

Opinion on Rio+20

- **At the request of Mr Magnette, Minister for Climate and Energy, in a letter of 28 June 2011**
 - **Prepared by the workgroups on international relations and strategies**
 - **Approved by the general meeting of 23 September 2011**
 - **This opinion was originally drawn up in Dutch**
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1. Context

- [a] Twenty years after the *Earth Summit* (UNCED, 1992) a UN Conference on Sustainable Development (UNCSD) will be held again in Brazil in 2012. This conference is of enormous importance, as it affords a unique opportunity to give new and necessary impetus to more sustainable development of our planet.
- [b] The FRDO/CFDD has issued two opinions¹ already this year in preparation for the conference, which remain in full force. In supplement thereto, the council has now issued a new opinion at the request of Minister Magnette,² which constitutes an input for the Belgian position on the topics and goals of the Rio conference.
- [c] As mentioned in the previous opinions, twenty years after the *Earth Summit*, there is still a dire need for a powerful sustainable development policy, as can be gauged from some observations. Some viewpoints for instance point to an excess of the ecological carrying capacity and the exhaustion of the biocapacity of our planet. There has been too little progress in the eradication of poverty, respect for fundamental human and labour rights and international treaties. Finally, there has been insufficient political will to make sustainable development into a leading paradigm of policy at different levels.

2. Opinion

2.1. Rio+20 conference goals

- [1] In its previous opinions on Rio, the council had already pointed out that declarations of principles and stated intentions on Rio+20 are not enough. Concrete, quantifiable goals are needed as well as a timeframe within which to achieve them. Against this background, the FRDO/CFDD considers that it would be helpful to define Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Such SDGs must be of sufficiently broad range³ and be set in a UN conference. They are not intended to replace but to complement the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). They should be explored together in the light of the possible renewal of the MDGs after 2015, whereby integrating MDGs in the SDGs may be an option. It is important to broach the underlying causes – and not only the symptoms -- of poverty when renewing the MDGs. The council asks that Belgium adopt a positive attitude to the idea of SDGs and would support their inclusion in the closing declaration of Rio+20.

¹ [2011a03](#) and [2011a10](#)

² *In addition to the request for an opinion (28 June 2011), the council also received an explanation with this request from the minister's policy unit (dated 2 August 2011).*

³ Broader therefore than the different areas mentioned by the Commission on Rio+ 20 (water, energy, oceans and seas, land use, forests, biodiversity, sustainable consumption and production, natural resources).

- [2] Agreements and conventions are not enough in themselves. They have to be implemented effectively, and implementation often turns out to be a thorny issue. Accordingly, the SDGs must be accompanied on the various policy levels by an action plan, a description of the policy instruments that will be used, and a financing model (both in the North and in the South). Adequate monitoring and enforceable standards are needed to guarantee the implementation of such goals, as is the case with the World Trade Organisation (WTO), for instance.
- [3] Defining concrete goals and introducing monitoring for their implementation mean that a number of indicators have to be established too – in specific areas as well as cross-sectional indicators (e.g. for sustainable consumption and production). In this regard, the council points to indices such as the ecological footprint, the Human Development Index (HDI), the Gini coefficient and a well-being index, and considers that the Stiglitz-Sen commission can make a useful contribution, just like the process launched by the European Commission in 2007 with the *Beyond GDP conference*.

