

## SUMMARY

This paper is a contribution to a project to generate Asian, African and Latin American perspectives of the external dimensions of the EU sustainable development strategy, and on key policy instruments and processes which shape the interaction of the EU with other regions of the world. Hopefully, it will also inform future policy debates on the further development of the SD strategy. The paper is concerned with the process of developing the SD strategy (both its internal and external dimensions). It does analyse the contents of these documents in any detail.

The Helsinki European Council (December 1999) invited the European Commission (EC) to prepare a proposal for a long-term strategy dovetailing policies for economically, socially and ecologically sustainable development” in time for the Council meeting in Göteborg in June 2001. This paper is concerned with the process of developing this SD strategy - both its initial *‘internal’ component* and the *‘external’ dimension* prepared subsequently.

Following an initial year of drift, in November 2001, the EC Secretary General established a small *Task Force* to coordinate the process. It adopted a two-pronged approach. First an analytical report was prepared (with no conclusions) through negotiations between EC Directorates General. A decision was taken (it is not clear at what exact stage) not to address the external dimension of the strategy and to leave this for subsequent consideration. A *consultation paper* was released in late March 2001 for wider comment and stakeholders were invited to express their views (in writing or electronically) by the end of April 2001.

The paper posed a *series of questions*, analysed *six key themes* (following an approach similar to that in the EU’s Sixth Environmental Action Programme) and suggested a *policy toolkit* to address the key problems. Despite the limited time to comment, the paper was generally well received, but the absence of an external dimension was strongly criticised. The *European Parliament* was unable to engage effectively in shaping the strategy, but its Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Consumer Policy prepared a report on sustainable development in preparation for the Göteborg Council.

Because of time restrictions, the communication for the Göteborg Council was prepared in parallel to the above process. As internal inter-service negotiations on the document proceeded, a number of elements in the consultation paper were weakened because they would not ‘fly’ politically. For example, a number of concrete targets were removed.

The College of EC Commissioners finally adopted a *communication on the new SD strategy* in May 2001: *A Sustainable Europe for a Better World – A European Strategy for Sustainable Development* (COM (2001)264 final). It consists of three parts:

- ?? A set of *cross-cutting proposals* to ensure that future policy-making is more coherent and cost-effective with a long-term focus, as well as to promote technological innovation and stronger involvement of civil society and business in policy formation. It proposed that the future reviews of common policies (eg agriculture, fisheries, transport) should have SD as their central concern;
- ?? A set of *headline objectives and EU-wide measures* to tackle the biggest challenges to SD not dealt with in the Lisbon strategy: climate change, threats to public health, depletion of natural resources, traffic congestion and land use problems;
- ?? *Steps needed to implement the strategy and to take stock of progress*. The EC will submit a progress report on implementing the SD strategy at all future spring meetings of the European Council, and establish an *SD Round Table* of independent experts to advise the

Commission President. The strategy will be comprehensively reviewed at the start of each Commission's term of office, and assessed every two years by a *Stakeholder Forum*.

The Göteborg European Council (15-16 June 2001) endorsed the strategy but also invited the Commission to further develop it by addressing the *external dimension* by January 2002. In response, an *Inter-Service Group* (ISG) was established (comprising the Directorate Generals for Environment, Development and Trade) and chaired by the Secretary General's office. *Tensions* between the three DGs emerged during the preparation of early drafts in October and November 2001 – each had clearly different objectives, agendas and 'territories' to defend. DG for External Relations (Relex DG) joined the ISG and assisted the production of a new draft, released in January 2002. This was subjected to another round of inter-service consultation in February 2002 and the document was edited and shaped through negotiations and the *final document* (*Towards a Global Partnership for Sustainable Development*), agreed by the Commission, was released on 13 February 2002. Given the extremely short period to prepare the communication, there was no formal opportunity for external stakeholder comments. However, some NGOs did make suggestions on issue and themes they thought should be addressed, and published critiques of the communication.

The external dimension of the SD strategy sets *priority objectives* and outlines *concrete actions* to harness globalisation and promote the role of trade for sustainable development, to fight poverty and promote social development and to promote the sustainable management of natural and environmental resources. It also addresses the pre-conditions for success, improved coherence of EU policies, better governance at all levels and increased financial resources.

The communication was submitted to the European Parliament, the European Council (for consideration at the Barcelona summit, 15-16 March 2002), the Economic and Social Committee (ECOSOC), and the Committee of the Regions.

The Barcelona Council did not debate sustainable development issues in any detail, and merely noted the communication and the views of the Environment Council on the external dimensions of the SD strategy.

The *first spring synthesis review* after Göteborg was published in January 2002 in advance of the Barcelona Council. At this time the Commission was still working vigorously on a new set of indicators and the synthesis was broadly criticised for inadequately integrating the environmental dimension. In practice, the Barcelona Council paid little attention to sustainable development, mainly because the Spanish Presidency was not particularly interested in the issue.

The first of the two-yearly *Stakeholder Forums* to assess the SD strategy was organised in September 2002. Very few high level representatives of EC attended and no report was presented by the Commission or the EU Presidency. Broad but unfocused working sessions were held on transport and energy, sustainable production and consumption, agriculture and public participation.

The *Round Table* of experts was established in January 2003, chaired by Dominique Strauss-Kahn, former French Finance Minister, to provide high-level advice on sustainable development to the Commission President. It has met four times so far during 2003 but no tangible products have yet emerged.

Work will commence soon to *revise the strategy* for the next Commission, to cover the period 2004-2009. This will be coordinated by the Secretary General's office.

To improve the annual reviews and the revision process, a number of issues might usefully be addressed (Box 1):

To achieve *effective stakeholder engagement* in the review and revision process, the strategy must be distributed with an explanation of how people can comment and contribute. Reliance on the internet will not be sufficient for developing countries. Existing consultative mechanisms, some regional meetings and perhaps facilitating dialogue in Brussels with selected individuals from the south would be helpful. An EU paper setting out the main points of the existing SD strategy (internal and external) should be produced as a basis for discussions in all such events.

The SD strategy is one of the biggest policy statements that the EU has made and, therefore, it might be argued that it should be subjected to an *extended impact assessment* procedure. This will require an external consultation process - that also satisfied the Commission's December 2002 communication on improving consultation.

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**Box 1: Some critical questions for revising the UE Sustainable Development Strategy**

- ?? What is the best institutional mechanism for coordinating how the EC addresses sustainable development and reviews/revises the SD strategy. Would a dedicated unit in the EC Secretary General's office be a good option?
  - ?? How can consideration of the internal and external dimensions of the SD strategy be integrated?
  - ?? What have been the achievements to date of the SD strategy, and what additional measures are required, particularly to deliver on the outcomes of the WSSD?
  - ?? How can stakeholder involvement in the review/revision process be enhanced and how can southern stakeholders best engage in the process?
  - ?? How can southern leaders and governments best voice their perspectives on sustainable development to the EU?
  - ?? What role could the European Parliament play in the SD strategy in future?
  - ?? How could the strategy be better integrated with national SD strategies?
  - ?? What are the implications of the draft European Treaty for future EU policy on SD?
  - ?? How can better policy coherence on SD issues be achieved – and what are the barriers to this?
  - ?? Should the SD strategy be subjected to an impact assessment procedure, and how could this best be used to enable stakeholder involvement in the SD strategy revision process?
  - ?? What steps can be taken to overcome misconceptions about sustainable development (eg some officials and politicians still see sustainable development as a Trojan horse for the environment)?
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