The Swiss NSDS and its integration into the National Legislative Program

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1 Introduction

This ESDN Case Study provides an overview of the Swiss NSDS (chapter 2) and its link to the Swiss Government Legislative Program (chapter 3). The case study has two major aims: on the one hand, it shows some insights into one of the most successful NSDS processes in Europe; on the other hand, it outlines the process of linking the NSDS to the national legislative program of Switzerland and thus making the strategy part of a high-level political planning document. In order to get first-hand information, especially on the NSDS link to the government legislative program, we interviewed Daniel Wachter, the Swiss NSDS coordinator.

The third and current National Sustainable Development Strategy (NSDS) of Switzerland was approved by the Swiss Federal Council in 2008. The two previous NSDSs were published in 2002 and 1997. At the moment, the next update of the NSDS is in preparation and will be adopted in early 2012 (for the period 2012 - 2015); this update is part of the preparation process in Switzerland for the UN Conference on Sustainable Development (“Rio +20”).

In 2009, the NSDS became a sub-strategy of the Swiss Government Legislative Program. The strong connection between these two processes generally resulted in the improvement of the implementation of the strategy, which brought along various advantages like a more efficient coordination, a more solid institutional anchoring of the NSDS, and a more effective integration of sustainable development into government policy. Overall, a broader acceptance of the NSDS was enabled (ESDN, Country Profile Switzerland), yet there are still some weaknesses to be tackled.

2 Swiss National Sustainable Development Strategy

Since 1997, the Federal Council of Switzerland has been applying an NSDS as the basis for performing its constitutional task of achieving sustainable development. The current NSDS comprises the federal policy guidelines and an additional Action Plan for the duration of the current legislative period (2008 - 2011). Technical reports provide an insight into implementation activities performed under the Action Plan. The NSDS 2008-2011 was evaluated in 2010 and is currently being renewed for the period 2012 - 2015.

2.1 Five guidelines of sustainable development

The five guidelines of sustainable development in Switzerland are based on Articles 2, 54 and 73 of the Swiss Federal Constitution, and on international reference documents issued by the UN and the OECD. These guidelines need to be taken into account for sustainable development policy in Switzerland, and they form an integral part of the NSDS:

i. **Fulfilling responsibility towards the future**: through prevention, liability and “polluter pays” principle;
ii. **Balanced consideration of the three target dimensions**: all three areas of environmental responsibility, economic performance and social solidarity should be given attention equally;

iii. **Integration of Sustainable Development into all areas of policy**: Sustainable Development should be treated as a maxim in all areas of politics and political processes;

iv. **Improving coordination between policy areas and enhancing coherence**: The impact of key political decisions on all three target dimensions should be analyzed and assessed at an early stage;

v. **Achieving Sustainable Development on the basis of partnership**: All institutional levels should work together constructively and fulfill their role as an interface for civil society and the private sector (Swiss Federal Council, 2008).

### 2.2 Action Plan 2008-2011

The actual Action Plan had the aim to boost the existing approaches to sustainable development during the past legislative period. The objective is to implement a more **horizontal, cross-sectoral approach** and to move away from sector-based thinking and action. The political initiatives and projects in the framework of the NSDS are supposed to be coordinated effectively in order to improve environmental quality, economic performance and social solidarity.

The **Action Plan’s five priorities** were defined by the Interdepartmental Sustainable Development Committee (ISDC): (1) Fight global warming and overcome natural hazards; (2) Enhance economic productivity while decoupling it from resource and energy consumption; (3) Ensure sustainable use of natural resources minimizing environmental impact; (4) Ensure fair access to social and economic resources; and (5) Fight global poverty and build peace.

In general accordance with the renewed EU SDS of 2006, the Action Plan contains 11 thematic action areas with 30 measures, from which the Federal Council defined **eight key strategic priority challenges**: climate change and natural hazards; energy; spatial development and transport; economy, production and consumption; use of natural resources; social cohesion, demography and migration; public health, sport and the promotion of physical exercise; global development and environmental changes. Furthermore, there are three other **horizontal policy areas** that have an impact on all eight key challenges. These areas build up a solid base for sustainable action: fiscal policy; education, research and innovation; culture.

