

Strategies For Sustainable Development: Meeting The Challenge

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In 1992, Agenda 21 called for all countries to develop national strategies for sustainable development to translate the words and commitments of the Earth Summit into concrete policies and actions. It recognised that key decisions are needed at the national level, and should be made by stakeholders together. It believed that the huge agenda inherent in sustainable development needed an orderly approach – a ‘strategy’. But Agenda 21 stopped short of any international agreement, or definition of what constitutes a strategy, or even of guidance on how to go about it. Until this year, no such strategy has emerged.

Writing and talking about sustainable development is easy. There seems to be a mine of literature and 24-hour rhetoric on the subject. But doing something about it is quite another matter. Just how do you turn the concept into reality? Indeed, can reality accommodate the concept?

UN commitments but no guidance

The UN held a Special Session to review progress five years after the Rio Summit. Delegates were concerned about continued environmental deterioration and social and economic marginalisation. There have been success stories, but they are fragmented. There have been improvements in meeting some environmental, social, or economic needs, but they have caused other problems. Sustainable development as a mainstream process of societal transformation still seems elusive.

This assessment led governments to set a target of 2002 for *introducing* national strategies for sustainable development (*nssds*). The Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the OECD, in its 1996 *“Shaping the 21st Century”* publication, called for the *formulation and implementation* of an *nssd* in every country by 2005 (as one of seven International Development Targets). It also

committed DAC members to support developing countries’ *nssds*. But, again, no attempt was made to set out what a strategy would include or involve. “How would I know one if I saw one?”, one Minister asked.

Building on what works

In response to this vacuum, the DAC launched a project in 1999 involving eight developing countries and a Task Force of donors, co-ordinated by IIED. Its aim was to clarify the purposes and principles underlying effective national and local strategies for sustainable development; to describe the forms they can take in developing countries; and to offer guidance on how development co-operation agencies can support them. The project involved stakeholder dialogues and reviews of a range of processes in each country that were *either* deliberately designed to lead to sustainable development, or were considered to have supported promising outcomes (thus including traditional and ongoing mechanisms as well as organised ‘strategies’).

This partnership culminated in the collaborative development of policy guidance on strategies, which was endorsed by aid ministers in April 2001. In the past, many strategic planning initiatives had limited

KEY CHALLENGES:

- The OECD launched a project in 1999 involving donors and eight developing countries, co-ordinated by IIED. It revealed how national strategies for sustainable development (*nssds*) can improve the mainstreaming of social and environmental objectives in development processes. The challenge is to get these processes under way
- *Nssds* should be seen as a set of co-ordinated mechanisms and processes to help societies work towards sustainable development – and not as ‘master plans’ which will get increasingly out of date
- Well-organised private sector participation in *nssds* is needed – as sustainable development will be fuelled by responsible business and investment

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practical impact because they focused on the production of a comprehensive document as an end-product, and such documents have often been left without implementation. It is now accepted that an *nssd* should improve the integration of social and environmental objectives into key economic development processes. In other words, a set of locally-driven, continuing processes, rather than an encyclopaedia of possible actions (most of which will interest only a few people). The DAC guidance also offers the first official definition of a strategy:

“A co-ordinated set of participatory and continuously improving processes of analysis, debate, capacity-strengthening, planning and investment, which seeks to integrate the short and long term economic, social and environmental objectives of society – through mutually supportive approaches wherever possible – and manages trade offs where this is not possible” (OECD DAC 2001)

Meeting the challenge

Moving towards sustainable development presents tremendous challenges. Important structural changes are needed for societies to manage their affairs. Different countries may settle for different solutions, but all will have to make hard choices. Strategies for sustainable development are about making and implementing such choices, in a realistic, effective and lasting way. Given circumstances of continuing change, strategies require systematic and iterative processes of learning and doing. They do not have discrete beginnings or ends. Establishing a new or stand-alone process would rarely be recommended. Putting an *nssd* into operation would therefore involve promising, existing processes as entry points, strengthening them in terms of several key principles, notably:

- Being country-led and nationally-owned with high-level commitment;
- Adopting a people-centred approach with effective stakeholder participation;
- Adopting a long-term vision with a clear timeframe on which stakeholders agree;
- Ensuring linkage with budget and investment processes;
- Establishing continuous monitoring and evaluation;
- Ensuring co-ordination between thematic or sector strategies and decentralised levels;
- Focusing on capacity development.

The label attached to a strategy process matters less than adhering to these principles.

Establishing a co-ordinated system

A co-ordinated set of mechanisms and processes is needed to implement the principles. This will help improve convergence between existing strategies, avoid duplication, confusion and strain on capacities and resources. Indeed, a sustainable development strategy may best be viewed as a *system comprising various components*:

- Regular multi-stakeholder fora and means for negotiation at national and decentralised levels, with links between them;

- A shared vision, developed through such fora, incorporating broad strategic objectives;
- A set of mechanisms to pursue these objectives in ways that can adapt to change (notably an information system with key sustainable development indicators; communication capabilities; analytical processes; international engagement; and means for policy coherence, budgeting, monitoring, and accountability);
- Strategic principles and locality- or sector-specific criteria, indicators and standards adopted through legislation, voluntary action, and market-based instruments, etc.;
- Pilot activities – from an early stage – to generate learning and commitment;
- A secretariat or other facility, with clear authority and powers, to co-ordinate these mechanisms;
- A mandate from a high-level, central authority and from citizens’ and business organisations.

Strategies: a shared challenge in the North and South

The problems faced by developing and developed countries in preparing *nssds* usually are quite different. Most developing countries are occupied with economic development, poverty alleviation and social investment. Developed countries face problems caused by high levels of industrial activity, movement and consumption.

Countries have consequently approached strategies from different perspectives and pursued them through different means. In the North, the focus has been on institutional re-orientation and integration, regulatory and voluntary standards and local targets, environmental controls, and cost-saving approaches. The South has been concerned with creating new institutions, and ‘bankable’ projects. Clearly they have much to learn from each other’s experiences. Both now face a stronger challenge, in a globalising world, of encouraging responsible business and investment – and therefore of well-organised private sector participation in *nssds*.

Governments urgently need to address several key uncertainties if they are truly serious in meeting the international target for strategies for sustainable development.

First, are bureaucrats willing to do things differently; to think and behave in new, participatory ways that provide for dialogue and consensus-building; to agree what is needed and how to get there? There is a need to identify those motivations that will encourage bureaucrats to work differently.

Secondly, are institutions willing to work in support of each other to achieve cross-sectoral integration and synchronisation? There is a need to identify and support the constructive institutional relationships and experiments that exist.

Finally, and perhaps most critically: political will must be generated to support such approaches. The *nssd* principles and system are designed to continuously improve such political will, but an *nssd* will require bold leadership to kick the whole process off. ●