co-operation organisations
- 1 of the 2 representatives of non-governmental consumer protection organisations
- 4 of the 6 representatives of workers' organisations
- 3 of the 6 representatives of employers' organisations
- 1 of the 2 representatives of energy producers
- 4 of the 6 representatives of the scientific world (*)

Total: 25 of the 38 members with voting rights (*)

(*) at present 1 representative of the scientific world is not appointed

2. Meetings for the preparation of this advice

The *federal plan* working group met on 11 January, 8 March and 2 and 17 April 2001 to prepare this advice.

3. Persons who contributed to the preparation of this advice

Voting members and their representatives

- Mrs Anne Panneels (Vice-President of the FRDO-CFDD) – Chair of the working group
- Mr Tom Bauler (Université Libre de Bruxelles, ULB)
- Mr Fons Beyers (Boerenbond)
- Mrs Isabelle Chaput (Fédération des Entreprises de Belgique, FEB)
- Mrs. Ingrid Deherder (Algemene Centrale der Liberale Vakbonden van België, ACLVB)
- Mrs Irène Dekelper (Le Syndicat Libéral)
- Mrs Birgit Fremault (Verbond van Belgische Ondernemingen, VBO)
- Mrs Brigitte Gloire (Oxfam-Solidarité)
- Mr Jos Gysels (Vice-President of the FRDO-CFDD / De Wielewaal)
- Mr Jean-Pierre Jacobs (Groupement de la Sidérurgie)
- Mr Joris Kerkhofs (Algemeen Christelijk Vakverbond van België, ACV)
- Mr Rafael Lamas (Fédération Générale du Travail de Belgique, FGTB)
- Mr Marc Maes (11.11.11)
- Mr Erik Paredis (Vlaams Overleg Duurzame Ontwikkeling, VODO)



- Mrs Edilma Quintana (Centre National de Coopération au Développement, CNCD)
- Mrs Leida Rijnhout (Vlaams Overleg Duurzame Ontwikkeling, VODO)
- Mrs Catherine Rousseau (Centre de Recherche et d'Information des Organisations de Consommateurs, CRIOC)
- Mrs Lut Slabbinck (Algemeen Christelijk Vakverbond van België, ACV)
- Mr Louis Van Geyt (11.11.11)
- Mrs Saar Van Hauwermeiren (Bond Beter Leefmilieu)
- Prof Han Verschure (Katholieke Universiteit Leuven)

Members without voting rights and their representatives

- Mr Luc Bas (Vlaamse Gewest, AMINAL)
- Mr Hadelin de Beer (Bureau Fédéral du Plan, Task Force Développement Durable)
- Mr Jean-Roger Drèze (representative of the Prime Minister, Mr Guy Verhofstadt)
- Mrs Nadine Gouzée (Bureau Fédéral du Plan, Task Force Développement Durable)
- Mr Jozef Sioncke (Vlaamse Gewest, AMINAL)
- Mr Denis Van Eeckhout (Bureau Fédéral du Plan, Task Force Développement Durable)
- Mr Luc Van Itterbeeck (representative of the Minister of Consumer Affairs, Public Health and the Environment, Mrs Magda Aelvoet)
- Mrs Sylvie Varlez (Bureau Fédéral du Plan, Task Force Développement Durable)

Guest expert

- Mr Marc Vanheukelen (European Commission, Task Force Sustainable Development)

Secretariat

- Mr Marc Depoortere
- Mr Jan De Smedt
- Mr Johan Pauwels

4. Acronyms

EU	European Union
FRDO-CFDD	Federal Council for Sustainable Development (Federale Raad voor Duurzame Ontwikkeling – Conseil Fédéral du Développement Durable)
SSD	Strategy for Sustainable Development