

EESC Public Hearing on the Review of the EU Sustainable Development Strategy

Main Conclusions

On 20-21 March 2006 the European Economic and Social Committee organised an important Public Hearing on the Review of the EU Sustainable Development Strategy. High-level speakers included European Commission Vice-President, Margot Wallström, Austrian Presidency representative, Minister Josef Pröll, and European Commission Secretary General, Catherine Day. The participants, representing a broad range of stakeholders, discussed among other things the Sustainable Development Strategy's linkages with the Lisbon Strategy, the targets suggested in the Commission's proposal, and the implementation and governance cycle of the Strategy.

The main conclusions of the hearing included:

Sustainable Development and the Lisbon Strategy

There was general agreement that the six priority areas of the Commission's proposal were well chosen and important. In addition, there was a demand for a stronger focus on innovation. The SDS should place greater emphasis on eco-innovation and social innovation, research and development and technology. It was strongly agreed that strengthening the innovation dimension would provide a positive link with the Lisbon Strategy, as well as a "hook" for positive private sector engagement.

Other ways to strengthen the link with the Lisbon Strategy would include a more emphatic introduction of market-based instruments as implementation tools in order to better integrate external costs. Public procurement was also highlighted as an important means of supporting the implementation of the SDS.

Some participants argued in favour of merging the two Strategies into a single EU strategy.

Communication

Human wellbeing is the key motivation for the SDS and therefore people should be more central to the EU SDS. In this context, education and youth were mentioned as areas that warrant greater focus in the SDS. It was also agreed that communication was the key to a successful SDS. To achieve effective communication, clearer concepts communicated without the usual EU jargon would be needed. A clear communication strategy should be developed alongside the SDS. An EU SDS website for sharing best practice could be an additional tool for the communication strategy.

Targets

There was broad consensus that targets were essential, since only what was measured would be done. All objectives would have to have targets that could be measured and underpinned by reliable indicators. Mechanisms should be introduced to evaluate the targets and instruments regularly, systematically and transparently, in order to ensure that they remain relevant. The current proposal has

too many targets that have been transferred from existing policies without scrutiny as to their appropriateness for SD. The targets should be set out in such a way as to provide a) *a headline aspiration* (the long term goal, vision), b) with a *scope for disaggregation* (intermediate targets), down to c) *manageable bite-size levels*.

Implementation

The SDS must clearly identify the relevant actors. Who is responsible, at what level and to whom are they accountable? This is strongly interlinked with setting targets, as mentioned above.

At national level, the national SDS must be further developed and effectively peer reviewed.

At EU level, the Commission must develop a strong SD division within the Secretariat General, which shall be competent to screen policy proposals and impact assessments. Each DG should be requested to draw up a SD plan. SD criteria should be applied to the review of the EU's financial perspectives in 2008. All EU funds and subsidies should be submitted to a SD impact assessment. An independent SD advisory council should be set up at EU level.

At local level, initiatives and examples of good practice should be fed into the review process of the SDS, as well as communicated through, for instance, an EU-wide website.

Review of the SDS

The Commission proposes reviewing the SDS every two years. Many participants wished to see this review discussed at the Spring Council together with the Lisbon Strategy. Some also proposed setting up a special Sustainable Development Council.