Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on ‘The role of the National Councils for Sustainable Development’

(2008/C 120/07)

On 25-26 April 2007, the European Economic and Social Committee, acting under Article 29(2) of its Rules of Procedure, decided to draw up an opinion on The Role of the National Councils for Sustainable Development.

The Section for Agriculture, Rural Development and the Environment (Sustainable Development Observatory), which was responsible for preparing the Committee’s work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 27 November 2007. The rapporteur was Mr Haken.

At its 440th plenary session, held on 12 and 13 December 2007 (meeting of 12 December), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 115 votes in favour with 3 abstentions.

1. Conclusions

1.1 National Councils for Sustainable Development (NCSDs) can be a strong and powerful force for sustainable development since they can provide independent advice and foster dialogue with civil society and stakeholders on sustainable development.

1.2 An overview of NCSDs throughout the EU gives a very diverse picture. While some Member States have no or only inactive councils, those that are active differ considerably in their remit, composition, independence, resources and also as to the impact of their work.

1.3 Following the positive experiences in Member States with ‘strong’ NCSDs, the EESC calls on all Member States to strengthen their councils or to create operative and effective councils where they do not yet exist.

1.4 The EESC recommends that NCSDs should:

— include representatives from all the main sectors of society concerned;

— have a sufficient degree of independence from government;

— play an important part in the shaping of sustainable development strategies and in monitoring their implementation;

— be sufficiently funded so that they are able to provide real added value to the debates and the decision-making process;

— pool experience, exchange best practice and maintain open dialogue among the councils, particularly through the strengthening of the European Environment and Sustainable Development Advisory Council (EEAC) network.

2. Background

2.1 Sustainable development means satisfying the needs of the present generation without jeopardising the ability of future generations to satisfy theirs. This is one of the overall aims of the EU, governing all its policies and actions. It is founded on the principles of democracy, gender equality, solidarity, the rule of law and respect for fundamental rights, including freedom and equal opportunities for all.

2.2 In 1992, following the United Nations’ Rio Conference, sustainable development became a globally recognised policy area. The idea of consultative bodies such as NCSDs also stems from the Rio Conference. Agenda 21, also a result of Rio, states that ‘a national strategy for sustainable development should be developed through the widest possible participation’; and in 2002, the Johannesburg recommendations also called for the setting up of sustainable development councils.

2.3 In the EU, the first sustainable development strategy was adopted in Gothenburg in 2001. In order to create a more comprehensive and effective strategy, the Commission started a revision process in 2004, and in June 2006 the Council adopted the renewed strategy for sustainable development for an enlarged Europe (1). This renewed strategy aims to implement Europe’s long-term commitment to achieving the goal of sustainable development.

2.4 Following the recommendations of the UN Conclusions, and subsequently of the EU, institutions known as NCSDs started to be set up in the 1990s in a number of countries, their main aim being to ensure that Agenda 21 was effectively implemented and sustainable development principles put into practice. Some governments established inter-ministerial coordination bodies (e.g. the Hungarian Commission on Sustainable Development, 1993), some chose mixed bodies like the Finnish National Commission on Sustainable Development (1993) and others created councils with a civil society composition, such as the Belgian National Council (1993) and the UK Round Table on Sustainable Development (1994). Other countries followed thereafter; some of the earlier bodies were restructured and others were eventually discontinued.

2.5 The renewed EU strategy states that: ‘Member States should consider strengthening, or where they do not yet exist, setting up multi-stakeholder national advisory councils on sustainable development to stimulate informed debate, assist in the preparation of National Sustainable Development Strategies and/or contribute to national and EU progress reviews. National sustainable development councils are meant to increase the involvement of civil society in sustainable development matters and contribute to better linking different policies and policy levels, also by using their network of European Environmental and Sustainable Development Advisory Councils (EEAC)’.

2.6 NCSDs have now been officially established in a number of Member States: Given their different histories Member States’ NCSDs take a variety of forms across the EU. There is some form of council for sustainable development or environmental policy in 24 Member States; eight of these have specific councils for sustainable development, and another six have environmental councils made up of stakeholders or experts that are also active in the area of sustainable development. Other countries have governmental coordination bodies called councils, some with civil society involvement. Some of these bodies are inactive. In several countries where regions have considerable powers, regional councils have been set up in addition to the national councils. The rapid growth in NCSDs shows that they have potential and could provide added value to the policy-making processes and the debate across wider society.

2.7 This opinion aims to examine the role of the NCSDs, their remit, composition, resources, working methods, and above all their involvement of civil society. To a certain extent, the opinion also aims to look at the effectiveness of the NCSDs, bearing in mind that such an assessment is always prone to subjectivity. This assessment is based, in particular, on the research conducted by the EEAC network (\(^\ast\)), the results of a questionnaire sent out by the EESC to several national focal points and NCSDs, and a number of civil society organisations. In addition, a number of interviews with NCSDs and civil society representatives have been carried out.

3. An overview of National Councils for Sustainable Development

3.1 The following overview of the NCSDs shows a highly diverse picture:

The councils’ remit

3.2 Four main tasks of NCSDs can be identified:

— monitoring progress in implementing SD strategies or in achieving specific targets, and drawing attention to shortfalls;

— encouraging dialogue and consultation with civil society (by having civil society representatives as council members in the work of the councils, by fostering dialogue among them and with the government);

— communication on sustainable development (by holding public events and by publishing SD information online, in the media, etc.).

Size and composition of the Councils

3.3 The NCSDs vary in size and composition; the number of members varies from 15, as in Germany, to 78, 81 and 90, as in Belgium, Finland and France, respectively. Most councils comprise civil society representatives (business, trade unions, NGOs and research institutes). Others also include representatives from various government departments. In certain cases, the government coordination body is called a ‘Council’ and could include a small number of stakeholders. Regional and local governments are often represented too. A number of civil society representatives have voiced discontent about the insufficient involvement of civil society in their national Council and in SD processes in general.