2.2. Towards a green economy in the framework of sustainable development and the eradication of poverty

- [4] The FRDO/CFDD points out that the green economy must be pursued in the framework of sustainable development and the eradication of poverty. Attention must be paid to all three dimensions of sustainable development, with focus on an integration of the agendas for the environment, the depletion of resources, the eradication of poverty, and climate change. The council stresses that the social dimension must not be overlooked in this process. Respect for human rights and international treaties must also take centre stage. In the council's view, such a green economy must not be seen as a separate sector next to the current economy, but as a profound recalibration of the entire economic practice.
- [5] The UNCSD secretariat has proposed seven tracks to the greening of the economy: *green stimulus packages, eco-efficiency, greening markets and public procurement, investments in sustainable infrastructure, restoration and upgrading of natural capital, getting prices right and ecological tax reform*. In a previous opinion, the FRDO/CFDD requested that four other tracks be added: *green and decent jobs, innovation and entrepreneurship, technology transfer and public finance*. The council will delve in greater depth into these additional tracks, as the minister asked in his request for opinion.
- [6] For the council, *green and decent jobs* constitute a component of a just transition to a green economy, as described by the FRDO/CFDD in a previous opinion. This process is broader than an employment policy, and comprises also education and training, investments in low-carbon technologies, dialogue between the government and stakeholders, respect for human rights and properly underpinned social protection.
- [7] As regards the latter point, the FRDO/CFDD calls on the Belgian and EU representatives to make a strong plea at Rio+20 for a basic social protection package as an international standard. It will not be the same for every country and must be adapted to the respective national situation (needs, capacity, etc.). A wide diversity of social models available notwithstanding, an effort must be made to reach consensus on the principle of elementary social security. It is moreover essential from the perspective of fair competition relations between countries to have developing countries converge to higher social standards. The fulfilment of the conditions that stimulate and make job creation possible is an important precondition to attaining sufficiently strong social protection.
- [8] The expansion of social services depends on solid public finances, which in turn depend on many factors. One of the still underexposed conditions (among others) for the sustainable financing of social services in developing countries is the strengthening of international fiscal cooperation, in particular through technical assistance for developing countries and a policy

against non-cooperative offshore financial centres and fiscal dumping. The importance of this issue was recently recognised as such in forums such as the UN *Financing for Development* process,⁴ the EU Council of Ministers⁵ and the OECD.⁶

[9] Finally, it is crucial for social protection to defend explicitly the attainments of the International Labour Organisation and in particular the agreed *core labour standards* in the closing declaration of Rio+20.⁷ No green economy can emerge in stride with sustainable development and the eradication of poverty without such ambition for social progress with the necessary international backing.

[10] As to innovation and entrepreneurship, the council has in a previous opinion already pointed out that companies too have an important role to play in the greening of the economy, along with the authorities and consumers. It is therefore recommended to examine the attainments on this front in the Rio+20 process and to check what can still be done as regards investments by companies in eco-technological innovation, efforts by producers on the energy and materials efficiency front, as well as commitments to corporate social responsibility and investment (CSR and CSI). As can be seen from the definition,⁸ CSR does not, as a volunteer instrument, replace the necessary legislative framework, but is one of other (regulatory, economic and social) such instruments that can contribute to the sustainable development goals.

[11] The council advocates a debate on the complex relationship between sustainable development and the international trade policy, where a coherent vision is still insufficiently developed on the international policy level. For the greening of the economy, the problem of trade in environment-friendly goods, services and technologies arises in particular, where aspects such as trade barriers and intellectual property rights must be examined in the light of sustainable development goals.

[12] The council underscores that innovation can also be of a societal, and not only of a technological and economic nature. In such a case, it becomes a matter of system innovation and transitions, and it is important to support such processes from the perspective of sustainable development. These are societal processes for the long term with concurrent changes on the economic, cultural, ethical, technological, ecological, social and institutional front, in which many stakeholders are involved (governmental authorities, companies, knowledge institutions, socio-cultural organisations, trade unions, environmental associations and individual citizens). Transitions presuppose innovation in all components of the system, such as in structures, practices, legislation, infrastructure, rules, cultural premises and knowledge. As initiatives already exist on this front in the regions, the federal government could promote the exchange of such experiences.

[13] With regard to *public finance*, the council reiterates that the Rio+20 process must pay attention to the means and resources needed to bring about the switch to a green economy in practice, in the North as well as in the South. In the aftermath of the financial and economic crisis, member states and world organisations are actually confronted with serious financing problems, and there is a justified concern to reduce deficits and to balance budgets. A crucial question arises as to how we can manage to make savings whilst generating the additional means and resources needed for the transition to the greening of the economy and a low-carbon society. That should be done in a way that is compatible with sustainable development, geared to financial, economic, social and ecological goals. In

⁴ Cf. the Doha Declaration on Financing for Development 2008 (<http://daccess-ods.un.org/TMP/1602545.html>).

⁵ Cf. http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/115145.pdf.

