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Discussion Paper I:
"Linking politics and administration"

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prepared by

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Guide for quick readers

This Discussion Paper provides **guidance** for the discussion in the **first breakout session** of the ESDN Conference 2007 - ESB07 -, dealing with the theme "Linking politics and administration" in the context of SD strategy processes.

The introduction in Section 1 provides some important clarifications and (theoretical) background information on the theme. Section 2.1 gives an overview of the four topics of the first breakout session, and Section 2.3 introduces the four topics more in depth. We encourage all participants to **read at least the general questions in Section 1 (grey boxes) and the topic of their choice in Section 2.3 closely**.

A separate discussion paper provided by the EEAC facilitates the second breakout session on the topic of "Stimulating informed debate in society".

1. Introduction

Together with the hosts of the event, we have chosen the challenge of linking political and administrative aspects in the context of SD strategies as topic of the first breakout session for several reasons:

- Although politicians and administrators together constitute the executive power of the state, the two groups can be regarded as two branches of government that are characterised by different rationalities and interests (see section 1.1). In other words, politicians and administrators have to collaborate closely in order to fulfil their executive functions, but they do not always pull at the same string. This is often obvious in the context of SD strategies.
- Virtually all strategy guidelines and most scientific studies emphasise high-level political commitment and involvement as key success factor of SD strategies.
- Securing political commitment in general and practical issues of better linking politicians and public administrators in particular have been raised repeatedly as key issue during previous ESDN conferences.

This introduction addresses the challenge of linking political and administrative aspects from a theoretical perspective. It aims to

i.   Clarify what we mean with political and administrative aspects,
ii.   Address the fact that political systems vary across Europe,
iii.   Highlight the underlying rationalities that are ideal-typical for politicians on the one hand and administrators on the other,
iv.   Raise issues and questions that are relevant for all discussion groups of this session.

We encourage all participants to reflect on the questions raised in the boxes in their working group discussions.

We thank the ESDN Steering Group and the German hosts for their comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

1.1 Political and administrative aspects: Clarifying two key concepts

What do we mean with "Linking politics and administration", or political and administrative aspects respectively? When we speak of politicians, we mean parliamentarians (constituting the legislative power of the state) and, in particular, high-level government officials, such as the Prime Ministers or Chancellor, sectoral ministers and secretaries, which are part of the execu-

tive power of the state. However, the executive power of the state consists not only of politicians but also of administrators.

How can we briefly describe the relationship between politicians and administrators? Generally speaking, politicians are either elected or politically appointed government officials that are accountable to the electorate and that decide on policies. Public administrators on the other hand are government employees that help politicians to formulate and implement policies and to deliver public services. Their scope of action is defined by what politicians expect from them, and they are accountable to them.

This ideal-type distinction between politicians and administrators is of course not as clear-cut as Max Weber has described it in the 1920s.[1] Because public administrators play important (also political) roles in terms of policy formulation and decision-making they have to be regarded as one of several political actors in a wider sense.[2] However, despite the fact that boundaries between politicians and administrators are often blurry and close relationships between the two are conceptually and practically important, they fulfil unique roles and functions in the service delivery and policy-making processes. This justifies speaking of two distinct branches of the executive power that should work together closely. Exploring the relationship and linkages between politicians and administrators in the context of SD strategies is at the core of the first breakout session.

1.2 Differences across political systems

When we discuss the linkage of political and administrative aspects in the context of SD strategies we have to take into account that political and administrative systems vary across Europe.[3] Thus, an overarching point of discussion that should be considered in all discussion groups of this breakout session is the following:

> In how far are the different political systems in Europe relevant when it comes to linking the politics and administration of SD strategies?

