



Linking Strategies

LISSTRA - WORKSHOP, VIENNA, 27. - 29. APRIL 2003

**Sustainable Development in an enlarged Union -
Linking national strategies and strengthening European coherence**

Workshop Summary

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Abstract

The Workshop “Sustainable Development in an Enlarged Union – Linking National Strategies and Strengthening European Coherence”, initiated by the Austrian Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, Environment and Water Management, took place in Vienna in late April 2003. The Workshop facilitated an exchange of experiences and information among European experts on Strategies for Sustainable Development (SSDs) at both national and EU levels. This summary describes the Workshop and its sessions in general (part I), as well as the discussion results of six working groups in more detail (part II). As virtually all participants saw this kind of networking activity as a useful tool for enhancing SSD processes in Europe, the summary concludes with some brief recommendations for future options (part III). Additional Workshop documentation can be found at www.nachhaltigkeit.at/lisstra.

I. The Workshop

The Workshop “Sustainable Development in an enlarged Union – Linking National Strategies and Strengthening European Coherence” took place in Vienna from April 27-29, 2003. It was initiated and hosted by the Austrian Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, Environment and Water Management, in co-operation with the European Commission (DG Environment), the Hungarian Ministry for the Environment and Water Management, the Dutch Ministry for Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment and the UK Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

1. The Workshop as Part of a Series

The Vienna Workshop followed up on the June 2002 meeting entitled “National Strategies for Sustainable Development: Facts, Faces and Future Challenges”, which was convened by the Dutch Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and Environmental Management. In this meeting at The Hague, 28 experts came together, most of them responsible for the coordination of the elaboration and implementation of their country’s National Strategy for Sustainable Development (NSSDs). As the participants of the Vienna Workshop agreed to continue their networking activities in a workshop format, it is likely that the Vienna Workshop will turn out to be part of a series of annual (N)SSD meetings, hosted by different countries (for further details see part III).

2. Purpose of the Workshop

While a core objective of the workshop was to discuss both possible improvements and potential limits to the coherence of SSD processes in Europe, the primary purpose of the Workshop was to facilitate the exchange of experiences and information among European experts on SSDs. Based on the assumption that there is a great deal to learn from the successes and shortcomings in other countries, the conference organisers sought to bring together those who are responsible for SSDs and establish a network among them.

3. Participants

The Vienna Workshop brought together more than 70 senior SSD experts from 23 European countries (member states, accession countries, Norway and Switzerland) and the European Commission. Participants included:

- Policy makers and co-ordinators responsible for SD at both EU and national levels (primarily civil servants from Environmental Ministries);
- Members of National Councils for Sustainable Development or similar institutions (e.g. Partnerships for Sustainable Development);
- Representatives of the European Environmental Advisory Council (EEAC).

4. Workshop Design

The Workshop consisted of keynote sessions, working group sessions, a structured exchange of good practice examples and a plenary.

Keynote Sessions:

The Workshop was opened by speeches from Wolfram Tertschnig on behalf of the Austrian organizers and representatives from the involved institutions as well as keynote speeches by:

- E. Freytag, (Austrian Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, Environment and Water Management): “Networking to Achieve Coherence and Synergies Between National and European SSD Programmes and Policies”, addressing the possible benefits and limitations of networking and European coherence;
- R. Miede (European Commission, DG Environment): “Linking NSSDs and the EU-SSD”, addressing possible roles of the European Commission in the European SSD processes;
- A. Kraemer (Ecologic): “The EU Open Method of Co-ordination: Risks and Chances for Environmental Policy”, exploring different types of Open Methods of Co-ordination and their potential role in different EU strategic processes (e.g. the Lisbon and Cardiff Processes);
- J. Minsch (University of Natural Resources and Applied Life Sciences, Vienna): “New Thinking and Institutional Innovation”, addressing some fundamental thoughts on new institutional approaches to sustainable development;
- R. Steurer & A. Martinuzzi (Vienna University of Economics): “Discussion Input Paper”, presenting some key Workshop topics raised by participants themselves in telephone interviews prior to the Workshop;
- D. Osborn & G. Bachmann (EEAC): “The role of National Councils for Sustainable Development (NCSDs)”, exploring some core features of NCSDs.

Further details on the keynote speeches can be found at www.nachhaltigkeit.at/lisstra.