⁶ Cf. http://www.oecd.org/document/35/0,3746,en_2649_34565_45958051_1_1_1_1,00.html.

⁷ Cf. FRDO/CFDD 2011a03 § 18, 2009 a04 § 22, 2002a06 §§ 46-49

⁸ Cf. Federal action plan for CSR:

<http://www.poddo.be/uploads/documentenbank/c73c31ce50cfae3a86abeefe6ebacb75.pdf>

addition, the FRDO/CFDD opines that the policy of international public financial institutions, such as development and investment banks, must be imbued by sustainable development principles as never before.

- [14] In this respect, the council believes that Rio+20 must take concrete steps at world level to introduce a *Financial Transaction Tax* (FTT) – if the impact assessment is positive – and to propose a carbon tax. Each of these taxes has a second purpose in addition to generating means and resources at world level to finance a justified transition to a green economy. The FTT must also ensure greater stability for the financial and economic system by limiting speculative transactions. The carbon tax should lead to a reduction of CO₂-emitting activities and can thus become a stimulus for low-carbon activities.
- [15] The financing mentioned in the previous paragraphs is also of great importance for the technology transfer track. For many countries in the South, the transfer of technology is actually important as support for building sufficient capacity in renewable energy. Structural attention must be paid to the precautionary principle in technology transfer projects. The international community must draw lessons from the failure of the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) 19, and must not let the negotiations at Rio+20 be compromised by discussions on the financing of the transition in the South. Belgium must adopt a clear position here through the EU to get the developing countries on board in the debate. The council proposes that *Financing for Sustainability* be brought forward by the EU as an input – a framework that can be filled more concretely in a subsequent phase.⁹ In this regard, the FRDO/CFDD continues to stress the existing international commitments for development aid, including the 0.7% standard.
- [16] In a previous opinion, the board coupled the issue of the greening of the economy with sustainable consumption and production (SCP). No formal agreement could be reached during CSD 19 on this issue,¹⁰ but it is perhaps possible to approve part of the results through the UN General Assembly. The FRDO/CFDD is moreover of opinion that Belgium should support such an initiative at UN level through the EU. Furthermore, the council asks that Belgium be open to other complementary initiatives on sustainable consumption. The idea of *Millennium Consumption Goals*, as they are known, could for instance constitute a line of further investigation in connection with the SDGs.

2.3. Governance and the institutional framework for sustainable development¹¹

- [17] The FRDO/CFDD has often indicated that coherence between policy areas and coordination between the competent institutions are crucial for a strong sustainable development policy at world level. During this exercise to strengthen the international policy framework, there is a clear risk that sustainable development will be treated de facto as a sector instead of a cross sectional topic. Radical steps must be taken instead to bring the ideas of sustainable development into the mainstream in all relevant international institutions.
- [18] Strengthening the CSD and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) without regard for the rest of the UN system and the broader landscape of global governance will be of insufficient help in bringing the concept of sustainable development centre stage. Sustainable development as an umbrella concept should be given a more prominent place in activities of the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). Furthermore, ECOSOC must

⁹ Cf. the conference on *Financing for development* in Monterrey, which followed the approval of the Millennium goals.

¹⁰ In particular the 10 Year Framework of Programmes on Sustainable Consumption and Production, 10YFP, as it is known.

¹¹ Members who abstain from paragraphs [17]-[24]: An Nachtergaele (FEVIA), Isabelle Chaput (Essenscia), Marie-Laurence Semaille (FWA), Piet Vanden Abeele (UNIZO), Anne Defourny (VBO).

be strengthened and given renewed impetus in such a way that it can send political signals concerning sustainable development in an authoritative manner to the rest of the UN system. In addition, ECOSOC must be assigned greater authority with regard to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, as was intended when the UN was set up, as well as the WTO.¹² An erosion of the independence of these economic institutions to the advantage of the policy bodies of the UN is perhaps unrealistic, but ECOSOC should be able to exert far greater moral authority than resolutions as regards these institutions. A merger between ECOSOC and CSD is also a possibility in this connection. In an alternative approach, a more dynamic and upgraded CSD (e.g. by analogy with the UN Human Rights Council) is becoming the political heart of the UN policy for sustainable development. In any event, it is important that sustainable development as a cross-sectional theme is seen by the UN policy bodies as a priority.