1.3 The relevance of SD strategies for politicians and administrators

As discussions at previous ESDN conferences have shown, SD strategies mean different things to politicians and administrators. Administrators, for example, are aware that their work relies on high-level political commitment, but they rarely have the impression that political commitment is sufficiently strong. This and other tensions between politicians and administra-

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[1] For a summary, see Hughes, O.E. (2003): Public Management and Administration: An introduction. New York: Palgrave Macmillan

[2] See Page, E.C. (2003): The Civil Servant as Legislator: Law Making in British Administration, in: Public Administration, 81/4, 651-679

[3] Some important differences can be summarised as follows:
- While a few countries (such as the UK) have a majority voting system and single party governments, most others have proportional representation and coalition governments.
- In most countries, the Prime Minister or Chancellor is the key political leader; in others (such as France) the Prime Minister faces a powerful, directly elected President with a considerable body of own administrative staff.
- Some countries have a strong federal tradition, others are more centralised.
- The checks and balances between the executive and the legislative parts of the state differ across countries. While some countries have parliaments that play a strong political role (for example by setting up parliamentary commissions looking into SD policies), parliaments in other countries more or less follow and adopt government policies.

tors can be explained with the "logic of disharmony", a theory proposed by Hansen and Ejersbo[4] and applied to SD strategies by Steurer and Martinuzzi[5].

Hansen and Ejersbo argue that politicians and administrators are dealing with the formulation and implementation of policies in distinct ways. Politicians on the one hand approach particular issues often rather case-by-case and focus on competing political actors and interests. By utilizing such an "inductive logic of action", they often ignore policy documents and strategies they have agreed on earlier. Administrators on the other hand prefer to deal with particular issues deductively by referring to general laws or guidelines and pay less attention to actors and interests. Thus, they are more likely to use SD strategies as guidance for their work than politicians do.

Of course, the picture painted here is a simplified one in several respects. Neither politicians nor public administrators are, for example, a homogenous group. The representatives within the two groups may share some rationalities or political interests, making them not so distinct after all. However, it seems that politicians and administrators do often follow different rationalities. Thus, overarching questions that could be considered in all discussion groups are the following:

> Given the case that SD strategies mean different things to politicians and administrators, what can be done to make this tension work for SD?

> In case the "logic of disharmony" between politicians and administrators is more than an overstretched simplification, how can the tension between different rationalities be overcome (or eased)?

2. Linking politics and administration: the topics

This section introduces four different topics on "linking politics and administration". Section 2.1 highlights some procedural/organisational issues. Section 2.2 provides a brief overview of the four topics. Section 2.3 explores some important aspects of the four topics more in depth, and it raises a few key questions that could be answered in the discussion groups. Of course, participants are welcome to raise additional aspects and questions.

2.1 Procedural issues

The four topics will be discussed by different groups in parallel in the first breakout session of the conference. Guided by a moderator, each discussion will focus on two guiding questions on the chosen topic, bo be discussed in two separate rounds (45 minutes each).

During the discussion, participants are asked to agree on statements that the moderator submits to an editorial team. Based on the input from the different groups, the editorial team will select 10 statements per topic that summarise the discussions in the different groups. At the end of each of the two rounds of discussion, all participants are asked to prioritise the statements summarized by the editorial team in a voting procedure. The statements summarized by the

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[4] See Hansen, K.M. & Ejersbo, N. (2002): The Relationship between politicians and administrators – A logic of disharmony, in: Public Administration, 80/4, 733-750

[5] See Steurer, R. & Martinuzzi, A. (2005): Towards a New Pattern of Strategy Formation in the Public Sector: First Experiences with National Strategies for Sustainable Development in Europe, in: Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy, 23/3, 455-472

editorial team and the outcomes of the voting procedure will be documented in the conference proceedings.

2.2 Topic overview

The topics and guiding questions to be discussed in the working groups can be summarised as follows.

Topic 1	**Vertical integration** by guiding politicians and administrators at other governmental levels: • How could the renewed EU SDS guide politicians and administrators in the Member States (and vice versa)? • How could national SD strategies guide politicians and administrators at sub-national levels (and vice versa)?
Topic 2	**Horizontal integration** by involving politicians across ministries/departments and parliamentarians: • Which structures and mechanisms help to involve politicians (including parliamentarians) in SD strategy processes? • How could the link between politicians and administrators be improved across ministries/departments?
Topic 3	The **added value** of SD strategies for politicians: • What is the added value of SD strategies for politicians in comparison to policy-making with sectoral strategies? • How could the added value of SD strategies be communicated to politicians? How could the "political visibility" of SD strategies be improved?
Topic 4	The engagement of **political actors in a wider sense**: • How do SD strategies deal with conflicts between relevant political actors in a wider sense? • How could SD strategies become "more strategic" by better engaging political actors in a wider sense?