Working Group Session – Design and Topics

The Working Group Session (“NSSD Roundabout”) was designed to allow not only the discussion of topics, but also the best possible connection of participants (for further details on the NSSD Roundabout design, see part III of the Discussion Input Paper, accessible at www.nachhaltigkeit.at/monthly/2003-05/pdf/input_paper.pdf). Two roundabouts consisting of three topic groups, one roundabout with an EU focus and one with a national focus, considered these six topics:

<i>Topics in Roundabout I (EU focus):</i>	<i>Topics in Roundabout II (National focus):</i>
Contents of SSDs	NSSDs and Civil Society Issues
EU Institutional Aspects, National and International Interfaces	National Institutional Aspects and the Sub-national Interface
Implementation and Evaluation of SSDs: Supra- & International Interfaces	Implementation and Evaluation of SSDs: National and Sub-national Level

Table 1: Topics of the six working groups in the “NSSD Roundabout” Session**Innovation Market Place**

A third feature of the Workshop agenda was the so-called “Innovation Market Place”. Participants were invited to prepare posters showing innovative policy processes in the context of their country’s NSSD. Ten countries accepted the invitation and presented national cases. The posters (accessible from the country table provided at www.nachhaltigkeit.at/lisstra) were not only displayed at the Workshop, but also presented to the audience in an informal session.

5. Workshop Documentation

The preparation of the Workshop, as well as the Workshop itself, resulted in a diverse documentation. Key products include:

- **Discussion Input Paper:** In order to guarantee a demand-driven agenda, the Scientific Support Team conducted more than 30 telephone interviews with participants prior to the Workshop. A qualitative analysis of the interviews resulted in a Discussion Input Paper, summing up the most important topics, issues and questions to be dealt with at the Workshop. In other words, the Discussion Input Paper gives an impression of the needs and questions of numerous NSSD experts. As only some of the questions were addressed at the Vienna Workshop, the paper may also be used as a discussion guide for activities in the near future.
- **NSSD Tables:** In order to give participants an overview of NSSD activities in Europe, they were provided with country tables describing the status quo of NSSDs in 19 European countries.
- **Innovation Market Place Posters and Report:** The good practice examples presented at the Workshop will be included in a forthcoming paper on policy learning and transfer possibilities.
- **Website:** Some general remarks on NSSDs, the documents mentioned above (except for the NSSD tables), a collection of email addresses and links to European NSSDs, other useful links as well as interviews and comments are accessible on www.nachhaltigkeit.at/lisstra (a website of the Austrian Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, Environment and Water Management).
- **Interactive Website:** Participants of the Workshop were provided access to a password protected Server, containing not only the complete Workshop documentation, but also allowing for “electronic networking”, i.e. posting messages and documents. If this provisional arrangement turns out to be successful, a permanent interactive platform should be considered (see also part III).

II. Working Group Results

The main findings and working group results can be summarized as follows:

1. Contents of SSDs

The group on content issues first of all highlighted that SSDs have to be effective, i.e. they have to make a difference and add value in the SD policy process. Moreover, when SSDs are themselves coherent they can contribute to the general coherence of European SD policies.

The group described some areas in which SSD coherence is desired. SSDs should

- be both general and detailed at the same time;
- start with a general vision and the analysis of trends, then move on to principles and objectives, providing concrete targets and indicators;
- pay attention to policy processes (i.e. important actors and their role in the implementation process) and review processes.

However, the coherence of SSDs themselves and of SD policies in general faces limitations in terms of different institutional settings and different geographical and socio-economic circumstances. In other words: though there are good reasons for a certain degree of coherence in SSD content, these reasons must be balanced with an awareness of the diversity of sources.

Another major conclusion of this working group was that SSDs need to address conflicts more openly: the integration of the three dimensions of SD (economic, social and environmental sustainability) is not possible without frictions. Yet, SSDs rarely address such conflicts, but more often imply harmony not only between the three dimensions of SD, but also between relevant actors. A first step in coping with such conflicts is to acknowledge them, i.e. to identify interests, to work on a mutual understanding, to be wary of widely acceptable policy alternatives and to improve the “arbitration machinery”.

2. EU Institutional Aspects

This working group dealt not only with institutional aspects of the EU-SSD process, but also with national and international interfaces. Key messages of this working group were (1) that Sustainable Development needs to be strengthened in the Lisbon Process, (2) that the Cardiff Process and Environmental Policy Integration (EPI) need to be reinforced, e.g. by including new Council formations, (3) that the review of the EU-SSD in 2004 should be (again) started with a broad consultation process involving member states and different stakeholder groups and taking into account the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation, and (4) that the General Affairs Council (GAC) should play a more active role in the horizontal coordination of SD at EU-level.

