

Peer review of the Netherlands' SD strategies/policies

Reflections on the process and learning points

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On this report

This report was commissioned by the RMNO and is a means to grasp the lessons learned for preparing, organising and conducting such a "civil society" peer review, which differs from more "expert" peer reviews, for example performed by the OECD. It was in particular meant to inform other councils that might be asked by their governments to organise such a peer review.

I was observer to the process and held interviews with the organisers at three landmarks of the process²:

1. after the background report was finished,
2. after the scoping meeting and
3. after the peer week.

Evaluation comments of four peers from three countries were also considered.

The "10 key learning points", which were prepared for the EEAC Working Group SD in May 2007, are displayed in the Annex.

This report follows the structure of the European Commission's "Guidebook for peer reviews of national sustainable development strategies" (February 2006) and also comments on some aspects of this guidebook. The headers and sub-headers as well as the key guidance recommendations per chapter (in boxes) are repeated in this report.

Background to the peer review in the Netherlands

The Netherlands in 2003 adopted an SD Action Plan with a national and an international part (the international part was developed and adopted a bit earlier). In tendency, this "Action Plan" is rather not considered as "SD strategy", as it lacks key elements like vision, goals and objectives. However, this was also discussed in the preparation phase and during the review.

The Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment (VROM) developed and coordinated the national part, with an interdepartmental group called CPO. The Ministry for Development Cooperation, which is part of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (BuZa), coordinates the international part, with an interdepartmental group called TFDO (Task Force Sustainable Development). Both groups have increasingly worked together.

Both VROM and BuZa commissioned the RMNO to manage the process of the review. VROM was lead authority and applied for the grant of the European Commission.

¹ European Environment and Sustainable Development Advisory Councils (www.eeac-net.org). The views expressed in this report are personal to the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the EEAC or any of its councils.

² Three interviews were held with responsible staff at the RMNO in different phases of the process:
8.1.07, 14:00 – 16:00 (Jelle Blaauwbroek, Linda Docter), 22.3.07, 10:30 – 14:00 (Jelle Blaauwbroek),
24.5.07, 12:00 – 15:00 (Jelle Blaauwbroek, Fieke Krikhaar).

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0. General considerations

LESSONS:

- Preparation:

In general, the preparation phase is of utmost importance: The process needs to be very well prepared long ahead in all aspects of approach and methodology. The COM guidelines serve quite well as guidance, but more details need to be considered.

Key questions regarding the role of different actors in the process need to be clarified in the beginning, and it requires a balanced coordination and process management taking peoples expectations into account: Who is steering, advising, and who may give comments? How to identify peers, who makes a selection based on which criteria? What is the role of Ministries, other government actors, business and science? What may be the contribution of the international observers like UN and OECD? What is the role of the organiser: In the Netherlands the RMNO was facilitator, but also had a supervising role and supported the peers to achieve that the product is written in the Dutch context.

- A stakeholder peer review is different:

It needs to be clarified more that a stakeholder peer review differs from expert type peer reviews as done by the OECD: There are other challenges and also other possible outcomes. If not, it bears the risk of disappointment regarding the outcomes. Policy recommendations for example can naturally not reach the depth of an "expert" peer review.

Throughout the process these differences have an impact, for example also on the choice of invitees for the review week: The options are basically either selecting a handful of experts, i.e. the very most involved actors, or a wide range of participants from all relevant groups of society. The choice might also depend on the political style of the country, with the Netherlands as consensus oriented country preferring the latter ³, and seems to be appropriate for SD policies with an inherent need for "outreach" into society. This option at the same time caused some difficulties, and required more capacity, with respect to involving key experts, especially from ministries.

There is an inherent information gap that can only be closed to a limited extent, as the peers can only provide this limited time, and the information available cannot be processed and condensed to an extent as it is done in expert peer reviews, again due to resource limitations ⁴.

³ In France the former option was chosen.

⁴ It should be checked with the OECD how much resources they spend for their environmental policy reviews.

1. Getting started

1.a) Securing commitment

Before embarking on a review Member States should make every effort to secure high level and cross-sectoral commitment to a NSDS review from both government and main stakeholders, and to follow through on the results of the review. Commitment will also need to be expressed in terms of resources made available to the review.