2.3 The four working group topics

This section introduces the four topics on "linking politics and administration" in the context of SD strategies as follows:

• The relevance of each topic and its scope is highlighted selectively.
• Some questions are suggested for discussion.
• A guiding question summarises the scope of the topic.

| Topic 1 | **Vertical integration** by guiding politicians and administrators at other governmental levels |

Many of the priorities and objectives stated in the renewed EU SDS[6] require implementation efforts at the Member State and/or sub-national levels.[7] Thus, the EU SDS's success depends crucially on how vertical policy integration (the integration of policies across different levels of government) can be improved within the EU. The **first round of discussion** addresses this topic with a focus on how politicians and administrators are involved and linked with each other in the EU SDS process.

The EU SDS process involves politicians and administrators from Member States in different ways:[8]

- National SD coordinators (mainly administrators) report about the implementation of the EU SDS in their country bi-annually.
- Member States are invited to peer review their SD strategy. The involvement of politicians in peer reviews is not explicitly foreseen.
- Prime ministers/chancellors receive an update about the implementation of the EU SDS at the European Council every two years. The involvement of other council formations is not decided yet.

So far, the involvement of politicians and administrators in the EU SDS process seems to be rather limited and separate from each other. Thus, important **questions** are the following:

- Should the EU SDS process involve politicians from the national/federal and sub-national levels more closely? If so, how could this be achieved?
- Should the EU SDS process involve administrators from the national/federal and sub-national levels more closely? If so, how could this be achieved?
- How could the EU SDS strengthen the linkage between politicians and administrators?

These and other points should be discussed within the scope of the following **guiding question**:

> How could the renewed EU SDS guide politicians and administrators in the Member States (and vice versa)?

The **second round of discussion** focuses on how national SD strategies could improve vertical policy integration by strengthening the linkage between politicians and administrators from the national/federal and sub-national levels.

As with the EU SDS, the implementation of some objectives stated in national SD strategies (for example on land use planning and waste) require close collaboration among politicians and administrators from sub-national levels. So far, the linkages between national and sub-national levels are rather weak in most EU Member States,[9] but as the ESDN Conference 2006 has

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[6] European Council (2006), http://ec.europa.eu/sustainable/docs/renewed_eu_sds_en.pdf

[7] For an overview of the renewed EU SDS see the ESDN Quarterly Report June 2006 at http://www.sd-network.eu/?k=quarterly%20reports&report_id=1

[8] For more details, see section 3 of this paper or the ESDN Quarterly Report March 2007 at http://www.sd-network.eu/?k=quarterly%20reports&report_id=4

[9] See European Commission (2004): National Sustainable Development Strategies in the European Union: A first analysis by the European Commission. Commission Staff Working Document,

shown, some good practices exist.[10] However, even these initiatives pay rather little attention on how to involve both regional/local politicians and administrators and how to strengthen the link between them. Thus, important **questions** on this topic are the following:

- Should national/federal SD strategies involve politicians from sub-national levels more closely? If so, how could this be achieved?
- Should national/federal SD strategies involve administrators from sub-national levels more closely? If so, how could this be achieved?
- How could national/federal SD strategies strengthen the linkage between politicians and administrators at sub-national levels?

These and other points should be discussed within the scope of the following **guiding question**:
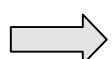
> How could national SD strategies guide politicians and administrators at sub-national levels (and vice versa)?

Topic 2	Horizontal integration by **involving politicians** across ministries/departments **and parliamentarians**

Across Europe, Prime Ministers, chancellors and sectoral ministers play important roles in initiating, developing and adopting an SD strategy as government vision. Parliaments, on the other hand, are rarely involved at this stage of the strategy process.