### 2.3 Responsibilities and ancillary measures in implementing the NSDS

The political responsibility for the NSDS and its Action Plan lies with the Federal Council. The related Federal Administration offices from all seven departments (ministries) are responsible for the implementation of the defined measures. Information, coordination and discussion with regard to the Federal Government’s sustainability-related activities and processes are facilitated by the ISDC. The
Federal Office for Spatial Development (ARE) is responsible for the NSDS process in the Swiss Government. Figure 1 below shows the different responsibilities in the implementation of the Swiss NSDS:

![Accountabilities and implementation diagram]

**Figure 1 (ARE: Accountabilities and implementation)**

### 2.4 The Interdepartmental Sustainable Development Committee (ISDC)

The ISDC is composed of approximately 30 Federal Agencies which formulate policies and undertake activities relevant to sustainable development. Under the leadership of the ARE (Federal Office for Spatial Development), the Federal Office of Public Health (FOPH), the Federal Office for Agriculture (FOAG), the Federal Office for the Environment (FOEN) and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) together constitute the ISDC’s leadership body. The main aim of the ISDC is the development, coordination and harmonization of activities of Confederation policy in areas related to sustainable development. Its main tasks include:
• Coordination of Confederation policy in areas of sustainable development;
• Interdepartmental and interagency coordination of Confederation activities significant to sustainable development;
• Joint development of strategies and Action Plans for Switzerland’s implementation of Agenda 21;
• Coordination of Switzerland’s position in international processes, and reporting to international bodies such as the United Nations;
• Maintain and cultivate relationships within the Federal Administration as well as with the private sector and civil society (ARE: Interdepartmental Sustainable Development Committee).

2.5 Cooperation at the federal level and financing

Each Government Agency is responsible for the financial planning of the NSDS implementation. The ISDC supports the various Government Agencies in the fulfillment of their sustainable development-related tasks. It also supports ARE with the compilation and assessment of reports and with strategy evaluations to be reviewed by the Federal Council. It will then submit the recommendations and the ongoing refinement of the NSDS to the Federal Council. ARE enables exchange between the various Government Agencies. Interested Government Agencies, which are part of the ISDC, can participate in joint projects and thereby supplement ARE’s limited financial resources. All Government Agencies should encourage staff to participate in training courses that are dedicated to sustainable development. Moreover, the ISDC produces a collection of good examples of the integration of sustainability into sectoral policies and is supposed to brief Federal Government Agencies and the public about these practices (Swiss Federal Council, 2008).

2.6 Sustainability assessments

“In the interest of the balanced inclusion of the three target dimensions [...] and improving policy coherence [...], it is very important to the Federal Council that decisions are presented and explained transparently” (Swiss Federal Council, 2008, 41). To achieve transparency in the assessment of sustainability, a specific methodology has been developed in the context of the NSDS 2002 and is still implemented for the current NSDS. It is a means of evaluation and optimization which analyzes social, economic and environmental impacts of the Federal Government’s political projects and initiatives at strategy, plan and program level. Sustainability assessments are conducted throughout the project cycle, from initial development to final decision, and may lead to several interim assessments. ARE supports Federal Government Agencies in their choice of methods and instruments and in conducting the assessment itself (Swiss Federal Council, 2008).

2.7 Monitoring and indicators

The Federal Council updates the Action Plan at intervals that correspond to the Swiss legislative periods of a term of four years. The Monitoring Sustainable Development (MONET) scheme is an assessment tool which forms the basis of reporting the process of sustainable development at the national level. It
measures and documents the current situation and trends in Switzerland with regard to social, economic and environmental aspects of sustainable development (Swiss Federal Council, 2008). MONET contains around 75 indicators and permits regular reporting on the status and progress of sustainable development in Switzerland. The main features and trends are shown in simplified form by 16 key indicators (ARE: Measuring Sustainability in Switzerland).

