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Background paper for the panel “Innovating governance in the EU SDS”

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Introduction

With the adaptation of the renewed EU SDS by the European Council in June 2006, new SDS governance mechanisms were introduced. Two of these novel mechanisms are **peer reviews** and **NSDS progress reports**. Accordingly, the Panel Discussion on „Innovating governance in the EU SDS: Coordinators, Member state reporting, Peer reviewing“ will comprise two panels: the first panel will deal with recent SD strategy peer reviews and the second panel will discuss progress reporting in the EU SDS and the role of the SDS Coordinators Groups.

This paper provides some background information on the two themes. It is based on the ESDN Quarterly Reports from September 2006 (peer reviews) and March 2007 (EU SDS process in Member States). For more details, please visit the ESDN website at www.sd-network.eu.

Recent Experiences with NSDS Peer Reviews

Peer reviews are most often associated with the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) that began to use the learning approach in the 1960s. Since then, peer reviews lie at the heart of the international cooperation in the OECD and the method has been adopted by various international organisations (e.g. UN, IMF, WTO). In a 2002 OECD report, a peer review is described as “the systematic examination and assessment of the performance of a state by other states, with the ultimate goal of helping the reviewed state improve its policy making, adopt best practices, and comply with established standards and principles”.¹

Within the EU, the uptake of peer reviews for NSDS was further specified in the renewed EU SDS of June 2006: “With regard to the national level, the Commission report [i.e. the biannual progress report starting in September 2007] will build on Member States’ actions to implement the EU SDS and the results gained from completed Peer Reviews”.²

The idea behind peer reviewing SD strategies in the EU is to identify and share good practices in a process of mutual learning. The peer review is voluntary and will be undertaken upon the initiative of the MS concerned. The process should be a bottom-up exercise with participatory elements – involving stakeholders from all political levels – with no intention to ‘name and shame’. The peer reviews are intended to address all three dimensions of SD, and the reviewed country is free to narrow the focus of the review on specific issues (“light peer review”).

In February 2006, the European Commission published a “Guidebook for Peer Reviews of National Sustainable Development Strategies”³ which offers practical guidance for Member States that intend to undertake a peer review. The guidebook is essentially a toolbox to support the exchange of good practices between Member States and to improve the link between the EU and the national level. A common approach to peer reviews among Member States should help to overcome common challenges and support the exchange of experiences, while fully respecting the diversity of national approaches, priorities, goals and targets.

¹ OECD (2002): Peer Review – A Tool for Cooperation and Change: An Analysis of an OECD Working Method. Paris: OECD, <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/58/42/36655769.pdf>

² European Council (2006), http://ec.europa.eu/sustainable/docs/renewed_eu_sds_en.pdf, para 37. In the context of the Thematic Strategy on the Urban Environment, peer reviews have been explored also at the local level (for example in the context of EuroCities and UBC, both co-funded by the European Commission, see http://www.ubc-action21.net/peer_review.htm; <http://www.wien.gv.at/umweltschutz/nachhaltigkeit/rtf/presud.rtf>).

³ European Commission (2006): A Guidebook for Peer Reviews of National Sustainable Development Strategies, <http://ec.europa.eu/environment/pdf/nsds.pdf>

So far, only France completed a full peer review of its SD strategy. Experiences of this review process are well documented⁴ and were presented at the ESDN Conference 2006 in Salzburg. Recently, two other European countries have undertaken a peer review of their SD strategy, namely the Netherlands and Norway. In the panel discussion, representatives of the reviewed as well as the peer countries will discuss their experiences made.

Progress Reporting in the EU SDS Process and the SDS Coordinators Group

The implementation of the objectives and targets formulated in the EU SDS requires efforts from the European level as well as from the EU Member States. Therefore, one of the guiding principles of the EU SDS is to establish coherence between policy-making on the various political levels for the implementation of the strategy. Member States are requested to include the objectives of the EU SDS into their national efforts for SD in order to “ensure consistency, coherence and supportiveness”⁵. This concerns all Member States, but is particularly important in countries that develop their first or renew their SD strategy.

To keep track of the implementation process in Member States, the EU SDS introduced a two-year reporting cycle. It works as follows: Member States are requested to submit progress reports every two years about “the necessary input on progress at the national level in accordance with NSDS”⁶. Member States appointed SDS Coordinators who are mainly responsible for the coordination of reporting on the implementation of the EU SDS in their country (“internal role”), and for the exchange between the European Commission and the Member States (“external role”). The first progress reports by the Member States are due in June 2007.

In order to foster exchange between the coordinators in the Member States, the European Commission initiated the SDS Coordinators Group in late 2006. So far, two meetings of the SDS Coordinators Group were held (in November 2006 and February 2007). The mandate of the Group can be summarised as follows:

- Assist in the preparation of the bi-annual Commission progress report on the EU SDS by providing input on progress made at the national (and, if appropriate, sub-national) level in the implementation of the NSDS;
- Exchange best practice, discuss work and exchange information on indicators, discuss and exchange information on the NSDS and the implementation of the EU SDS at the national level as well as progress made on the peer reviews of the NSDS;
- Provide input and make suggestions on new SD policy initiatives; and
- Serve as a forum for information exchange on SD between the Commission and the Member States.

Based on SD indicators, the national progress reports and latest developments in key EU activities (i.e. strategies, action plans, legislation), the European Commission will issue bi-annual progress reports on how the EU SDS is implemented on the European level and in the Member States. The first Commission progress report on the EU SDS implementation is scheduled for September 2007. Based on the EU SDS progress report by the European Commission, the European Council will review the progress made and provide further orientation on policies, strategies and instruments at its December meetings every two years. Until 2011, the European Council will decide whether a comprehensive review of the current EU SDS is needed.

⁴ Brodhag, C. & Talière (2006): Sustainable Development Strategies: Tools for Policy Coherence, in: Natural Resources Forum, 30, 136-145

⁵ European Council (2006), http://ec.europa.eu/sustainable/docs/renewed_eu_sds_en.pdf, para. 40,

⁶ Ibid., para. 37.