During the implementation of the SD strategy, however, the type and extent of involving government politicians and parliamentarians vary considerably from country to country. The following modes of involving politicians in SD strategy processes in order to drive horizontal policy integration (that is the integration of economic, social and environmental policies) can be found across Europe:

- Finland and some Central-Eastern European (CEE) countries have a National Council for SD that involves not only different stakeholder groups but also government politicians. The Finnish National Commission on SD, for example, was chaired by the Prime Minister for 14 years (until April 2007). It is now chaired by the Minister of Labour and involves seven other ministers.[11]
- Most other Western European countries have National Councils for SD that exclude politicians (at least from the national level). Some countries, such as Germany and the

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http://europe.eu.int/comm/sustainable/docs/sustainable_development_strategies.pdf. See also Steurer, R. & Martinuzzi, A. (2005): Towards a New Pattern of Strategy Formation in the Public Sector: First Experiences with National Strategies for Sustainable Development in Europe, in: Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy, 23/3, 455-472

[10] See the proceedings of the ESDN Conference 2006 at http://www.sd-network.eu/pdf/doc_salzburg/Proceedings_ESDN%20Conference%202006.pdf

[11] For a description of the Finish National Commission on SD, see the ESDN Quarterly Report December 2006 at http://www.sd-network.eu/?k=quarterly%20reports&report_id=3

UK, foster horizontal integration in national/federal governments with inter-ministerial committees at the political or "top-administrative" level of state secretaries ("Green Cabinets").[12]

- Most SD strategies involve government politicians rather on an ad-hoc basis in the context of developing work or action plans, when reviewing or monitoring the SD strategy.
- Experiences with involving parliaments in SD strategy processes are rather rare. In some countries, parliaments or parliamentary committees discuss specific aspects of SD strategies (such as indicator or progress reports).[13]

Thus, important **questions for the first round of discussion** exploring the status quo are the following:

- What are your experiences with involving government politicians in SD strategies?
- What are your experiences with involving parliamentarians in SD strategies?
- Do you have experiences with additional ways and means of involving politicians and parliamentarians that are not mentioned above?

These and other points should be discussed within the scope of the following **guiding question**:

> Which structures and mechanisms help to involve politicians (including parliamentarians) in SD strategy processes?

The **second round of discussion** should build on the status quo findings of the first round. Here we recommend exploring the following outlook-oriented question:

> How could the link between politicians and administrators be improved across ministries/departments?

By answering this guiding question, we suggest to address also the following sub-questions:

- How can existing structures and mechanisms be improved?
- Can you think of new ways and means of involving politicians and parliamentarians in SD strategies that do not exist yet?

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[12] Formally, state secretaries belong to the administrative branch of government. Practically, however, their function is very much political (politicians appoint them, and they often resign in case of a government change).

[13] Baumgartner, C. et al (2006): Sustainability Strategies in the European Union and Options for Underpinning them in the National Parliaments. Vienna, Forum Sustainable Austria; http://www.nachhaltigkeit.at/strategie/forum/pdf/SustainabilityStrategies2006.pdf

Topic 3	The **added value** of SD strategies for politicians

The scope of SD strategies is relatively broad in terms of policy fields covered, government ministries involved and follow-up mechanisms deployed. Although SD strategies are perhaps the most comprehensive approach used by governments to coordinate SD policies, they are not the only one available. Other approaches that complement or sometimes even compete with SD strategies are incremental forms of ad-hoc policy making that do not follow a strategic vision, or, more importantly, other sectoral strategies.

Interestingly, SD strategies have displaced most environmental plans and strategies, but they did not replace economic and social strategies (for example on employment and poverty reduction). Moreover, some specific environmental strategies, such as climate change strategies also co-exist besides SD strategies in most European countries. In recent months, climate change strategies have been relatively high on the political agenda in some countries, often without shedding light on related yet broader SD strategies.

At the EU level, we find a similar situation. There, the renewed EU SDS is complemented by the Lisbon Strategy, triggering National Reform Programmes (NRPs) at the Member State level,[14] and other, more focused strategies and action plans, such as the Environmental Technologies Action Plan (ETAP)[15].