MONET was established by the Swiss Federal Statistical Office (SFSO), the Federal Office for Spatial Development (ARE) and the Federal Office for the Environment (FOEN). In addition to MONET, other indicator-based analyses of sustainable development, such as the ecological footprint, are applied (Swiss Federal Council, 2008).

2.8 Cooperation between the Federal Government, cantons and municipalities

The Federal Council is also concerned that sustainable development principles are integrated at cantonal and municipal levels. Generally, the NSDS is supposed to be adapted and extended appropriately at cantonal and municipal levels. Although the NSDS is not binding on the sub-national level, Switzerland’s cantons are thought to embark on similar initiatives as the Federal Council’s strategy on a voluntary basis, with all such initiatives following the five guidelines for action on sustainable development. These initiatives should not be regarded as additional tasks, but as the actual implementation of the Federal Council’s strategy at cantonal and municipal levels (Swiss Federal Council, 2008).

In order to foster sustainable development integration, the Sustainable Development Forum was formed in the context of the Sustainable Development Strategy 2002, where representatives of the Federation, the cantons, cities, communities and regions actively participate at meetings twice a year. The aim of the forum is the exchange of information of different areas and the support and coordination of implementation projects (ARE: Forum Nachhaltige Entwicklung). Although there is no legal enforcement, there have been an increasing number of sustainable development initiatives at the sub-national level. In total, 16 of the 27 cantons as well as 5 percent of the communes (representing 32 percent of the Swiss population since all major cities participate) have participated voluntarily in NSDS initiatives. Since cantons usually insist on their independence, it has showed that voluntary cooperation is the most effective way of achieving sustainability (Wachter, 2011).

2.9 Cooperation with other stakeholder groups

In order to ensure the effective implementation of the NSDS in Switzerland, a process of dialogue between the Federal Government, institutional stakeholders, civil society and the private sector is fostered. “Alongside the cantons, municipalities and regions, all of the other parties involved – such as the private sector, NGOs, religious organizations and political parties – must also factor the content of the Sustainable Development Strategy appropriately into their own activities” (Swiss Federal Council, 2008, 45). Working with the ISDC, the ARE is committed to creating a network that involves additional stakeholder groups more closely in the NSDS implementation process (Swiss Federal Council, 2008).
Overall, the cooperation between stakeholders is regarded as very important, since the draft of the new strategy (for the legislative period 2012 - 2015) has been discussed with the stakeholders in the framework of the Sustainable Development Dialogue in September 2011 (Wachter, 2011). This platform is an arrangement for increasing the cooperation between the federation and the stakeholders. The next dialogue will be held in May 2012 (ARE: Dialog Nachhaltige Entwicklung Schweiz).

2.10 Evaluation of the Swiss NSDS

The evaluation of the Swiss NSDS was conducted between June and November 2010 by the INFRAS research and consulting group with the aim to “conduct a retrospective assessment of the relevance, appropriateness and effectiveness of the SD Strategy, and to formulate recommendations for its future development” (ARE, INFRAS, 2011). The evaluation was based primarily on document analysis, as well as interviews with major stakeholders (i.e. stakeholders responsible for implementation of measures at federal level, representatives of NGOs, cantons and local authorities).

The evaluation shows that the greatest strength of the NSDS lies in its function as a point of reference and orientation for all active stakeholders involved in the process of sustainable development, such as „the Federal Government, the cantons, local authorities, business and civil society“ (ARE, INFRAS, 2011, 26). Other positive effects brought about by the NSDS are:

- High level of acceptance for the strategy;
- Promotion of awareness and discussion of sustainable development;
- Considerable credibility because of approval every four years by the Federal Council;
- Clearly defined responsibilities for sustainability policy at the federal level;
- Ensured coordination within the Federal Government through the ARE/ISDC.

The evaluation also points to a variety of weaknesses of the NSDS:

- Lack of clear and measurable targets makes it difficult to review the effectiveness of the NSDS;
- Lack of comprehensive and systematic controlling at the overall strategy level;
- Too little control by the ARE/ISDC over the NSDS measures;
- Only coordinative function of the ISDC, no possibility to influence or act as a binding force on the implementing bodies (ARE, INFRAS, 2011).

