

Opinion on the Belgian National Reform Programme 2014

- **Own Initiative**
- **Prepared by the Strategies Working Group**
- **Approved by the General Assembly in a written procedure** (See Appendix 1)
- **The French language version of this opinion constitutes the original text**

Background and Preliminary Remarks

- [1] As part of the European Semester, our country is due to present its National Reform Programme (NRP) 2014 to the European Commission in April. This NRP is currently prepared by a drafting committee, as supervised by a Policy Monitoring Committee¹. A contribution has also been requested from social partners and civil society. It is in this context that the FRDO issues this opinion².
- [2] The NRP must contain an overview of measures both planned and taken by our country with a view to implementing EU2020 strategy objectives as well as responding to the specific recommendations for Belgium which the Commission published on the occasion of the previous NRP³. This FRDO opinion draws on four of its earlier consensus opinions: its 2010 Opinion on the NRP, its 2011 Opinion on Energy Efficiency in Buildings⁴, its Framework Opinion on Greening Taxation⁵ and its 2013 Opinion on the NRP⁶.
- [3] The fact that in this opinion, the Council is focussing in particular on Commission recommendations regarding CO₂ reduction, energy and resource efficiency and greening taxation is in response to its specific mission and the work which the Council has already carried out on this subject. This does not of course detract from the importance of implementing other aspects of the EU2020 strategy in Belgium. These aspects are an integral part of the sustainable development approach which the FRDO considers to be of vital importance in this context, not just at Belgian but also at European level. Group members of the Council may also bring in their own approach and priorities, in addition to this consensus opinion.

¹To find out more about these two organisations, go to: <http://www.be2020.eu/nhp/procedure.php?lang=en&IS=102>

² The FRDO has in the past published its "Opinion on the National Reform Programme for transposition of the 'Integrated Guidelines for Growth and Jobs 2005-2008'" (2005a07), its "Opinion on the Advance Report on the Lisbon Strategy - Implementation of the National Reform Programme of Belgium" (2006a11), its "Secretariat Note on the Lisbon Strategy - Belgium's National Reform Programme - second cycle" (2007a12), its "Opinion on the Belgian National Reform Programme in the context of EU2020 Strategy" (2010a11) and its "Opinion on the National Reform Programme 2013" (2013a04).

³ See: http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/pdf/nd/csr2013_belgium_en.pdf

⁴ *Avis sur la réduction de la consommation d'énergie dans les bâtiments* [Opinion on energy efficiency in buildings, French version only](2011a04f).

⁵ Opinion on Greening Taxation in the Framework of Sustainable Development (2009a15e).

⁶ The Council also consulted the opinion of Belgium's national council for people with disabilities, the *Conseil Supérieur National des Personnes Handicapées* which includes proposals to improve disability inclusivity at NRP level.

Content of the Opinion

The Overall NRP Vision

- [4] The FRDO notes that, compared to the Lisbon Strategy, the EU2020 Strategy aims to widen its strategic focus, giving social and environmental issues equal emphasis alongside economic issues. The Council believes that these three sustainable development areas should, in an integrated approach, be relevant to both EU policy (the European Semester) and Member State policy (the reform and stability programs which are being tackled together).
- [5] The FRDO would also like to see greater clarification on the connections between the short and medium-term vision of the EU2020 Strategy and the longer term vision of the European Sustainable Development Strategy (EUSDS). Should the latter be revised, our country “shall be actively involved in this revision process with a view to ensuring maximum efficiency and coherence with regard to EU-2020 strategy”⁷. Similarly, the NRP should also refer to the sustainable development policy framework in our country, as well as the long-term sustainable development vision approved on 17 May 2013 by the Council of Ministers and the concept of a low carbon society by 2050. The EU2020 mid-term review⁸ will be a key moment for organised social debate on the aims of this strategy and the aforementioned relationships.
- [6] In its 2010 opinion on the Belgian National Reform Programme as part of the EU2020 Strategy Framework, the FRDO requested that the issue be examined from an international viewpoint, taking account of Belgium’s competitive position at international level and the impact of our growth on the reduction of world poverty and sustainable development in the South. In the same 2010 opinion, the Council noted that employment was an absolute priority, and one which involves looking at not only the quantity but also the quality of jobs available.

Process Management

- [7] The FRDO considers that the political decision-makers and the federal and regional government bodies dealing with economic, social and environmental issues must all be involved in the drafting of the NRP, in order that it embody the integrated vision referred to in [4]. The Council also wishes to see the NRP containing more than a single summary of the actions being taken at various levels of authority. The Council is consequently pleased to note that the federal government has decided to include in the NRP 2014 a section covering scheduled actions, as requested by the European Commission.
- [8] The FRDO has often emphasised the importance of the sustainable development impact study as a tool for both EU2020 and NRP processes, to evaluate the long and short-term social, economic and environmental aspects of a political issue and thereby arrive at integrated decisions. As of 1st January 2014, the federal government has decided to deploy a wider impact study instrument, namely the Regulatory Impact Analysis (RIA). The Council recommends the effective use of this tool, and that the RIA take into account the three aspects of Sustainable Development in an integrated manner.

⁷See the general Policy Document on Sustainable Development 2012:
<http://www.lachambre.be/FLWB/PDF/53/2586/53K2586025.pdf>

⁸The mid-term review was announced for the second half of 2014 as part of the programme of the Greek presidency of the Council of Europe.

- [9] The FRDO appreciates the fact that civil society, through various advisory bodies, is regularly involved in the process, and especially through this latest regulation. It hopes that in the future, its contribution will be more fully taken into account.