Another major topic of this working group was the institutional interface between the EU-level and the member state and accession country level. The group felt that, in addition to the SSDs at EU- and national levels, SD co-operations at the cross-national, inter-regional and inter-local levels would be beneficial. The working group emphasized the Alpine Convention, the Nordic Strategy, Euro-Med and the Baltic Agenda 21 as good examples in this context. The sustainability of current Structural Funding was identified as an area needing further examination.

Against the background of the powerful “Maastricht Criteria”, the working group developed a vision of SD-Guidelines, conceptualised as either integrated or as three chapters, each chapter relating specifically to one of the dimensions of SD. As the SD-Guidelines would have to be obeyed in all policy fields by various political actors (including the different Councils), they could also direct the horizontal policy co-ordination process. Regarding SD co-ordination tools, the working group also emphasized:

- The application of (Sustainability) Impact Assessments ([S]IAs) at all policy levels and in all policy fields related to SD;
- A SD Road Map outlining future steps of the EU-SSD process.

3. Implementation and Evaluation - EU and International Focus

This working group addressed the following three topics:

a) EU Institutions and SD Implementation: The group emphasized that a EU Convention should maintain or even strengthen the legal basis for the Cardiff Process (respectively for EPI) and for the EU-SSD. Against this background, the group also mentioned Guidelines as an instrument to ensure a level playing field for SD. Parallel to the conclusions of working group 2, the strengthening of the environmental dimension of the Lisbon process and the reinforcement of the Cardiff process were requested.

b) Policy learning: The working group emphasized that policy learning can take various forms. It can

- be content-related, leading to more coherent goals and targets.
- be implementation-oriented, leading to similar implementation mechanisms and/or processes (like annual action plans).
- make certain policy instruments (like economic incentives or voluntary agreements) more fashionable.
- improve decision making processes by supporting the spread of forecasting methods, indicators and SIA.
- help to make use of synergies between NSSDs and the EU-SSD.

c) Consequences of the WSSD: Last but not least, the working group on implementation and evaluation at the EU level focused on the WSSD interface. It emphasized that internal and external SD policies in the EU have to be linked closely. In order to maintain EU world leadership and credibility in terms of sustainable development, sound political milestones and an effective implementation of SD policies in Europe are urgently needed. Finally, the group saw a need to bring external SD policies in line with the WSSD and the EU-SSD.

4. Civil Society Issues

Dealing with a very general topic, this working group reflected on the interplay of policy processes on the one hand and awareness and participation issues on the other.

The group depicted the policy process as a cycle, beginning with (1) the perception of certain problems and/or issues. This general awareness of problems/issues is followed by (2) a political agenda setting process. On the basis of the political agenda, (3) programs and policies are formulated. Finally, (4) the implementation of these programs should be followed by (5) a review/evaluation.

Within this “policy cycle” the group identified a kind of “awareness cycle”: At first, (1) certain problems and issues are related to a general understanding of SD that has been shaped by educational institutions and the media. (2) The agenda setting process is strongly influenced by the general understanding of SD as well. When it comes to policy formulation, (3) more specific attitudes and interests prove to be relevant. Participation and stakeholder involvement are especially important at this stage in order to balance various attitudes and interests. On the next level, political implementation processes can be matched with (4) a readiness to change behaviour on the individual level. Finally, (5) the review and evaluation stage of the policy cycle reinforces the readiness to learn and build process momentum.

Last but not least, the working group emphasized that both the policy and awareness cycles are repetitive, open, non-linear and time intensive.

5. National Institutional Aspects and the Sub-national Interface

One departure point of this working group was the key question: “What about a ‘common roof’ for regional and local SD activities in a country?” (Discussion Input Paper, page 14). Because of concerns that this approach is too “top-down”, the group turned the “common roof” into a “common garden”. The details of this metaphor can be summarized as follows:

- Local and regional bodies should be seen as partners, rather than as the subjects of regulation.
- National bodies should facilitate communication and co-ordination between different levels.
- Such communication and co-ordination efforts should lead to a shared vision and understanding of SD processes and policies, to clear roles and responsibilities and to a clarification on how to monitor and evaluate progress toward SD.

When addressing leadership issues of NSSD processes, the group carried its garden-metaphor further by defining essential characteristics of “good gardening” and “good gardeners”:

- Leadership comes from vision and values, which should be shared across government and even society.
- A big garden needs more than one gardener, but only one head-gardener.
- The head-gardener needs to provide direction, but not micro-manage details.
- Each gardener has his/her responsibility: to look after his/her own plants.
- Gardeners need to represent/reflect/understand the needs and expectations of consumers and other partners.
- Gardeners need to share expertise and plan ahead for future seasons.