2.11 Renewal of the NSDS (2012-2015)

The renewal of the strategy for the next legislative period 2012 - 2015 will not bring about fundamental changes to the current NSDS; the Action Plan will be adjusted and up-dated, in particular. The number of key challenges will be slightly shortened, plus there will also be a differentiation between ongoing and new measures, with the new measures being put into the center of political attention. For instance, the new “Energy Strategy 2050” will reorient Swiss energy policy in the aftermath of the Fukushima nuclear
accident and the decision by the Swiss Parliament not to replace nuclear power plants after the end of their secure technical life. The general aim is to take stock of all major current and newly planned initiatives in favor of sustainable development. The institutional responsibilities for the NSDS process will also not change with the renewal of the NSDS (Wachter, 2011).

3 Integration of the NSDS into the Legislative Program

[Note: This part of the Case Study is based on a telephone interview with Daniel Wachter (Swiss NSDS Coordinator, ARE) conducted on 6 December 2011. We would like to thank Daniel very much for his availability and insights.]

The Federal Act on Parliament requires the Federal Council to plan for legislative periods of four years. The “Legislative Program” is the Government’s overall strategy or work program. There is generally a strong linkage between the planning of the legislative period and the NSDS. Both processes cover a wide range of issues, but they differ in terms of their content focus and time horizon. The NSDS has a long-term nature and gives particular emphasis on a series of key challenges by proposing important strategic activities to different policy sectors. On the other hand, the legislative planning concentrates on legislative dossiers from the whole spectrum of government action (Swiss Federal Council, 2008).

The current NSDS (covering the period from 2008-2011) is the third strategy for sustainable development and was, for the first time, developed in parallel with the Legislative Program. The first two strategies were primarily developed for international summits (Rio+5 in 1997; Johannesburg in 2002): the first one in 1997 was a plain list of measures; the second one in 2002 was more comprehensive and included an Action Plan. The third and current NSDS is a comprehensive strategy, again including an Action Plan. When developing the current version of the NSDS, the discussion arose whether or not the NSDS was a parallel or contradicting strategy to the Government Program. During the discussions it became apparent that the NSDS should be coherent with the Government Program with a specifically focused Action Plan. In 2009, the Federal Council decided to formally link the NSDS and the Legislative Program. The next NSDS for the period of 2012 - 2015 will formally be a part of the Legislative Program and be published as its annex, which refers to an increasing acceptance and institutionalization of the NSDS.

The NSDS as sub-strategy of the Legislative Program differs from the latter in that

- its time horizon is longer than the 4 year legislative period;
- it is not limited to legislative projects but also comprises other government actions; and
- it is thematically focused on a limited number of key challenges related to sustainable development.

The NSDS additionally contains some legislative proposals which are, however, fully in line with the Legislative Program. As Daniel Wachter stated, the Legislative Program and the NSDS have been
coordinated as much as possible, nevertheless there remain some inconsistencies, since “the Legislative Program is not 100 percent geared towards sustainability”.

It might be interesting to explain that there exists no specific budget for the implementation of NSDS Action Plan; the NSDS and the Legislative Program are so called “working programs” with high political importance, but the budgeting for the measures is negotiated through a specific process of approval by the Federal Government and Parliament. Every measure has to be adopted and gets financed through ordinary procedures for adopting political projects. But the NSDS evaluation has shown that, through the inclusion of the NSDS and the political importance of measures achieved through this, there is a high probability for implementation (Wachter, 2011).

3.1 Specific effects of integrating the NSDS into the Legislative Program

- Speaking of specific effects on the NSDS and its process in general, Daniel Wachter said that “no quantum leap has occurred” by linking the strategy to the Legislative Program. He argued that the NSDS has not become more binding in the legal sense, but has remained a “working program”. He pointed out that, nevertheless, the integration into the government’s program has gradually increased the NSDS’s political weight.

- The integration of the NSDS into the Legislative Program had no direct effect on horizontal policy coordination mechanisms, as sectoral policies or inter-ministerial coordination were not affected. Yet, an overall increase of coordination between the policy sectors could be achieved.