1.b) Initiating the review process

Member States should secure a clear mandate from senior actors in government, outlining the scope of the review, identifying the authority for carrying it out, and the resources to be made available.

What led to the decision to perform a peer review?

VROM started early 2006 to plan for an assessment of the national SD Action Plan (intending to also involve the international part), ultimately in light of national elections due in May 2007: A review conducted by then would provide the opportunity for a fresh start for a new government. In this situation the proposal of the EU SDS in June 2006 for conducting a peer review fell on fertile grounds. The financial support provided by the Commission was on the one hand positive, but on the other hand it was also felt as too much external cause. Some colleagues in the CPO⁵, where first talks took place, were in particular sceptical and found it important that a peer review would not be conducted "*because of Brussels.*"

Identify a lead authority and getting commitment from other Ministries

After the clarification on the motives most Ministries agreed to the VROM proposal for a peer review, and were willing to consider the results and recommendations, but did not want to be involved in the process. It needed some time to change this.

As initiator, VROM also became the lead authority. This appears as quite natural situation, likely applicable in other countries, as there will usually already be a Ministry/authority responsible for the SDS. All other concerned Ministries have been involved/informed throughout the process at different levels, with VROM and BuZa at the Minister level. In the latter case the chair of the TFDO⁶, who has the function as "ambassador for SD" provided for this link.

The RMNO started the process with the assumption that the peers would be fully responsible for the review, including fact finding and meeting experts and stakeholders. Therefore the RMNO started with an Advisory Committee without representatives from government, which was meant to reflect the independent nature of the process. At its first meeting the Advisory Committee decided to involve government, by asking VROM to participate and changed its function into a Steering Committee (see below). Civil servants were informed about the progress via the CPO and TFDO and were able to respond on steps in the process. The TFDO wanted to be involved from the beginning, and interpreted this at a certain point also as influencing decisions to be taken. However, it was clarified in their meetings that government representatives in the Steering Committee would only advise and not decide.

LESSONS:

- The Dutch experience shows that the commitment of one Minister is needed, more desirable is two, to start a peer review.
- For the responsible Ministry initiating a peer review it is important to prepare colleagues in other Ministries better about the three-tiered decisions to take:
 1. Should the SDS be reviewed?

⁵ The coordination group for the national part of the SD Action Program, chaired by the Environment Ministry

⁶ Task Force SD, the coordination group for the international part of the SD Action Program, chaired by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs.

2. Should it be with the method of a peer review?

3. Who should organise the process?

and to involve them more systematically from the beginning, in order to increase acceptance and outcomes.

- With other Ministries it should be agreed which degree of involvement is desired, given the inherent range from "involved" (in terms of being informed, being available, taking action if desired or appropriate) to "steering" (in terms of having an influence on decision-making during the process). If the latter is desired, the respective Ministry would get a seat in the steering group (see below).
- It should also be clarified with the lead authority and other ministries, which level of officers should take the desired role in the process. The selection may also depend on the respective personalities.
- It is also beneficial if the lead authority and other Ministries clarify better the desired achievement of the process.
- In the course of the process, and in particular on the road to implementation, it has shown again as beneficial, that a key person in the Prime Minister's office was committed and took the lead for involvement and coordination on the government side.

Human and financial resources, commissioning the RMNO as organiser

The idea to commission the RMNO (Advisory Council for Research on Spatial Planning, Nature and Environment) with organising the process came up early: VROM had asked the RMNO to organise a stakeholder conference on the EU SDS in April 2006, which was a successful event. VROM then entrusted RMNO to organise the peer review for them, considering also as beneficial its large network into civil society and its contacts to other advisory councils in Europe, which could support the task to identifying peers. The EU SDS already proposed to involve national SD Councils, as key actors in SD processes, in particular for the link to civil society. In the Netherlands there is no (explicit) SD Council, but a system of policy advisory councils relevant for SD, e.g. the VROM-raad (Advisory Council for Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment), the AER (Advisory Council for Energy) and the RLG (Advisory Council for Rural Areas), as well as so-called 'sector councils' for wider societal knowledge questions, among which the RMNO has been very active regarding SD. The RMNO involved the aforementioned councils in the process, as well as the RAWOO (sector council for development aid) and the SER (Economic and Social Council). In January 2007 the two latter terminated their participation, because the RAWOO was no longer in function and the representative of the SER became Minister of Environment in the new cabinet.

