



Fact Sheet on the EU Sustainable Development Strategy

The EU Sustainable Development Strategy

The concept of Sustainable Development was introduced at the international level in 1987. Sustainable Development aims at meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs¹. The EU acknowledged its obligation to act on this premise and focus on those problems “which pose severe or irreversible threats to the future well-being of European Society”². In 2001 the European Commission launched “A European Strategy for Sustainable Development” presenting the long-term vision that “economic growth, social cohesion and environmental protection must go hand in hand”. Following the launch of the strategy by the European Commission, the European Council adopted the Sustainable Development Strategy (SDS) at its meeting in Sweden, in June 2001.

Objectives of the Sustainable Development Strategy

The initial SDS introduced long-term objectives and targets for the following priority areas for action³:

- Climate change.
- Europe’s transport system.
- Threats to public health such as hazardous chemicals.
- The management of natural resources.
- The biodiversity decline.
- Poverty and social exclusion.

The Strategy is meant to be overarching to all EU policy making and therefore aims at integrating environmental policies into other areas such as economic growth and the Lisbon Agenda.

Also the EU’s international role in the sustainable development policy making process is highlighted in the SDS.

Implementing the SDS: How committed is the EU really?

Given the urgency to achieve sustainable development and halt environmentally destructive practices, the SDS is subject to a constant review process. In 2004⁴, stakeholders were invited to contribute to the mid-term review of the SDS and in February 2005 the Commission published an initial stocktaking. The Commission admitted that several unsustainable trends still continue in the EU. The European Council in June 2005, consequently adopted the Guiding Principles for Sustainable Development⁵, which outline the EU’s objectives and policy principles such as the precautionary and polluter-pays principle as means to achieve sustainable development.

Finally, the Commission presented the results of its mid-term review⁶ (5 years after the initial adoption) of the SDS in December 2005, which are alarming. Not only does the review not lead to positive improvements of the strategy, in our view it actually takes a step backwards. Although Commission President Manuel Barroso continues to emphasize the SDS and the Lisbon Agenda are “mutually reinforcing”, the results of the mid-term review indicate just how much the Strategy has come under severe pressure from businesses and the European Commission’s own agenda. Clear targets and timetables, especially in the previously identified priority areas for action are missing. Instead, priority is given to economic development measures, such as “impact assessments” and voluntary business initiatives to achieve the objectives of the strategy.

The impact assessments to be used under the SDS are not defined as in assessing the potential benefits to a sustainable use of resources, eliminating hazardous chemicals or reducing CO₂ emissions. Rather such assessments are designed to determine whether an environmental policy poses a potential threat to economic growth. This, however, is in contrast to the goal of sustainable development as such, which is to halt destructive growth patterns such as the overexploitation of natural resources to ensure today’s resources are available for tomorrow’s generations.



WECF demands for an effective SDS in the EU

Given the lack of ambition and the shift in focus the European Commission presented with the revised SDS, WECF is asking for the following measures to be implemented at Council level:

- Reassert the EU's leadership in achieving sustainable development.
- Adopt a SDS that is ambitious and comprehensive. Adopt clear targets and timetables to guide the implementation of the SDS and the actions demanded in its priority areas. Voluntary business initiatives alone will not help deliver the implementation of the strategy and halt destructive environmental resource use.
- Invest in eco-innovation through enacting clean production policies (i.e. substitution of hazardous chemicals) and environmental taxation reforms.
- Reinstate the public health priority area as part of the SDS - an effective and efficient new chemicals policy (REACH) that closes the data gap on 85% of chemicals on the EU market and phases out the most hazardous chemicals must be an integral part of this.
- Climate change priority area: Fully implement the Kyoto Protocol targets as soon as possible and adopt urgent measures to increase energy efficiency in the EU by using renewable energy sources. Nuclear energy should not be promoted in this context.
- Protection of natural resources and halting biodiversity decline priority area: Eliminate perverse subsidies, agree on concrete targets and timetables.
- Implement and enforce existing legislation pertaining to environmental and health protection in the EU.

¹ World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987.

² A sustainable Europe for a better world: a Sustainable Development Strategy, COM (2001) 264 final, 15th May 2001.

³ <http://europa.eu.int/comm/environment/eussd>

⁴ The WECF network contributed to this internet consultation. The results can be downloaded from

http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/sustainable/pages/consult_en.htm

⁵ http://europa.eu.int/comm/sustainable/docs/COM_2005_0218_F_EN_ACTE.pdf

⁶ The result of the mid-term review is a revised Sustainable Development Strategy

WECF

Women in Europe for a Common Future

is a Network of 78 Organisations in 31 Western and Eastern European countries, the Caucasus and Central Asia, working on sustainable development, health and environment, and poverty reduction.

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