Thinking in terms of gardening and SD, what could be more appropriate than some concluding thoughts about “Getting to the Garden of Eden”? Answers to this question have to take into account the following points:

- Approaching the Garden of Eden first of all requires co-operation and the involvement of all, both inside and outside of governments.
- Everybody is welcome in the garden, but rules have to be respected.
- In order to allow people to get involved in “gardening affairs”, different structures and committees are necessary gates to the garden.
- Getting to the Garden of Eden takes a while; it is important to nurture the approach process constantly.

6. Implementation and Evaluation - National and Sub-national Focus

This working group addressed two topics in depth: (1) instruments of policy implementation and (2) implementation via co-operations and partnerships.

Ad (1): Interestingly, neither Environmental Fiscal Reforms nor particular types regulations were discussed by the group, but rather indicators, evaluations and voluntary agreements. The group emphasized that indicators are good for benchmarking, learning, communication and – when broadly and comprehensively applied, as an alternative to the conventional GDP - for “re-inventing the economy”. Although coherent sets of indicators are desirable, the group

emphasized that indicators must always relate to an organization's goals, and therefore face limits of coherence.

Regarding evaluations, not only ex-post, but also ex-ante (Sustainability Impact Assessment/SIA and Strategic Environmental Assessment/SEA) tools were considered important. However, a need for piloting and learning was seen in both cases.

Ad (2): Voluntary agreements, i.e. implementation via co-operations and partnerships, occupied a prominent place in the working group discussions. As numerous examples across Europe show, co-operations and partnerships are possible between national and sub-national institutions and with businesses and NGOs. Recommendations for this kind of implementation instrument are:

- Be clear about the frame of a partnership
- Look for key actors and opponents
- Deal with them directly and avoid intermediate organizations
- Try to understand their interests and speak their language

Conclusions drawn by the group included:

- Implementation processes require a "pushing power point", which should be as neutral as possible (Prime Minister's Offices or Chancellories may therefore have an advantage compared to Environment Ministries)
- SD implementation would benefit from integration strategies like EPI, integrative budget mechanisms and ex-ante evaluations of policies
- Partnerships and local activities play a crucial role in SD implementation

III. Outlook

As already mentioned in part I, participants would like to see such networking activities continue. Because the Workshop proved to be very successful in facilitating an exchange of experiences and information on NSSD processes in Europe, we also think that this exchange should be carried further by various activities. The main points regarding future networking options, raised by participants in the concluding session of the workshop and in a Feedback Questionnaire addressing the issue, can be summarized as follows:

- Annual meetings to tighten and strengthen the network.
- However, the network should be able to exist without establishing a new institution.
- What could be institutionalised is a kind of rotation mechanism, bringing the SSD Workshop to a different country every year.
- Several participants would like to see experts not only from environmental institutions, but also from other key ministries and DGs participate in the Workshops to come.
- Some added that it would make sense to have a core group meeting every year, as well as an additional group of participants changing from year to year (e.g. 2004: representatives from financial ministries; 2005: from economic affairs ministries; etc.).
- Between the annual meetings, networking activities should be supported by an interactive website, allowing for an exchange of postings, documents and links.

The Vienna Workshop was the second to bring NSSD-coordinators together, and the first to include EU-SSD-coordinators in this informal Workshop format. This informal SD-network could quickly vanish due to circumstance (e.g. presidency priorities), which would mean the loss of a valuable learning and co-operation tool. A systematic rotation mechanism would help to overcome this uncertainty. From the point of view of the organisers, an active role of the European Commission in this network would help to secure a continuity not guaranteed by

changing Presidencies. Moreover, as the interactive website provided by the organisers of the Vienna workshop is only a provisional solution for the next few months, it would be beneficial if this active role of the European Commission would include the establishment of a permanent SSD-networking platform.

As SD projects, programs and even policies rely not only on high-ranking politicians who already meet on a regular basis, but also to a considerable extent on civil servants who meet each other only rarely, effective SD policy learning, enactment and implementation rely very heavily upon a network among the latter. There is a great deal to learn from each other's good practices, challenges and bad experiences, but the benefits of such co-operation will only be fully realised when such networking becomes an established, lasting and continuous procedure. The potential gains of a more comprehensive communication between member states, accession countries and other European partners are pronounced, and resources dedicated to such activities are likely to be saved manifold later on.