VROM secured human resources on its side and had also agreed to fund the process with the maximum of 100.000€, as laid out in the arrangements offered by the European Commission.⁷

The RMNO was asked by VROM to also take care of the formal steps required for the financial support of the European Commission. This process turned out as quite time-consuming.

There was also an internal debate on how to calculate the capacity of the RMNO to be spent for the peer review. This is due to the organisational setting of an advisory council, whose staff expenses are covered by the government, but at the same time it acts like an independent organisation regarding budget. In the final budget a certain amount of RMNO staff capacity was included, but it turned out to be not sufficient. The RMNO hence "subsidised" the process with own capacity.⁸

LESSONS:

- Resources:

The organisation and facilitation of the process is very resource intensive. Even without a

⁷ A 50/50 share of the costs between the Commission and the reviewed country, with a maximum of 100.000€ funded by the Commission.

⁸ 30 man-days were budgeted, and around 180 days were required.

budget review so far available, it can already be seen that the time to be spent by the RMNO amounts to around 8 man-month and with this exceeded far what was expected and budgeted. With some lessons learned this could be probably reduced, but not significantly. A budget review will specify these estimations. Other councils, which might take up the organiser role in a peer review process, should plan accordingly and agree with the commissioning ministry how staff capacity may be budgeted.

- What is expected from the peers (also with relevance for planning resources)?

The RMNO produced a paper with guidelines for peers, including an indication for the capacity required for a review and some rules about budget. However, questions arose and some peers asked for specific arrangements, for example for travels. Not all peers provided the requested capacity. It should therefore be made more clear what the peers may expect, incl. the reimbursement policy. In the Netherlands some peers received attendance money upon request. It is recommendable to clarify how many days of work are expected, also for preparation and commenting on draft papers, i.e. beyond the mere attendance in the country, and to provide for attendance money for all peers (the governmental peers might be different) for all days.

- Administration:

Other councils should plan for enough capacity for the step to settle the financial arrangements, both at the beginning and end of the project.

Putting in place the necessary institutional support

a) An advisory committee was established in October 2006. It was originally composed of members of the councils involved (RMNO, AER, VROMraad, RLG, RAWOO, SER), representatives of the European Commission, the UN and OECD, as well as the Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency (MNP), chaired by the chair of the RMNO. At the first meeting in October 2006 it was decided to include the lead authority VROM and to turn it into a "steering committee", in order to guide and oversee the process, rather than only advise.

The UN and the OECD were invited as members of the Steering Committee and as observers of the entire peer review. Representatives did not participate in Steering Committee meetings, but attended the scoping meeting and the review week. Some participants mentioned that the role of the UN and OECD representatives should have been made clearer to better benefit from the involvement.

EEAC was also invited as observer in order to grasp lessons learned for other councils that might be asked to organise a peer review.

The Steering Group met five times prior to the review week, and two times afterwards⁹.

b) For the preparation of the background report, a commenting group was established. An expert group, composed of members of the Steering Committee, the RMNO and some other national experts, held a meeting in December to review the background report and give recommendations for the scoping meeting.

c) In November an (earlier planned) conference with stakeholders and Parliamentarians on the future SD policies in the Netherlands took place. It was not the formal launch of the peer review, as the peers were not yet selected at that time, but it was announced at this conference.

LESSONS:

- The initiator(s) of the peer review and/or the lead authority should be member of the Steering Committee.
- The majority of the Steering Committee should be from non-governmental members, and the participation of members of advisory councils is very effective.
- The role of (international) observers should be more clearly defined.

⁹ 24.10.06, 7.11. on the background report, 8.1.07, 19.2., 9.3., 16.4., 16.5.

1.c) Getting external support for the review

Member States should consider drawing on independent external expertise to support the review process.

The COM Guidelines recommend to involving independent expertise, i.e. external to government and/or national stakeholders, for shaping and facilitating the process and interaction between different parties, as well as providing technical support. The RMNO as main contractor fulfils all these functions as independent advisory council.

It has been considered from the beginning to outsource other functions, namely:

- drafting the background report,
- overall advising the process and drafting the final report.