Degree of independence

3.4 As councils are established and funded by governments there is ‘dependence’ in this respect. In order to gain the respect of both government bodies and civil society organisations, the councils must achieve the right degree of independence, and striking this balance is a difficult task. The selection process varies, but in general, the government appoints the council members, typically on the basis of nominations by the civil society organisations represented in the council. Another issue concerns the staff working for the council; in several countries,
the staff comes from government bodies. This may restrict the degree of independence of the council. Moreover, some councils are chaired by a member of the government.

**Resources**

3.5 The councils are very unevenly resourced, in terms of both human resources and the budget available. In some countries, where the secretariat is based in a ministry, there is only one administrator who, moreover, is often not working full time for the council. The total number of staff ranges from less than 1 to around 20. The biggest council is the UK Council with 58 employees. Not all councils have their own budget. Budgets range from less than EUR 0.1 million to around EUR 1 million, with the exception of the UK council whose budget is EUR 5.5 million.

**Impact**

3.6 Evaluating the impact of the councils’ work is not easy, but a few conclusions can be drawn from the information received. For example, it would seem that in several countries where the council has a strong mandate, a large number of the recommendations made by the councils were incorporated in government policies, especially as regards the national SD strategy. Some councils clearly have good access to government ministers and departments and are regularly consulted on policy formation. Others are kept at a distance. It can also be stated that some councils have managed to reach out to a large number of stakeholders and the broader public by attracting a lot of participants to their events, thus ensuring a strong involvement of civil society in SD processes.

**Evaluation**

3.7 NCSDs can be a strong and powerful force for sustainable development. They can provide independent advice and a wide range of knowledge; they are in a position to foster dialogue with civil society and stakeholders; they can play an important part in monitoring progress towards longer-term sustainability goals, and exercise a valuable challenge function when progress is falling short.

3.8 While some Member States have no or only inactive councils, those that are active differ considerably in their remit, composition, independence, resources and also as to the impact of their work. This is the result of a variety of factors: the size and political organisation of the country, the role given to sustainable development policies by government, the tradition of civil society involvement, the existence of other bodies partially covering the remit of a council, the will of the government to accept advice from another body, etc.

3.9 The full potential of NCSDs is not exploited in all Member States. In some, the establishment of a council seems to be more a kind of ‘window-dressing’ than striving for real input from civil society. However, there are a number of countries with well-established councils that live up to their role and have a real impact.

3.10 Most councils do not seem to have sufficient resources to fulfil all their assigned tasks. A significant amount of manpower and funding is necessary to assemble evidence, analyse policies and their impact, organise council meetings and public engagement processes, produce well-argued and authoritative reports and to promote them actively to government and others.

3.11 In some Member States, the government appears to have a very strong role, e.g. as regards the appointment of council members, the number of government representatives on the council and the staff working for the council. In such cases, there is a certain risk that the government’s view may dominate the work of the council, making it less likely that the council can play a significant part in helping governments to transcend shorter-term political considerations and move towards longer-term sustainability goals.

3.12 NCSDs have had mixed experiences in promoting engagement with civil society on sustainable development issues. Councils across Europe could have much to learn from each other in terms of developing good practice in this regard.

3.13 For many sustainable development issues competence is shared between the European Union and Member States. But most councils have a limited capacity to focus on the European aspects or to exercise any influence in Brussels. They have partly addressed this through the creation of the EEAC network, which is becoming an increasingly significant voice for sustainable development in Europe.

4. **Recommendations**

4.1 Following the positive experiences in Member States with ‘strong’ NCSDs, the EESC calls on all Member States to strengthen their councils or to create strong councils where they do not yet exist.

4.2 The composition, mandate and functions of NCSDs will differ from country to country depending on local circumstances and political structures. The EESC recommends that Member States give close attention to the following general recommendations on the key aspects of councils.

4.2.1 Membership: NCSDs have more authority and credibility if they include representatives from all the main sectors of society concerned with sustainable development issues. The broader the basis of membership, the higher the probability that solutions which will be broadly accepted can be found.
4.2.2 Mandate and vision: Achieving sustainability requires decision-makers to develop a long-term view and to take account of the needs of future generations and of the planet as a whole, as well as more immediate and short-term political considerations. NCSDs can play an important part in articulating that long-term vision. To play that role effectively they need to have members with vision, authority and standing in society, capable of taking an independent view and of challenging existing policies and practices.

4.2.3 Independence: NCSDs would be able to exercise a stronger influence in the direction of more sustainable development if they had a sufficient degree of independence from government, and were able to take up difficult political issues where there may be some degree of conflict between shorter-term political objectives and longer-term sustainability needs.

4.2.4 Scope: NCSDs should, from an early stage, play an important part in the development of sustainable development (and related) strategies and in monitoring their implementation. This includes addressing a wide range of sustainability issues like climate change, energy and transport policies, biodiversity, rural and agricultural issues, and the overall management of the economy in a sustainable way. NCSDs are likely to be most productive if they are able to both respond to government requests to study particular issues and also to take up other areas they deem to be important on their own initiative.

4.2.5 Access to information: In order to work well, NCSDs need the capacity to gather evidence from all relevant sources and, in particular, to have good access to government information and thinking.

4.2.6 Promoting the engagement of civil society on sustainable development issues: One important role of NCSDs is to increase public awareness. They can have a valuable role in aiding the relevant authorities to incorporate the sustainable development perspective into formal and informal education. They can promote wider understanding of the issues in the media. The publication of annual 'state of sustainability' reports by NCSDs could draw additional attention to the subject and foster public debate.


The President
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