

Sustainable Development Indicators on European level: Where is the value-added?

(presentation overview)

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Introduction

Current situation:

In the end of 2007, widespread unease about progress of the sustainable development strategy (SDS):

- introduction of SDS in 2001, external dimension added in 2002
- renewal of SDS in 2006
- first progress report in October 2007

but what next?

Questions:

- How to proceed further with SDS in the current political context?
- What role for the sustainable development indicators (SDI) as a tool to support SDS?

Suggested objectives for meeting:

- Use workshop as occasion for an informal exchange on SDS and SDI (in addition to more formal meetings in the Council context)
- Aim at contributing to consensus building between Member States on objectives and means for SDS and SDI

I. Sustainable Development in the current political context

1. Issues of sustainable development currently on **top of the European agenda**:
 - The **Commission's first Progress Report** on the Sustainable Development Strategy confirms that the EU must take a more decisive stance to turn around the persistent unsustainable trends addressed by the strategy's seven core challenges;
 - Both the European Union and Member States have made progress and adopted many of the policies needed, but figures show that the **results are slow in coming** (time lag from action to visible results);
 - Now time to consider further measures to **improve implementation of SDS**
 - For its part and early in 2008, Commission will adopt **new and far reaching proposals on emissions trading, alternative energy and climate change**.

2. In a recent **speech at the Jean Monnet Conference** in Brussels, President Barroso set out the wider policy perspectives of the European Commission:
 - Thanks to the joint efforts of the Portuguese and German Presidencies, the European Commission and other Member States, **Europe is advancing again**. This momentum must be seized also for progress in other policy areas;
 - Sustainable development poses **existential questions** to our economies and societies. In the field of sustainable development, **Europe must lead from the front**. Sustainable development is therefore at **the top of our agenda** for the rest of this Commission's mandate;
 - **Inside the Union**, the main pillars of the SDS remain: i) Lisbon Strategy (education, training, research, innovation) as well as our priorities on climate change. **In its external policies**, Europe is fully committed to the global partnership for SD (Johannesburg summit, UN millennium development goals, Monterrey consensus on development financing) as well as to the principles of multilateralism and of a global governance system for the environment. In addition, a **global climate change alliance** is required to help the developing countries most affected by climate change;
 - strong European unity around position for December meeting in Bali on **follow-up to Kyoto**.

3. **Two Key Questions** for this conference:

- How can SDI on European level be further improved so as to better reflect the **monitoring and surveillance needs of the SD strategy** (value-added on technical level)?
- How can SDI be better used on political level so as to better **support the implementation of the SD strategy** (value added on political level)?

II. **Experiences with indicator systems on European level**

Complex indicator systems are frequently used on European level (internal market scoreboard, structural indicators, etc.). However, the experiences made so far are somewhat mixed.

Useful to first look at conditions for successful use of indicators, then to look at chances to assure/implement such conditions:

1. **Conditions for the successful use of indicator systems on European level/Link between indicators and political decision-making process:**

- Criteria for **good policy-driving indicators**: must be linked to problems concerned, must have comprehensive coverage so as to allow for consistent decisions, must be understandable for the audience/level intended, must be available in sufficient quality and timeliness ...
- Possibility of **simultaneous discussion of related issues** in the field of SDS crucial (example Spring European Summit for Lisbon strategy)
- Use of **indicator information on political level (within policy cycle)**
- Basis for **soft coordination** with peer pressure, benchmarking, exchange of information and best practice
- Indicators as a means of support for **evidence-based political decision-making** (now also example of Common Internal Market Review).

2. **Practical experiences with indicator systems (with particular reference to the "structural indicators" of the Lisbon Strategy) on European level**

- Problems of **internal establishment** of list (conflicting interests between services, tendency for expansion of list, risk of inclusion of unrelated areas)
- **external confirmation** of list by Council (political interest will lead to a dominance of political over substantive issues)

- Problems of **use of indicator information** through Spring Council (short term foreign policy events dominate longer term policy considerations (Western Balkans, Iraq war, Madrid bombings, etc.))
- **Practical problems** regarding credibility of list such as coverage, number of indicators, input vs output orientation, level vs progress orientation, simplicity, readability, availability, consistency, etc. ...

III. Conclusions for the future development of SDI

1. Possible value added of SDI on technical level

SDI as compared to national figures:

- Allow for a monitoring on the basis of stable data all across the EU,
- Allow for comparisons across MS,
- Can provide an appropriate base for benchmarking, etc.

2. Possible value added of SDI on political level

SDI as a possible tool to support the implementation of the sustainable development strategy:

- Form a constitutive part of the **institutionalised implementation** (achieved through the renewed SDS in 2006)
- Can allow for an **enhanced visibility of indicators** on political level
- Can be supported by a **confirmation of indicators selected on political level** (higher commitment yet less stringent set of indicators)?
- Can be accompanied by a **single headline indicator** (recent conference "Beyond GDP")?
- Can be reinforced by a **short list of indicators** (experiences with structural indicators mixed)?
- Can be accompanied by **composite indicators** (agreement on composition required)?
- Can contribute to the formulation of **country specific guidelines** (too early after first progress report)?