The former decision was taken very early, as the background report was the first document to be prepared. For the latter it was decided to first hire a consultant for supporting in the scoping meeting, and if cooperation went well, to extending the task also to drafting the final report. In this case a consultant from abroad should be twinned with a Dutch partner. Both decisions were taken and arrangements made.

LESSONS:

- The way and degree of involving independent expertise has shown to be beneficial. Members of the RMNO and other advisory councils were member of the Steering Committee, and involving more experts and stakeholders in the course of the process worked well, also because of the large networks of these councils.
- A consultant for overall support and for drafting the final report and recommendations needs to be familiar with governance and policy in Europe; a background in the international dimension alone does not provide for enough insight in the more similar situations of EU member states, particularly regarding governance.

2. Preparing for the review

2.a) Drafting background material

Member States should prepare background information for the initial 'scoping' workshop, describing the main institutional arrangements and SD indicators for the country.

The RMNO decided in September to commission a Dutch consultant with drafting a background report. It was originally discussed, but then discarded, to also hire a non-Dutch person in order to ensure that information is better understandable for outsiders. A small group, including one person from abroad, was then asked to comment during the drafting process. The RMNO also played a guiding role.

The background report was prepared on the basis of open sources (literature and websites) and in communication with ministries, the Environmental Assessment Agency MNP and advisory councils involved in sustainable development. Given the strong involvement of the consultant in SD policies of the Netherlands and in order to save time and capacity, it was decided not to perform systematic interviews.

It gives a general introduction to the political and institutional setting in the Netherlands relevant for SD, describes the development and content of the current SD policies, in particular the two action programs, addresses which parties have been involved, how and which issues are or have been under discussion and what has happened since the introduction. The background document is not an evaluation of SDS process or policy or results in the Netherlands, as this is the role of the peer reviewers.

It took around eight weeks to finalise the background report, which was published in December 2006. The Steering Committee met mid-term and gave recommendations for the finalisation.

An above-mentioned expert group met on 21 December to give recommendations for the scope of the peer review. This meeting also identified some deficiencies in the background report, and the Steering Committee decided that two addendums should be written:

1. expanding on the societal context, and addressing the involvement in and activities of societal actors in SD (policies), as the report was considered to focus too much on the government side,
2. on indicators for SD.

The latter was not entirely easy, as there had been no political process in the Netherlands leading to an agreement on a set of indicators used for measuring progress in SD policies. Efforts were undertaken to compile a list of existing objectives (and related indicators) in different sector policies relevant for SD, both from national and from EU policies¹⁰, and, where available, information on the status¹¹. The task was easier in the environment domain, as a set of indicators had already been developed after the endorsement of environmental plans (NEPP) in the 1990s, and have been further developed by MNP as European Benchmark Indicators, which also allow for comparison of the Netherlands with other EU countries.

The background report was assumed to cover the main information important for the peers, and was therefore published in the beginning of the process and handed over to the peers.¹² In the course of the process additional material was collected and delivered (see chapter 3.a).

LESSONS:

- It is recommendable to clarify the scope of the background report early. Having a small commenting group is useful, as well as including here somebody from outside the country.
- As one expert usually has a strong(er) background in one of the SD dimensions, it is recommendable to foresee some input from other angles, as well as views from a non-national, which makes typical national specifications better understandable for peers from outside the country. A team of two authors could be a good idea for both reasons.
- Given that there might be a general tendency to be government-focussed, it is good to be aware from the beginning that looking at societal activities needs to be included.
- As for methodology: It is worthwhile to consider to using a set of interviews to enrich the background report and to better reflect the societal approaches and activities. However, one could also argue that this should be mainly the task of the peers, on the basis of the background report.
- On indicators: It is recommendable to
 - clarify whether there is a set of agreed SD indicators, for example in an SD strategy, or similarly agreed indicators in economic, environment, social policy and (other) sectoral policy,
 - clarify whether the state of environment report (and similar reports in other policy fields) use indicators,
 - check the involvement of the country in the Eurostat Expert Group on SD Indicators, and the effects on the debate on or use of domestic indicators.
- It is useful to publish the background report in the beginning of the process as main information basis for the peers.

¹⁰ NB: the majority in the end were objectives from the EU level.

