



Sustainable Development - Commission issues second progress report on implementation of the EU Sustainable Development Strategy

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Summary: The Commission has published its second review of implementation of the revised EU Sustainable Development Strategy (SDS). The report notes that despite some significant developments, in particular with regard to climate change; unsustainable trends persist in a number of areas including biodiversity, natural resources and transport, and the EU needs to further intensify its efforts. Regarding the future of the SDS, the Commission's report does not think it feasible to merge cross-cutting EU level strategies given the different roles they fulfil; however it recognises that there is scope for further clarification of the role of the SDS in relation to other EU strategies, notably the Lisbon Strategy, and puts forward a number of proposals in this context.

Mainstreaming sustainable development in EU policies

On 24 July, the European Commission presented its second progress report on implementation of the revised EU Sustainable Development Strategy (SDS). This follows the Commission's first review of progress which was presented in late 2007 (see IEEP Analysis Briefing: 2 November 2007). The 2009 review (COM(2009)400)¹ takes stock of EU level progress in the areas covered by the SDS and provides some initial input to the debate on the future of the SDS. Unlike the first review, this report focuses on progress at the EU level. Member States were apparently not asked to submit national progress reports to the Commission; however information on implementation in Member States should be covered in a Eurostat indicator report that will be published later this year.

The Commission's progress report recognises sustainable development as the 'overarching long-term goal of the EU' and that in recent years the EU has 'successfully mainstreamed' the objective of sustainable development in many policy fields. The EU's climate and energy policies in particular are given as an example of the impact of the SDS on the political agenda. This appears somewhat impertinent given that the discussions on the climate and energy package hardly mentioned the SDS as a policy driver for action in the area².

Overview of EU level progress

The report provides an overview of EU level progress on the seven challenges and cross-cutting themes of the EU SDS. The key areas discussed are outlined below:

- **Climate change and energy:** EU efforts including the climate and energy package, the energy efficiency package, amended rules under the European Regional Development Fund and the adaptation White Paper are highlighted

as key developments. However, additional effort is required at the global level; in particular the successful conclusion of international negotiations on climate change is seen as critical.

- **Sustainable transport:** Rising greenhouse gas emissions and energy consumption, along with persistent problems of noise and air pollution, continue to be a problem in the transport sector. A number of key EU developments are noted and it is stressed that all aspects of sustainability, including emissions, noise, land occupancy and biodiversity, should be taken into account when designing EU transport policy.
- **Sustainable consumption and production:** Despite some progress in decoupling economic growth from environmental damage and natural resource use, negative trends continue, particularly with regard to energy consumption. The sustainable consumption and production Action Plan and accompanying legislative proposals are noted among the EU's key developments in this area.
- **Conservation and management of natural resources:** Global biodiversity is in decline and it is increasingly evident that the EU will fail to meet its 2010 target to halt the loss of biodiversity. EU developments of note include the raw materials initiative, action on water management, maritime initiatives, the planned reform of the Common Fisheries Policy, and implementation of EU nature legislation. However, a number of challenges remain including completion of the Natura 2000 network, appropriate management of species and habitats, and implementing the water framework Directive given that the majority of EU water bodies are at risk of failing to meet the objective of achieving good environmental status by 2015.
- **Public health:** Despite some improvements in health, increasing exposure to air pollution and toxic chemicals pose new challenges for European health policy. The adoption of legislation concerning the sustainable use of pesticides is noted as a particular improvement in terms of environmental protection and safety.
- **Global poverty and sustainable development challenges:** The importance of engaging third-country partners to address global sustainable development challenges is stressed, and the EU's multilateral and bilateral efforts in this regard are outlined.
- **Finance and economic instruments:** The report notes that 30 per cent of cohesion policy funds allocated in the 2007-2013 period will be spent on the environment and recognises that there is scope for further integration of SDS principles into cohesion policy so as to address 'new sustainable development challenges' including climate change. Other key developments include the gradual removal of environmentally harmful subsidies in sectoral policies.

Reflections on the future of the SDS

There has already been much debate over the relationship between the EU SDS and other cross-cutting EU level strategies, in particular the Lisbon Strategy for growth and jobs. On this issue, the Commission's report sees the Lisbon Strategy as a 'dynamic strategy' which takes sustainability into account, whereas the SDS is viewed as a 'long-term strategy' which provides an overall framework for policy making and for forward-looking thinking on sustainability. The Commission's report notes that 'merging cross-cutting strategies does not seem feasible given the different roles they fulfil'. However it recognises that there is scope for further clarification of the role of the SDS in relation to other EU strategies and puts forward a number of proposals in this context:

- Greater synergy, improved coordination and linkages with the Lisbon Strategy and other cross-cutting EU strategies;
- Streamline the SDS or refocus it on its overarching nature (it is not clear what difference, if any, is implied between streamlining and refocusing);

- Facilitate the exchange of best practices of innovative approaches;
- Use mechanisms in the Lisbon Strategy to monitor implementation of the SDS, identify measures that support both Strategies with positive results on growth, jobs and the environment;
- Explore the possibility of creating a sustainable development scoreboard; and
- Expand the scope of the SDS to reflect new and emerging challenges such as energy security, adaptation to climate change, food security, land use, sustainability of public finances and the external dimension of sustainable development.

Priority actions?

In December 2007, EU leaders reviewed progress under the EU SDS and called on the Commission to present its next progress report in June 2009 together with a 'roadmap setting out the remaining actions to be implemented with the highest priority' (see IEEP Analysis Briefing: 4 January 2008). Although the Commission's report does not explicitly refer to such a roadmap, it does note that the SDS 'could' focus on the EU's long-term goals in key areas, namely:

- Contributing to the shift to a low carbon, low input economy;
- Intensifying efforts for the protection of biodiversity, water and other natural resources;
- Promoting social inclusion; and
- Strengthening the external dimension of sustainable development.

This proposed focusing of effort seems to imply that not all objectives and actions laid out in the current EU SDS are still viewed as having the same level of priority. It also implicitly recognises that the external dimension has not yet received the full attention it deserves.

Next steps

The Commission's report will be discussed at the December European Council which will undertake its second review of implementation of the renewed SDS and if necessary adjust its priorities. A Eurostat report based on a set of EU sustainable development indicators is to be published in autumn 2009, and is expected to provide data on progress at both EU and Member State level. The European Economic and Social Committee is also preparing an opinion on the future of the SDS which will be presented in autumn.

The Commission expects these processes to provide the basis for a future decision on whether to launch a comprehensive review of the EU SDS - which was initially anticipated to be launched by 2011. The Commission notes that such a review could serve as the basis for 'further streamlining the EU SDS, defining its role more clearly in EU policy-making, focusing it on areas where progress is most needed, and improving governance'.

The EU is also starting to look forward to the next cycle of the Lisbon Strategy which is expected to be adopted at the spring European Council in 2010. A consultation on post-2010 Lisbon Strategy is to be launched on 30 September and the Commission is expected to present a progress report on the Lisbon Strategy along with proposals for the next cycle at the end of 2009 or in early 2010.

These parallel reflection processes on the future of two of the EU's key overarching strategies will have important implications for the priority afforded to, and focus of, future EU environmental policies.

Summary:

References

1. Commission of the European Communities, Communication on 'Mainstreaming sustainable development into EU policies: 2009 Review of the European Union Strategy for Sustainable Development', (COM(2009)400), 24/07/2009,
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2. See for further details on this issue - Pallemmaerts, M. et al, 'Does the EU Sustainable Development Strategy contribute to Environmental Policy Integration?', February 2007,
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