

# Advice on the vertical integration of sustainable development and multilevel governance

- On the council's own initiative
- Prepared by the working group *strategies for sustainability*
- Adopted by the general meeting of December 18 2003<sup>1</sup>
- This recommendation was originally drawn up in the Dutch language

## 1. Summary

[0] Vertical integration refers to the coordination of and coherency in the policy of sustainable development across the different policy levels in our country. This kind of integration is needed as the competences in this domain have been variously distributed by our federal structure. Because of this situation, Belgium's position on how to influence international decisions with respect to sustainable development, on the one hand, and to implement them in an efficient fashion, on the other, remains unclear.

In this recommendation, we examine what kinds of instruments at the implementation, the legislative, and the administrative levels could promote the vertical integration in our country. In this respect, at the implementation level, the council pleads for an interministerial conference on sustainable development and for cooperative agreements between federal and federate entities in a number of specific fields. At the administrative level, the council emphasizes the importance of coordinating structures and of capacity development in the administration.

Integration involves structures but also has to do with a change in mentality, namely a shift towards a greater willingness to make use of (existing) coordinating instruments and take account of other policy levels. This manner of policy conduct is sometimes referred to as *multilevel governance*, where (*good*) *governance* or good management means, amongst other aspects, that the policy pays attention to the participation of all involved societal and social actors. This implies that the civil community shall be consulted in decisions regarding sustainable development.

## 2. Context and objectives of the advice

### 2.1. Taking into account the increasing importance of the international level

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<sup>1</sup> Advice adopted by the representatives of the member organisations, with the exception of the VBO, Fedichem, and SPE, which abstained.

- [1] The ever growing number of problematic issues require an international approach. Within the context of sustainable development, decisions are taken at the international (Rio, Johannesburg...) and the European levels that are determinants of our own national policy. This globalisation demands not only firm international structures for decisions and consultation, but also an improved cooperation between the various public administration branches. Consequently, the council is of the opinion that our country stands in need of greater coordination amongst and greater coherency in the policies of the federal state, the regions, and the communities. This will enable Belgium to better prepare the negotiations and consultations at the international and European planes and to implement as effectively as possible the agreements that have been concluded at those levels.
- [2] The council considers it important that the federal and regional authorities cultivate an anticipatory attitude to be in a position to react actively and timely to the European and international decisions that they shall need to negotiate, translate, and implement.
- [3] However, the relationship with the international level is hardly a one-way street where decisions are only *downloaded* from the international to the national, regional, and local levels. The reverse action, the *uploading* of decisions from the local, regional, and national levels is equally essential for the policy. It thus involves a two-way process. In this respect, the council wishes, in the context of the vertical integration, to emphasize the importance of *bottom-up* besides *top-down* actions.
- [4] Taking account of the international level means also taking account of the impact of Belgian policy on North-South relations. The fact is that Belgian policy exerts not only an indisputable impact on the domestic plane, it also has consequences for other countries. In fact, the last Federal report on sustainable development stresses with reference to the policy documents of the government members that: "Even though more frequent mention is made of the international context, there is no systematic accounting of the impact exerted by Belgian policy on North-South relations" (point 5.1.1).

## **2.2. Taking into account our federal structure**

- [5] Sustainable development relates to various social domains and to different policy levels. In Belgium, the competences regarding sustainable development are divided amongst the federal government and the federate entities, not only for the three dimensions, but also within each dimension individually. Thus, within the economic dimension, a number of different offices are given competence in the fiscal area; within the social dimension, the employment policy falls under different policy levels; while in what concerns the ecological dimension, the regions are largely given the responsibility. Nonetheless, the Federal State, for instance, remains responsible for the issuance of product standards, for the coordination of the international environmental policy, and its translation into Belgian law.
- In this process, from a legal point of view, the regions and the municipalities are positioned at the same level as the federal government: the decisions they take in their respective areas possess an identical force of law. This distribution of competences makes it difficult to pursue a coherent policy and, likewise, to bring enough weight to bear on an international scale – something that for a small country like Belgium is not easy to begin with.
- [6] Decisions are also made more difficult as the distribution of the various (thematic) competences has not always been paired with the distribution of the needed instruments. Thus, within the context of the economic and monetary union that is Belgium, instruments such as pricing policy, labels, norms, and a large portion of the fiscal policy have been kept at the federal level, while many of the domains where these instruments can be employed (housing, industrial policy, energy policy...) have been regionalised to a large degree.

### **2.3. Scope of the advice**

- [7] It is hardly the aim of this advice to bring into question the existing distribution of competences in our country. The council restricts itself to the formulation of proposals for an improved cooperation between the various public administrations in Belgium and for the further development of synergies within the context of sustainable development. To that end, a number of procedures and instruments can make a contribution, both on the implementation (chapter 3), on the legislative (chapter 4), and at the administrative levels (chapter 5), as well as at the level of the civil society (chapter 6).<sup>2</sup>
- [8] Nonetheless, the council considers it important to emphasize that, aside from the proposals for adapted structures, instruments, and procedures that are following, a change of mentality is also required in order to achieve an effective vertical integration and coordination of the policy. Sometimes, one gets the impression that there exists not just a shortage of instruments and procedures, but that also the defective implementation of the existing instruments and procedures forms an obstacle to integration.
- For that reason, there is need at the various levels, policy-wise as well as administratively, for a growing willingness to coordinate policies rather than limit oneself to the strict demarcation of one's own competences and to the defence of this territory. In this respect, the council pleads for the implementation of the "principle of mutualism". This principle implies that each policy level exert itself to act in such a way as to reinforce the efficiency of all the other policy levels. Each individual level evaluates not only the realisation of its own objectives, but also the degree to which it has been able to contribute to the realisation of the objectives by the other levels.
- [9] Improving the vertical integration of and the coordination amongst policy levels is not only important in general in order to arrive at an effective policy for sustainable development, it also happens to be an important condition for drawing up and implementing a "national" strategy for sustainable development by the year 2005: a goal to which Belgium has committed itself in Johannesburg (Implementation plan §162 b). A "national" strategy can, amongst other aspects, include a national plan for sustainable development, being different from the current federal plan in that the federal government as well as the regions and the municipalities shall be called upon to draw up its strategic outlines, and being effective equally for all of these policy levels.
- [10] Vertical integration in the domain of sustainable development can be more readily realised while the horizontal integration amongst economic, social, and ecological policy domains is being improved as well, both in the Belgian context and in the context of the EU and the UN. To this effect, the appointment, for instance, of a European commissioner for sustainable development would at the Belgian level greatly facilitate the coordination and the integration task with respect to the international policy. In this regard, the council refers to her first preliminary advice for Johannesburg (2002a06f, 16/04/02) where she tabled a series of proposals to reinforce the horizontal integration of the sustainable development at these various policy levels.

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<sup>2</sup> The council has on several occasions stressed the great importance of coordination amongst the various policy levels; she has mentioned this specifically in her advice on the defederalisation of cooperative development, in recommendations regarding climate policy, product policy, and the like. See in attachment the list of the relevant recommendations, advisory documents, and paragraphs.