

Federal Council for Sustainable Development (FRDO-CFDD)

Opinion on the annual assessment of federal policy for sustainable development

- requested by the federal government
 - approved by the General Meeting on 3 February 2005
 - drafted by the *Sustainable Development Strategies* working group
 - original language: Dutch
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Main themes of the opinion

In this opinion, the FRDO-CFDD evaluates sustainable development policy on the whole and the institutional framework set up to implement it in Belgium. The opinion does not address any specific areas of sustainable development policy in detail.

1. MAKING OPTIMAL USE OF THE POLITICAL CYCLE

Belgium has a number of strengths when it comes to forging a sustainable development policy. It has a well developed institutional framework and a political cycle set by law, with, inter alia, a Five-Year Plan for Sustainable Development, biennial reports and organised participation. While there seems to be a need to enhance the use of this framework, it nonetheless constitutes a major asset for improving the coherence and quality of the policies implemented. It is also important that major political documents (e.g. the government declaration of 2003) recognise sustainable development as a key political concept.

2. SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AS A POLITICAL FRAMEWORK

Our country scores points when it comes to procedures. Yet the sustainable development philosophy does not appear to be concretely rooted in operational policy. In practice, the concept of sustainable development is not (always) a common denominator in policies implemented in different sectors and fields. The transversal approach inherent to sustainable development still too often encounters resistance because it runs counter to the traditional approach and to established interests. The far-reaching *ownership* vital to real progress is still too seldom present in politics, the administration and society.

3. WORKING TOWARDS A NATIONAL STRATEGY

The FRDO-CFDD is aware that it will take time for a new approach and another way of working to become established. The Federal Council nevertheless urges the government to pursue its efforts to make sustainable development a priority in the different areas and institutions for which it is responsible. Along with this "horizontal" integration, it is also essential to establish "vertical" integration: better coordination between the different levels of power, and especially between the regional and federal levels would enhance the coherence and effectiveness of sustainable development policy. The FRDO-CFDD therefore invites all interested parties to make a real commitment to the national strategy for sustainable development (NSSD) currently being prepared.

4. SETTING INDICATORS

The national strategy for sustainable development should also involve the establishment of a scoreboard of indicators used to measure progress. The Council considers that careful attention must be paid to this measure. A scoreboard is an essential tool for accurately appraising the real situation, identifying non-sustainable trends, developing future scenarios, setting objectives, assessing the impact of measures (evaluation of effect) and communicating effectively on sustainable development.

5. PUTTING INTENTIONS INTO PRACTICE

The FRDO-CFDD stresses that it is fundamental to define instruments, resources, cut-off dates and responsibilities in the drive to achieving sustainable development objectives. Without such concrete content, the policy will be little more than expressions of intent. The implementation deficit, to which the FRDO-CFDD has drawn attention on a number of occasions¹, will continue to grow.

6. INVOLVING CITIZENS IN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT POLICY

Establishing a wider civil society base for sustainable development policy in our country should be a major concern. This means that efforts are needed to involve citizens and organisations as active participants and to communicate the concept of sustainable development to a wide public. Political leadership can play an important role here.

Context of the opinion

- [a] The 2003 federal government agreement states: *"Progress achieved on sustainable development policy will be reviewed annually by the Council of Ministers, based inter alia on*
- *the sustainable development reports of the Federal Planning Office Task Force,*
 - *the CIDD-ICDO report on implementation of the plan in each administration and federal body. These reports will then be transmitted to parliament"*².
- [b] The FRDO-CFDD regrets that, in drafting its opinion, it did not have the reports of the Task Force or of the CIDD-ICDO mentioned in point [a], because these sources of recent information are a priority for evaluating progress on achieving sustainable development³. The Federal Council accordingly asks to have access, in due time, to the reports by the actors concerned for the purpose of drafting the opinions it will have to deliver in the coming years on the evaluation of sustainable development policy. This should be taken into account as part of making optimal use of the political cycle.
- [c] For the reason mentioned in the preceding paragraph, the FRDO-CFDD will limit the present opinion, in large measure, to an assessment of the overall policy and of the institutional framework for sustainable development in our country. The opinion is consequently broader than an evaluation of the sustainable development policy implemented during the past year. It does not address in detail, however, either the objective situation or the policies implemented in specific areas.

¹ The gulf between policy objectives and the real situation is mentioned, for example, in the FRDO-CFDD 2003 memorandum to the new federal government (2003a04) and in the Opinion drafted for the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg (2002a06).

² The Federal Council draws attention to the fact that the French text of the government agreement differs from the Dutch text. The French version speaks of "reports by the Sustainable Development Task Force" ("des rapports de développement durable de la Task Force") and of "the report by the CIDD-ICDO" ("du rapport de la CIDD"), while the Dutch version does not make this distinction ("een rapport ... een verslag"). The second Plan (§4101) seems to refer to the French version. The third report of the TFSD will not be out until autumn 2005 and the CIDD-ICDO report is always published at the end of March or beginning of April every year. The two bodies consequently drew up a specific report for the evaluation by the Council of Ministers.

³ The CFDD did have access, however, to the information transmitted by political players (TFSD, CIDD-ICDO and PODDO-SPPDD) at a hearing on 6/1/2005.