¹¹ Status information could be given in around 80% of the objectives/indicators.

¹² In the case of the French peer review the background report was published in the end of the process to also cover the findings of the peers.

2.b) Involving partners from local and regional government ¹³, business, trade unions, civil society and peer countries

A broad range of actors, including national SD councils and representatives from business and major groups, should be involved at an early stage in the review process. Peer countries should be selected to balance between developed and neighbouring or developing countries and different social and legal systems.

Involving stakeholders and other actors

In the architecture of the peer review in the Netherlands the RMNO as main contractor is a key link to civil society/stakeholders: through its expert/stakeholder composition, through involvement of other advisory councils with similar compositions, and through the RMNO's wider network and links to a wider circle of organised civil society.

Stakeholders in the form of representatives from other advisory councils were members of the Steering Committee and with this involved in all phases of the process.

The first wider stakeholder involvement took place in the course of the stakeholder conference in November: This was not directly related to the peer review, but had been planned as political debate for "future policies", in light of the forthcoming elections ¹⁴. However, the peer review was announced there, and during the preparation of this event ¹⁵ the first contacts were also made to the Environmental Assessment Agency MNP, which was working on the 'Sustainability Outlook', a kind of "state of environment" report for all SD dimensions. It also presented intermediate results at the stakeholder conference.

In the peer review itself stakeholders were also involved:

- a) For the scoping meeting a group of government representatives, as well as experts and stakeholders (mainly from involved advisory councils) was invited for a questioning session.
- b) A wider stakeholder involvement took off in preparation for the peer review week itself: The peer group chair decided to hold additional/preliminary interviews with experts and stakeholders, in extension of the scoping meeting and in preparation of the review week This took place two weeks after the scoping meeting and included seven interviews (the then hired consultant also participated). In addition, four telephone conferences with stakeholders were held, in which in average three peers participated (*see 2.c) below*).
- c) For the review week a program with inviting around 120 experts and stakeholders was set up; the number was partly due to the fact that the peer group did not decide for one or two topic for more in-depth consideration, but continued with the five that had been proposed in the scoping meeting (*see 2.c) below*). 85 people joined the sessions during the review week. Also Parliamentarians as well as local and regional governments took part in the review sessions (*see program in the Annex*). Two of four invited cities participated in the review week, and one of them was visited with a full evening program. Some peers however found the involvement of the local level, and in particular Local Agenda 21 initiatives as somewhat insufficient.
- d) The results were presented in a discussion with stakeholders in the framework of an "SD festival" in June.

LESSONS:

- The extent of stakeholder involvement in the Dutch peer review was wide and has taken place throughout the process.
- Improvement potentials include to better preparing the stakeholders for the scoping meeting discussion, any interviews to take place and the review week, in terms of expected scope of

¹³ For the Guidelines: The header should read "local and regional governments", as the involvement of the central government/ministries is addressed in chapter 1. Proposal for the entire header: "Involving partners from civil society, business, local and regional governments, and peer countries" as trade unions are part of civil society.

¹⁴ NB: The elections were originally scheduled for May 2007, but due to a break of the coalition government, it had to be brought forward to November.

¹⁵ Entitled "Options for tomorrow – show colours".

the discussion and methodology.

- It might also be worthwhile to consider stimulating stakeholders for a meeting prior to the scoping meeting in order to clarify better their expectations.
- The local level and in particular Local Agenda 21 initiatives need to be involved sufficiently.

Choice of peer countries and peers

Considerations regarding the peer countries started from the very beginning of the process. It was envisioned to select two EU countries and one developing country.

- Germany was chosen as a country with similar legal tradition and with an established and successful structure for SD policies. Finland was chosen for its similar background as a frontrunner in environmental policy, and being one of the smaller EU countries.
- For the developing countries there were a couple of options, considering language as well as trade and development aid relations. South Africa was chosen as English speaking country, where good contacts existed, and because of its economic situation. It was assessed that it faces SD problems that would enhance the mutual learning in the peer review.

When approaching countries and potential peers it needed to be clarified sometimes that a peer review is not an evaluation "from above", and the notion of peers is "equals". It was also not always clear that there is no automatic peering in return. Some persons contacted found that somewhat logical, given the capacity invested for peer reviewing the Netherlands. The RMNO offered support for identifying peers from the Netherlands in case involved countries wanted to organise a peer review in this constellation..

