

Opinion on sustainable development indicators

- **Own initiative**
- **drafted by the Scientific Research and Sustainable Development Working Group**
- **approved by the General Meeting on April 16, 2002**

1. Summary:

- [1] The Federal Council for Sustainable Development (FCSD) aims with this opinion to draw attention to the problem of sustainable development indicators.

Indicators can be considered the elements of a scoreboard for our society. They provide information on the current situation, trace developments and can alert us to potential problems.

- [2] The FCSD is of the opinion that indicators must contribute to several vital political functions: diagnosis, assessment and communication. They cannot be considered neutral tools. There is no such thing as a list of "ideal" indicators. They must be legitimate from both the scientific and democratic angles.

Accordingly, indicators must be scientifically relevant and their development needs to be transparent. Participatory processes must be used to help base the choice and definition of indicators on the identification of policy objectives and priorities.

- [3] The FCSD considers that Belgium offers a high level of research potential in matters of indicators. Initiatives have already been taken and must be encouraged. The Council nevertheless finds that certain circumstances act as a brake on the effective development of national sustainable development indicators.

? Sustainable development is not yet sufficiently mainstreamed into different political priorities. Efforts in terms of indicators focus mainly on economic indicators.

? As a result of the new institutional structure in Belgium, the three traditional pillars of sustainable development (economic, social and environmental) come under the remit of different public powers. While a centralisation of data seems to be in place, methodologies often differ between the different institutions responsible for developing indicators.

? At present, there is no organisation or institution charged with coordinating a list of sustainable development indicators. Consistency in terms of logistics is also lacking.

? The choice and development of indicators is not always a transparent process. Indicators are not always subject to public debate and organised participation.

- [4] The FCSD proposes **nine topics of discussion** with a view to improving the current situation.

? 1) Once sustainable development policy objectives have been identified, it is vital to guarantee follow-up, practical implementation and mainstreaming into existing policies.

? 2) Communication has to be more effective between the different sustainable development players and the developers and users of indicators.

? 3) Sustainable development falls within the remit of several different levels of power. Better coordination is needed between the authorities producing institutional data. The FCSD considers that the Federal Planning Office can take on the function of institutional coordination and be in charge of developing sustainable development indicators.

- ? 4) As requested in the Federal Plan for Sustainable Development, an "indicators" focal point must be set up in every federal department.
- ? 5) Research on sustainable development and in particular on indicators must be coordinated. In parallel, there is a need for an interface between political and scientific users. The SSTC platform for scientific consultation, "Sustainable Development Indicators", can continue to carry out these tasks.
- ? 6) Current levels of resources and existing scientific structures must be strengthened and stabilised. A stable institutional and legal structure should identify responsibilities, tasks and objectives.
- ? 7) Belgium's must participate more fully in international processes for developing indicators.
- ? 8) Indicators can be good instruments for awareness-raising and communication. They can make sustainable development more tangible for the public and for decision makers. The Council welcomes the fact that the Federal Report on Sustainable Development is based on indicators. Investments are needed in communication and awareness-raising.
- ? 9) Because they are destined to become tools for informing public opinion and communicating policy, indicators developed at political level to measure the progress of sustainable development must be debated openly and transparently. Participation is one of the elements that can give democratic legitimacy to indicators. The FCSD wishes to contribute to the practical implementation of this process. The CIDD-ICDO could be charged with implementing public consultation, once conclusions have been drawn from the consultation on the first preliminary draft Federal Plan for Sustainable Development.

The FCSD considers that these processes must take place within the existing institutional and administrative framework. It would also suggest assigning a role of coordination to the Sustainable Development Public Planning Service.