

# National Strategies for Sustainable Development: New Thinking and Time for Action

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**Recent OECD and UN reviews have revealed how national strategies for sustainable development can offer systems to integrate many initiatives – and keep sustainable development on everyone's agenda.**

Sustainable development means treating the issues of poverty, environmental management and social issues together, in the face of many difficult challenges. But how can environmental protection, poverty alleviation, and money-making objectives be integrated in practice – or trade-offs made if integration is impossible? How can long-term needs really be balanced with short-term imperatives, especially when change is so unpredictable? How can local demands be treated alongside broader national and global requirements? And how do you get a decision-making process 'with the maximum possible participation' (as called for by Agenda 21) that does not impose substantial costs in time or money?

In effect, social, environmental and economic issues of almost unprecedented complexity need to be tackled at several levels in ways that are not merely conceptually neat, but that also encourage significant behavioural and institutional change.

*Earlier strategic planning efforts that professed to address the issue of 'sustainable development did not really get to grips with the above challenges.* From the World Conservation Strategy in 1980, to Agenda 21 in 1992, the sustainable development texts that emerged from international processes tended to be overwhelming in their all-encompassing nature, with an emphasis on comprehensive sets of objectives. Many approaches were largely environmental and did little to integrate social and economic dimensions. Often the focus was on producing documents with little effective implementation. A similar approach was followed by sectoral initiatives towards sustainability (for example, the

Intergovernmental Panel/Forum on Forests produced over 250 'proposals for action').

Such massive agendas have tended to be ignored: no one person or group is interested in all items in the list of 'what should be done'. They were also too vague or too remote from day-to-day realities of 'how to do things' – investment, trade and production and consumption. No wonder that many of the earlier national approaches – national conservation strategies (NCSs), national environmental action plans (NEAPs), etc – have been treated at best as checklists, or as encyclopaedias of ideas, to turn to whenever the occasional policy space, or financial opportunity, emerges to do something 'green'.

*Until recently, there has been little guidance on strategies. The assumption that they are plans has been unchallenged.* At the 1992 Earth Summit, governments made a commitment to adopt national strategies for sustainable development. The understanding at the time was that some kind of integrated master plan was the way forward: 'the strategy should build upon and harmonise the various sectoral, economic, social and environmental policies and plans that are operating in the country'.<sup>1</sup> However, it was also understood that international precepts should not be imposed, and that successful strategies would be 'country-driven'. Most recently the UN Millennium Development Goals include an undertaking to 'integrate the principles of sustainable development into country policies and programmes and reverse the loss of environmental resources'.<sup>2</sup>

*Recent UN and OECD initiatives have been developing guidance on effective strategies*

## KEY CHALLENGES:

- A strategy for sustainable development should be seen as a set of co-ordinated mechanisms and processes to help society work towards sustainable development – not as 'master plans' which will get out of date.
- Effective national strategies have other common characteristics, which recent work by several countries, North and South, has revealed. Initiatives of the OECD and UN DESA have presented these in terms of principles and guidelines.
- National sustainable development strategies can take different forms depending on national and local conditions. The particular label applied to a national sustainable development strategy is not important, as long as the common principles and characteristics of effective strategies are adhered to.
- National strategies should be a top issue for the WSSD. Because national strategies are now understood as being based on what works, they should be able to spur countries on to real institutional change.

for sustainable development. As in any field, it is clear that leadership and innovation in sustainable development derives from many sources. It would certainly be a conceit to view centralised national strategies as the only means to bring it about. Earlier reviews by IUCN and IIED,<sup>3</sup> and a more recent intensive consultation exercise in eight developing countries supported by the OECD,<sup>4</sup> did show that there have been *some* valuable results from the earlier approaches to sustainable development strategies. Most common has been their roles: in improving awareness of sustainable development issues amongst a wide range of stakeholders; in developing sustainable development pilot projects; in setting up environmental authorities where these were missing; and in co-ordinating/integrating authorities and fora concerned with sustainable development. But the OECD work<sup>5</sup> and a recent international forum hosted by UN DESA<sup>6</sup> and the Government of Ghana, supported by UK DFID, UNDP and the Danish Government, were also significant in looking more widely for sources of leadership and innovation – not assuming that existing one-off strategies were the only pointers to the future.