Regarding the peers it was aimed, and realised, to have each a representative from government, business, NGO and science, i.e. altogether there were 12 peers¹⁶. This idea has shown to be quiet successful: It clearly broadened the scope of experience and perspective, and also supported building bridges between peers from different countries. Proposals for peers were delivered by partner SD councils in Germany and Finland, and through government's and other contacts in South Africa.

In order to get the commitment of proposed peers it was beneficial to describe the task and expectations well. It was not entirely determined in the planning phase how much work there will be for the peers besides the presence phases in the Netherlands (i.e. the scoping meeting and the review week). Because of that, the time available for preparation, commenting on texts and delivering material on SD-experience from the home country was limited, and some peers were not able to provide such preparation time. This had a negative effect on the mutual learning aspect of the review. Also, some activities (e.g. telephone conferences) were only decided during the process, in particular after the scoping meeting. It was indicated by the RMNO that there would be no compensations beyond covering all expenses like travel and accommodation. It was assumed in general that a commitment would be on a voluntary basis, as the peer countries also have an interest in terms of mutual learning. This aspect seems to be not entirely clear in the concept of peer reviews: Some countries imagined a quid pro quo in the respect that the Netherlands would in return become a peer, if the respective country was to conduct a peer review itself. But this would consequently mean that the same group of countries would stay among each other, which is not really the idea. It turned that voluntarily participating was not possible for all NGOs, and also for others it became somewhat questionable as the demanded time increased. Some NGOs finally received an attendance fee.

All the peers were assumed to having insight and/or being involved in their national SD processes/policies, which did not apply in all cases.

LESSONS:

- It should be clarified that "peers" is a notion of equals and a peer review is not an evaluation "from above". However, it remains difficult in an international setting to find an appropriate way between politeness and useful criticism.

¹⁶ The government representative from South Africa was not available anymore just before the project started with the scoping meeting. There was no replacement appointed.

- It is recommendable to select peers from government, business, NGOs and science.
- It should be made more explicit that a peer review includes the idea of mutual learning, which is assumed to take place for the reviewed country and the peer countries as well, already during the review of the former.
- Peers should be well briefed on the task and expectations. It should be made clear how much time they are asked to commit.
- It is recommendable to provide for attendance fees for all peers (probably besides the peers from governments) for all days (which amount to around 15). This would also prevent some shifts of attitude on the peer side (working on a shoestring, and with this the expectations for all kinds of logistical support rise ¹⁷).
- The aspect of mutual learning should be clarified and emphasised more, also regarding the follow-up of the peer review (see chapter 5). Peers should therefore be more clearly be required to gain insight – if it is not given qua their background - in the SD strategy/policies of their country, in order to serve better the aim of for example feeding in good practice examples from their country and more actively communicate the results in order to enhance mutual learning.

2.c) Agreeing on the scope and extent of review

Member States should organise an initial 'scoping' workshop, involving all partners, to agree on and plan the review. This preparatory meeting would need to be attended by proposed participants in the main peer workshop.

The Steering Group strongly supported the recommendation for a "scoping meeting" (as it was called in the Netherlands), which was planned and the peers asked to participate. All of them were able to attend ¹⁸.

The date of the scoping meeting was announced around one month ahead.

Scoping meeting (2 days)

The peers received the background report four weeks ahead, and were encouraged to ask questions already on beforehand, which was followed by some of them. The commissioned consultant prepared a list of questions, based on earlier experience (review of the French NSSD) and the input of the peers. The scoping meeting has several objectives:

1. Peers forming a group:

The scoping meeting is the first time the peers get together, and the meeting should provide that the peers form a group. Therefore a setting is important that allows for informal getting to know each other in order to build a good atmosphere and trust. The same reasons apply to limiting the numbers of observers, and to only admit them to parts of the meeting.

2. Settling the scope of the peer review:

Although rather obvious, it is often difficult to really concentrate on "scoping" only, and not getting into substantial discussions. At the same time the scope that is started with (and then time is lost) tends to be too broad.

3. Getting a "feel" of the country beyond the background report:

Peers expressed that such occasions gave them the most valuable information. It is therefore recommendable to arrange for face-to-face interviews during the scoping meeting, i.e. also there breaking up in groups of 2-3 peers discussing with an expert from the country.