- [19] Other instruments can play an important role in such a mainstreaming policy. For instance, the recommendations of the UNEP *International Resource Panel* could be run better through to all policy levels. Furthermore, ideas such as the creation of an international environmental court deserve further investigation.
- [20] The mainstreaming of sustainable development in the UN system, including the IMF, World Bank and WTO, requires permanent monitoring and the necessary political authority in order to propose the necessary corrections. ECOSOC and CSD were not designed as inter-governmental bodies for such a management function. That is a task for the UN Secretariat, which must be strengthened with that function in mind, if necessary through a service and a senior civil servant very close to the Secretary General, which would boil down to upgrading the existing Division for Sustainable Development. Lessons could be drawn from the workings of the new entity UN Women, which fulfils a similar function for gender policy. Sustainable development must also become a central issue, more than in the past, in the activities of coordinating bodies in the Secretariat, such as the Chief Executives Board and the UN Development Group.
- [21] The FRDO/CFDD recommends that the necessary connections be made between the discussion on the international framework for sustainable development in Rio+20 and the running exercise in the UN General Assembly on the United Nations in Global Governance,¹³ which appears to focus on world economic governance. This second process concerns the sustainable development agenda very much. Sufficient attention should here also be paid to important organisations outside the UN, which deal with aspects of sustainable development, such as the OECD, the International Energy Agency and the G20, and the way in which they can contribute to cohesion. Belgium is represented in these institutions directly or indirectly (via the EU).
- [22] Rio+20 is an international process, that cannot however become a success if it is not borne and supported by other policy levels. *Good governance* entails a two-way traffic, whereby not only are decisions downloaded to smaller-scale levels, but they are also uploaded to the international level from the local, regional and national levels. The FRDO/CFDD thinks that this is a problem in the EU as regards sustainable development at this time. Whereas ten years ago, the Union could bring the ambitious approach of the EU sustainable development strategy (EUSDS) to the Johannesburg process (WSSD, 2002), own commitment has been limited hitherto, whereby the EU has difficulties assuming the role of forerunner and example that it had 10 years ago.

¹² The WTO is not formally a UN organisation, but there is a cooperation agreement between the two organisations, and the head of the WTO sits on the UN Chief Executives Board. A formula should be found to involve the WTO better in ECOSOC's coordinating role.

¹³ Cf. General Assembly Resolution 65/94 of 8 December 2010.

[23] Accordingly, the FRDO/CFDD asks that Belgium should plead within the EU for a more ambitious contribution and vision for Rio+20 than what appears from the EU Commission's communication on Rio+20.¹⁴ EU 2020¹⁵ cannot be presented as the EU's contribution, because this strategy is no fully-fledged sustainable development strategy in terms of scope or of term. The council repeats the question – raised in a previous opinion¹⁶ - that the Union should again push EUSDS to the fore as a frame of reference in the run up to Rio, and commit itself to review the EUSDS after Rio+20 in accordance with the results and commitments of this world summit.

[24] The CSD has always had a strong participatory impact from the involvement of the nine Major Groups,¹⁷ and the FRDO/CFDD considers it important to strengthen this approach further in the Rio+20 process and in the new institutional framework to be created. The council calls for our country to give further support to the representation and participation of the civil society in this sense within the UN. A convention for the participation of the civil society could be considered, based on the positive results of the Aarhus Treaty in the UNECE region. In addition to the view of companies, trade unions, NGOs and scientists, due account must be taken here of the input of other Major Groups, such as women, young people and farmers, as well as of the input of local authorities and communities. It is important to make room for bottom-up initiatives and other forms of participation alongside organised participation. Movements such as *sustainable cities*, *transition towns*, *cittaslow* ... unquestionably have a place in the Rio process.

¹⁴ COM (2011) 363

¹⁵ The EU [strategy](#) for “smart, sustainable and inclusive growth.”

¹⁶ FRDO/CFDD [2011a10e](#)

¹⁷ Cf. <http://www.uncsd2012.org/rio20/index.php?menu=35>