

SER opinion on the *National Strategy for Sustainable Development*

Background

The United Nations decided in 1997 that every country would have to draw up a national strategy for sustainable development by 2002. To prepare for the UN Summit on Sustainable Development, which will take place from 26 August to 4 September 2002 in Johannesburg, the UN will be comparing the national strategies of the various countries.

It was against this background that the Dutch Cabinet published its Study of National Government policy within the framework of the National Strategy for Sustainable Development (*Verkenning van het Rijksoverheidsbeleid in het kader van de Nationale Strategie voor Duurzame Ontwikkeling*) – referred to as the NSSD study– on 21 December 2001. The Cabinet has asked the Social and Economic Council (SER) for its opinion on this study.

General assessment

The NSSD study takes the first step towards devising the Netherlands' strategy for sustainable development, and this means that it pays scant attention to the international context within which sustainable development is to be achieved. In view of this fact, the Social and Economic Council has considered what the study contributes to public opinion and decision-making in the Netherlands with respect to sustainability issues.

The Council agrees with the aim of achieving sustainable development, and in this advisory report it defines the concept of sustainability in the same manner as described in the NSSD study. Sustainability means the balanced, integrated management of financial and economic (*profit*), social and cultural (*people*) and ecological (*planet*) capital, not only “here and now”, but also “elsewhere” (across borders, with a specific concern for developing countries) and “in the future” (for the generations to come). The 3x3 matrix below effectively illustrates the task at hand: how to bring the various dimensions into balance and avoiding passing problems on to other countries or future generations.

Promote integration with a view to	Economic dimension	Social and cultural dimension	Ecological dimension
Here and now			
Elsewhere			
In the future			

It is up to the government to define the framework within which society will have to make choices. This framework should reflect limitations on the substitutability of resources – for example restrictions on the amount of pressure that can be borne by ecosystems. The Council expects that a study of a national strategy for sustainable development will clearly indicate the strategic choices to be made, the social dilemmas that make such choices difficult, and possible ways of resolving those dilemmas.

Unfortunately, the NSSD study does not live up to these expectations. It largely neglects to consider what must be done to achieve sustainability in its various dimensions, and

does not adequately emphasise the need to make choices. The study makes it appear as if the whole issue is a question of a few adjustments within existing structures. It lacks a sense of urgency and it fails to steer the public debate on difficult sustainability issues. In this respect it seems to turn back the clock. The fourth National Environmental Policy Plan clearly indicates the need to make structural changes in the economic and social order and targets three transitions to sustainability¹.

In the Council's view, the NSSD study should pay specific attention to the tensions and the problems that we will face on the road to sustainability, and should also indicate forms of action and types of solutions which offer a feasible alternative. At present difficult decisions are avoided and placed on the back burner as dilemmas. That leads to problems being passed on: to "others", to "the future" or to "elsewhere".

Each of the five themes which the NSSD study considers separately – population, climate, water, biodiversity and knowledge – are essential to sustainable development. Mobility and space are two of the other themes that merit separate consideration. By dividing the study up into policy themes, the study fails to give adequate consideration to cross-over issues. Ultimately, many sustainability issues – particularly those that can be found on the interface between economics and ecology – can be traced to the behaviour of and the interaction between consumers and producers. That is why the Council would like to draw special attention to making consumption and production patterns sustainable.

Coherence and co-operation

The NSSD study is right to call for greater policy coherence, international co-operation and closer co-operation with stakeholders as the basic principles leading to the further development of the strategy for sustainable development.

The Council would emphasise the importance of a more coherent policy. Sustainable development requires all the dimensions to be considered and an all-encompassing policy. Because it fails to link up in any clearly defined way with the series of long-term studies which the Cabinet published last year² or with the present round of investment in the Netherlands' economic structure, the NSSD study gives the impression that it is an isolated exercise, one which has no relationship to strategic policy-making.

The very point is to systematically embed efforts to achieve sustainability both in strategic policy-making and in the implementation of policy that touches on sustainable development (and which policy does not?). The alternatives that the NSSD study lists – keying in to the new system for making the national budget more transparent, including a memorandum on sustainable development in each of the ministerial budgets, setting up inter-ministerial policy screening with a view to sustainable development – have the

¹ The Dutch Cabinet published the fourth National Environmental Policy Plan (NMP4) in June 2001. This policy Memorandum specifically addresses persistent environmental problems and is intended to set the agenda and the strategy for dealing with these problems. The memorandum takes a long-term perspective (2030), focusing on transitions to sustainability in three areas: energy efficiency, agriculture and biodiversity and natural resources. A transition is defined as a long-term process of conversion to a new system, with sustainability being defined broadly in terms of economic, social and ecological sustainability.

² These are long-term studies in the following policy fields: health care, social infrastructure, education and research, economic structure, taxes and social insurance contributions.

Council's support. The Council also agrees with the argument put forward by the Swedish and Dutch governments to make a "sustainability impact analysis" an integral part of policy-making.

International co-operation is required, on the one hand because of the transnational nature of many environmental issues and the close relationship between our economy and society and the international context, and on the other hand because of the poverty in many developing countries. Poverty is both a manifestation and a source of non-sustainability.

The Council also subscribes to the third principle, which is the vital significance of co-operation between government, the business community, private citizens and non-governmental organisations when it comes to making the transition to sustainability. Interactive policymaking, the co-makship in policy and corporate social responsibility are the key words in this regard. The Council would refer in this connection to its advisory report on the fourth National Environmental Policy Plan where it refers to the "interaction" that must carry the transition to sustainable energy efficiency³.

Indicators for sustainable development

The Council regards indicators as an important aid with which to guide the transitions to sustainable development. Indicators serve to chart progress on the road to sustainability. The dynamic, process-like nature of sustainable development must be adequately expressed by the indicators selected and by the presentation of relevant forecasts.

The indicators for sustainable development are eloquent:

- they can be interpreted in only one way and can be easily related to important sustainability issues;
- they key in to objectives and targets which are generally accepted and have been included in the national strategy for sustainable development;
- they offer a frame of reference within which specific action can be taken in the Netherlands and the relevant parties can be held accountable.

Where no objective has been defined, a well-chosen, meaningful, thought-provoking indicator will offer the necessary impetus by confronting people with the consequences if we should fail, as a society, to make the right choices regarding sustainability issues.

³ SER Advisory Report, *Nationaal Milieubeleidsplan 4*, publication no. 01/08, The Hague 2001. See www.ser.nl.