- Daniel Wachter mentioned that without there being a direct causal relationship, the increasing acceptance and institutionalization for the NSDS on the national level has also helped the vertical policy cooperation, respectively the coordination between the different cantons of Switzerland. Currently “there is a lot of progress” going on, which in fact means that, although this “process is not nationwide”, the majority of the cantons, all major cities, and many more communes have been involved in sustainable development processes on a voluntary basis.

- Daniel Wachter argued that eventual changes in coordination with stakeholders are “difficult to quantify” and added that eventual changes are intricate and can be traced back to the integration of the NSDS into the Legislative Program. However, he stated that the drafting of the new strategy (2012 - 2015) has been discussed with the stakeholders and that “it seems that the strategy is being seen and used as a reference framework”, which “gradually increases in acknowledgement”.

Generally, however, Daniel Wachter stated that it nevertheless remains difficult to assess whether the anchoring of the NSDS in the Legislative Program has increased the overall importance of sustainable development, or if it has been addressed in a stronger way at the political level.
3.2 Experiences with the Swiss process of integration and its transferability to other countries

Daniel Wachter agreed with the evaluation of the INFRAS research and consulting group which assessed the integration of the NSDS into the Legislative Program as very positive and forward-looking. He added that it has been recommended to continue the integration of the NSDS into the Legislative Program in the future, eventually increasing its liability, since the evaluation has shown some overall positive results.

Parallel to integrating the NSDS into the Legislative Program, and based on an amendment of the Federal Act on Parliament, a change in the legislative proposals by the Swiss Government put forward to the Parliament has been introduced: Besides formal guidelines for every subject, every legal proposal must now contain an assessment of its specific impact(s) on environmental responsibility, economic performance, and social solidarity. This does not entail a direct legal obligation to apply the Sustainability Assessment instrument that has been developed in the context of the NSDS, but will, together with the integration of the NSDS in the Legislative Program, certainly help to widen the instrument’s application.

As one of the challenges for the implementation of sustainable development in Switzerland, Daniel Wachter brought up the problem of how to “nourish the sustainable development process in order to keep it politically relevant”, since many key sustainable development topics, like climate change or biodiversity, have experienced their own and separate institutionalization. The sustainable development process must play the role of an innovator and incubator for new, emerging issues, including other environmental issues. Furthermore, he stated that other policy strategies related to sustainable development (e.g. Green Growth Strategies) applied at the European and international level, that put the focus again on sectoral issues and approaches, might create “certain threats for sustainable development and cross-sectoral integration”.

As far as the transferability of the Swiss system to other countries is concerned, a direct application in other countries could be difficult. But the underlying principle and the integration of sustainable development into central policy planning should be taken into account. Speaking of the Swiss model of integration, it is important to take a look at its political system which is “extremely geared to consistency”. The Swiss Government is formed as Collegial Government with the biggest political parties collaborating, but without the formation of coalitions, coalition agreement or coalition program which usually consist in parliamentary democracies. An additional important element in Switzerland is its direct democracy. All of these elements also affect the way political planning and strategies are carried out. Overall, it is probably Switzerland’s “peculiar political system” with “no great leaps in a positive sense” that makes Switzerland adapted for a long-term implementation of sustainable development.
4 Conclusions

The integration of the NSDS into the Swiss Legislative Program has not only promoted the consideration of sustainable development into legislative proposals put forward by the government to the parliament, but has also increased the overall political awareness of issues and principles of sustainable development on the various levels of governance. Since the Legislative Program, together with the NSDS, is reviewed and renewed for every Swiss legislative period, its political relevance has increased.

In addition, the vertical and horizontal cooperation concerning the sustainable development process has been increased and improved. Around a third of the Swiss population is currently involved in sustainable development related local processes, with voluntary participation as an underlying principle.

Switzerland’s political structure – which is aligned to slow, incremental changes as well as an overall high level of quality-of-life, prosperity, and high stability – has certainly played a major role in the implementation of sustainable development related issues at all levels of governance.

In summary, the integration of the NSDS in the Legislative Program has been an overall success for the implementation of sustainable development principles in Switzerland.
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