Overall, politicians are confronted not only with numerous policy challenges, but also with a broad variety of strategic processes and plans. Thus, important **questions for the first round of discussion** exploring the status quo of the issue are the following:

- Why should politicians (including parliamentarians) pay attention to SD strategies?
- What is the relationship between SD strategies and other economic, social and environmental strategies (such as NRPs)?
- Do you think SD strategies compete politically with sectoral strategies, such as poverty reduction and climate change strategies, or do they complement each other?

These and other points should be discussed within the scope of the following **guiding question**:

> What is the added value of SD strategies in comparison to policy-making with sectoral strategies?

The **second round of discussion** should build on the status quo findings of the first round. Here we recommend exploring the following outlook-oriented question:

> How could the added value of SD strategies be communicated to politicians? How could the "political visibility" of SD strategies be improved?

By answering this guiding question, we suggest to address also the following sub-questions:
- Under what circumstances do politicians pay attention to SD issues, and (how) do they relate them to SD strategies?
- When do politicians pay attention to SD strategies as a policy-making tool?

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[14] For the Lisbon Strategy, see http://ec.europa.eu/growthandjobs/
[15] For the ETAP, see http://ec.europa.eu/environment/etap/

- What are the best tools and languages to communicate the added value of SD strategies to politicians?

| **Topic 4** | SD strategies and the engagement of **political actors in a wider sense** |

The three topics so far have dealt with the relationship between political actors in a narrow sense (government politicians and parliamentarians) on the one hand and public administrators on the other. This topic opens up the scope of the discussion to political actors in a wider sense. It explores how SD strategies and related administrative processes address other influential political actors such as political parties (in particular opposition parties), social partners, businesses, NGOs and the media.

The concept of SD is mainly concerned with synergies (or win-win solutions) and trade-offs (or conflicts) between economic, social and environmental issues, and a key purpose of SD strategies is to maximise synergies and minimise trade-offs in the short and long term.

Because tackling trade-offs implies resolving conflicts between political actors in a wider sense with different political interests, SD strategies rely not only on a strong political commitment by the government, but also on the involvement of other influential political actors and stakeholders. Thus, one important aspect of strategic management is to build strategic alliances or "advocacy coalitions"[16] of a broad variety of political and societal actors that help to push SD policies. SD councils can certainly help in this respect, but building strategic alliances is a task that can hardly be delegated to a single (often non-governmental) body.[17]

Thus, important **questions for the first round of discussion** exploring the status quo are the following:

- What are the controversial issues of SD strategies? Under what circumstances do SD strategies trigger political debates that involve political actors in a wider sense?
- Are SD strategies "strategic enough" in terms of involving relevant political actors or are they rather conflict-averse, that is ignoring trade-offs and/or delegating their resolution to other strategies or political processes)?
- What are your experiences with involving political actors in a wider sense in the context of SD strategies? Can you think of an instance where building an "advocacy coalition" on an SD policy issue resulted in a significant policy outcome?

These and other points should be discussed within the scope of the following **guiding question**:

> How do SD strategies deal with conflicts between relevant political actors in a wider sense?

The **second round of discussion** should build on the status quo findings of the first round. Here we recommend exploring the following outlook-oriented question:

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[16] See Sabatier, P.A. (ed.) (1999): Theories of the Policy Process. Theoretical Lenses on Public Policy. Boulder: Westview Press; and Sabatier, P.A. (1998): The advocacy coalition framework: revisions and relevance for Europe, in: Journal of European Public Policy, 5/1, 98-130.

[17] See Steurer, R. (2007): From Government Strategies to Strategic Public Management: An Exploratory Outlook on the Pursuit of Cross-Sectoral Policy Integration; in: European Environment, 14/3 (forthcoming).
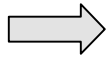
> How could SD strategies become "more strategic" by better engaging political actors in a wider sense?

By answering this guiding question, we suggest to address also the following sub-questions:

- How should SD strategies deal with political actors, interests and ideologies that hinder SD policies?
- How should SD strategies deal with the challenge of building advocacy coalitions that support SD policies?
- What are the major difficulties in making SD strategies "more strategic" in addressing key political actors, interests and resources?