Energy and Resource Efficiency

Regarding Recommendation 7 of the European Commission: "Take concrete measures and agree a clear division of tasks between the federal and regional authorities to ensure progress towards reaching the targets for reducing greenhouse gas emissions from non-ETS activities, in particular from transport and buildings."

- [10] Energy efficiency is essential to meeting climate change targets. Ambitious energy efficiency aims will drive green employment and sharpen the competitive edge of our businesses. There is great potential for this in our energy-intensive country, right across the industrial, transport, domestic and construction sectors. The Council calls for a better interactively-compiled list of potential money and energy-saving measures to be made in order to improve competitiveness and employment, and that a list of current barriers to energy efficiency be drawn up in association with stakeholders. Moreover, to overcome these obstacles, a route map must be drawn up for the implementation of any appropriate measures found, including the creation of test fields and research into innovative tools. This must be set up in tandem with a monitoring and evaluation system which will enable progress to be tracked. This approach will in many cases require regional collaboration.
- [11] The FRDO hereby proposes for consideration its opinion on energy efficiency in buildings⁹, which proposes an approach which utilises a number of tools (e.g. industry standards, the distribution of information, taxation, the financing of investments, new types of housing etc.) and which integrates, coordinates and optimises work done at various levels of authority. This opinion also includes a series of Council recommendations. It also made the case for the greater use of third-party investment systems, in order not only to create new jobs but also improve energy efficiency, reduce energy consumption and increase the proportion of renewable energy.
- [12] Resource efficiency (for both energy and materials) is an important aspect of reducing the consumption of raw materials and the production of greenhouse gases. It can also help to create jobs and drive innovation and therefore potentially market competition; it also aims to break the direct connection between economic growth and the use of these commodities. The FRDO would therefore like to see this concept being better integrated into the NRP. Resource efficiency requires a coherent framework connecting regional and federal action, as well as the implementation of appropriate policy tools and resource efficiency indicator monitoring to measure, inter alia, our consumption of raw materials, water, space as well as our greenhouse gas emissions. This means examining resource consumption impact across the entire lifecycle of a product, i.e. including a product's manufacturing, use, recycling and end-of-life stages. From this point of view, innovation has an important role to play in helping manage resource consumption so as to ensure more sustainable and efficient production and consumption methods.
- [13] With regard to transport, the Council has issued a number of practical proposals in its previous opinions. These have included six proposals for reducing environmental damage and energy consumption in this area related to the supply and demand of sustainable mobility, a "modal shift", technological solutions, taxation and education and awareness campaigns¹⁰ (also including the aim of

⁹ See: <http://www.frdo-cfdd.be/sites/default/files/content/download/files/2011a04f.pdf>

¹⁰ See: <http://www.frdo-cfdd.be/sites/default/files/content/download/files/2007a09f.pdf>

limiting demand). The Council also recommends the inclusion of the results of the recently launched pilot study into the kilometre tax.

Taxation

Regarding the first section of Recommendation 5 by the Commission: "Establish concrete and time-specific proposals for shifting taxes from labour to less growth-distortive tax bases, notably by exploring the potential of environmental taxes"

[14] In 2009, the FRDO published an opinion on "Greening Taxation in the Framework of Sustainable Development"¹¹ which may make a useful contribution to the NRP 2013. This opinion contains ten criteria which need to be fulfilled for greening taxation. The Council also includes in this opinion a series of measures which in many cases require regional collaboration. These proposals may be the key to achieving EU2020 objectives.

¹¹ See: <http://www.frdo-cfdd.be/sites/default/files/content/download/files/2009a15e.pdf>

Appendix 1: Voting members of the General Council who voted on this opinion

- The Chair and two Vice-Chairs:
M. Aelvoet, L. Cloots, O. Van der Maren, M. Verjans
- 2 representatives of non-governmental organisations for environmental protection:
M. Bienstman, M. Cors
- 2 representatives of non-governmental organisations for development cooperation:
R. De Meyer, B. Gloire
- 4 representatives of workers' organisations:
B. De Wel, S. Storme, F. Van Daele, C. Verdoot
- 5 representatives of employers' organisations:
V. Biebel, A. Nachtergaele, M.-L. Semaille, P. Vanden Abeele, F. VanTiggelen
- 1 representative of youth organisations:
O. Beys

Total: 18 of 24 voting members

Appendix 2

Meetings for the preparation of this opinion

The *Sustainable Development Strategies* working group met on 16 January 2014, 23 February 2014 and 18 March 2014 to prepare this opinion. On 16 January, Mr Kim Lievens, Advisor to the Prime Minister's Strategy Group, presented the Federal Government's vision of the AGS and the NRP.

Appendix 3

Participants in the preparation of this opinion

Chair

Prof. Tom Bauler

FRDO voting members and their representatives

Olivier Beys (Jeugdraad)
Vanessa Biebel (FEB)
Antoinette Brouyaux (Associations 21)
Lieve Cloots (BBL)
Philippe Cornelis (CSC)
Rudy De Meyer (11.11.11)
Jonathan Lambregs (Jeugdraad)
Stijn Rocher (FEB)
Olivier Van der Maren (FEB)
Diana Van Oudenhoven (CGSLB)
Geert Vancronenburg (FEB)
Lars Vande Keybus (ABVV)
Olivier Vermeulen (Conseil de la Jeunesse)

FRDO Secretariat

Jan De Smedt
Fabrice Dehoux
Koen Moerman