*It is now clear that effective strategies are continuous processes.* The OECD initiative, and latterly the UN International Forum, actively looked for those mechanisms that individual countries had found most effective in identifying and debating sustainable development issues, in planning experiments, in changing policy towards sustainable development and associated roles, and in monitoring sustainable development in ways that lead to improved action. Some NCSs, NEAPs, and Green Plans offered some of these mechanisms. But there were other sources of innovation, too – especially in the regular planning system, in corporate investment, in public/private partnerships, and in community development and decentralisation initiatives.

The UN International Forum<sup>7</sup> agreed a number of characteristics that can be summarised as:

- Integration of economic, social and environmental objectives, and balance across sectors, territories and generations
- Broad participation, effective partnerships, transparency and accountability
- Country ownership, shared vision, commitment and continuous improvement
- Developing capacity and an enabling environment, building on existing knowledge and processes
- Focus on priorities, outcomes and coherent means of implementation.

*'Effective national sustainable development strategies have common characteristics, but that they take different forms depending on national and local conditions... For example, established frameworks such as a National Vision, National Agenda 21, a Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS) or a Comprehensive Development Framework (CDF) can all provide a good basis to build on for taking strategic action towards sustainable development. The particular label applied to a national sustainable development strategy is not important as long as the common characteristics of the strategy are adhered to.'*<sup>8</sup>

**UN International Forum**

*The emphasis is now on demand-driven processes rather than top-down agendas. 'Strategy' is increasingly being used to imply a continuous (or at least iterative) learning system to develop and achieve a shared vision, rather than one-off exercises. The associated challenges are more clearly about*

institutional change – generating awareness, reaching consensus on values, building commitment, creating an environment with the right incentives, working on shared tasks – and doing so at a pace with which stakeholders can cope. The means to do this are integrated systems: of participation, analysis, debate, experiment, prioritisation, transparency, monitoring, accountability and review. All countries will have some elements of these systems within existing strategic planning mechanisms. The challenge is to find them, bring them together and strengthen them.

*National strategies should be a top issue for the WSSD.* Potentially, the WSSD is a good catalyst to get countries thinking through how they organise themselves to achieve sustainable development. The guidance resulting from both the UN and the OECD processes is timely and effective here. They offer a 'fitness for sustainable development' diagnostic and a 'gap analysis' to identify processes and mechanisms that are missing. Because national strategies are now understood as being based on what works from civil society, private sector and government sources, they should be able to spur countries on to real institutional change by clarifying the issue as one of 'identify and scale up' rather than 'start again'. Because the new thinking on national strategies treats NEAPs, PRSPs, CDFs, and so on as optional means to an end, rather than as ends in themselves, it encourages an inclusive approach that should be able to defuse tensions between these 'branded' initiatives. By emphasising integration with budget/investment processes, and by seeking clarity of goals and evidence of priorities, effective strategy processes are also more likely to attract investment than in the past.

*National strategies can provide many 'entry points' for concerned civil society and business groups.* There are limits to what even the best corporations and NGOs can do on their own, especially in the absence of a forum to debate integration and trade-offs with one another and with government. Many are seeking effective means of engagement with one another and with government. It is clear that the emerging, pragmatic approach to national strategies has dispensed with the notion of a government-led plan and replaced it with a government-facilitated process. This process integrates many functions (debate, information-gathering, analysis, decision-making, experimentation, role changes, policy changes, monitoring and review) and incorporates principles of inclusiveness and innovation: thus it is an efficient and equitable way to bring together concerned groups. In short, it offers a practical way to keep sustainable development on everybody's agenda. As Dr Habito of the Philippines, Chair of the International Forum, concluded:

*'Ultimately, sustainable development is not something that governments do for people; it is something people achieve for themselves through individual and collective change.'*

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## References

1. Agenda 21, Chapter 8, paragraph 8.7
2. A/56/326, Report of the Secretary General: Road map towards the implementation of the United Nations Millennium Declaration, Goal 7, target 9
3. Notably: Carew-Reid *et al* 1994, Dalal-Clayton *et al* 1994
4. OECD Development Assistance Committee, 2001

5. OECD, 2001. The DAC Guidelines: Strategies for Sustainable Development: Guidance for Development Co-operation (see also <http://www.nssd.net>).
6. UN DESA, 2002 (forthcoming). Report of the International Forum on National Sustainable Development Strategies. Accra, Ghana, 7–9 November 2001
7. The International Forum comprised 73 expert participants from 31 countries, developing and industrialised, and drawn from government, civil society, the private sector and international agencies
8. UN DESA, 2002 (forthcoming)