¹⁷ In this context it is recommendable to make clear that e.g. flights are only provided in economy class.

¹⁸ Besides the government representative from South Africa, who cancelled overall participation prior to the scoping meeting. . The German NGO representative missed the first day.

4. Agree on a methodology for the peer week:

This includes the structure (e.g. how many parallel breakout sessions, what to do in plenary) and the methodology to gather and summarise discussions, to feed back to the whole group of peers and to generate conclusions.

5. Whom to invite for the review week:

Depending on the scope and topics the invitees for the review week should be discussed.

ad 1. The first objective was achieved very well. The peers relatively quickly connected to each other and appeared as group, and it was also to the satisfaction of all that they agreed on a chair. He from that moment became the external voice of the peer group (e.g. presenting the results at the end of the review week, meetings with the Environment Minister and the Prime Minister, presenting the final report to the general public), and spent also more capacity for the preparations after the scoping meeting.

ad 2. It was achieved that peers formulated questions that served as a guideline for further preparation and the review week. However, too much time was spent for the scoping. In consequence, objectives 4 and 5 were not achieved, and the agreement on a methodology required time in the beginning of the review week. Some discussion had taken place prior to this between the chair, the consultant and the organiser. Selecting invitees for the review week was done by the RMNO in cooperation with the chair and the consultant. Regarding the scoping itself it turned out that the preparation could have been more focused, as three elements are relatively clear:

- One key focus of the peer review are governance and process questions, and another non-substantial aspect is science and education.
- Beyond this, time constraints of the review week only allow for looking deeper into a very limited number of topics. An evaluation of policy developments is not possible.
- Experience has shown that limiting to one or two topics is too arbitrary; hence it is more likely (and appropriate) that three or four are chosen. This again is only doable when breaking up in parallel groups during the review week, and it is recommendable to already split up responsibility among the peers in the preparation phase (by topics and/or dimensions of SD), to be settled during the scoping meeting. The COM guidelines recommend that peers, responsible for certain topics, already produce initial draft chapters for the final report. This seems to be not desirable, as the review and the very large portion of interviews and discussion takes place during the review week.

ad 3. It was beneficial that some Dutch experts were invited to present at the scoping meeting, as the peers were able to ask clarification questions, which all gave a better insight into the Dutch situation. However, this took place in plenary, and there were no formal arrangements for accommodating a face-to-face experience, as this only turned out then to be highly desirable.

The peer group chair suggested after the scoping meeting to return at another date for some interviews. Also, the idea for telephone conferences for all peers was born. Preparation of these activities required additional, unplanned capacity of the organiser, and of course also for the peer group chair and the peers. However, those peers who were able to participate in telephone conferences found it very useful. Organising the interviews and the teleconferences put pressure on the preparation time for the review week. In this situation the time between the scoping meeting and the review week should have been longer than the two months.

LESSONS:

- The scoping meeting with these objectives is really important for the process.
- Two days is the minimum duration in order to meet the five objectives.
- The scoping meeting should be designed in a way that provides for peers growing together

as a group.¹⁹

- Peers need to provide capacity for preparing the meeting (in particular reading the background report and other material provided)²⁰
- All participants should give enough attention to existing guidelines in order to speed up scoping.
- Scoping is easier if the reviewed country makes more explicit what the peer review should achieve. If left relatively open, it provides an opportunity, but at the same time more difficulties, for the peers.
- A balance should be struck between involving experts/stakeholders and enough time for the scoping/agreement itself.
- The scope for the review needs to concentrate on structures and process, and a careful selection of topics needs to be made.
- The group should agree that individual peers (all peers) become responsible for selected topics for the subsequent preparation and review week (e.g. chairing breakout sessions). This should also include to prepare guiding questions for the review week, and maybe already preliminary thesis.
- Face-to-face interviews with invited experts/stakeholders should be provided for during the scoping meeting. Additional meetings/interviews/telephone conferences after the scoping meeting are also an option, but it is more difficult and time consuming for the peers to inform themselves about the results of such activities.

Communication/dissemination plan

In the phase after the scoping meeting a communication plan was developed, followed by a dissemination plan: the former addressing the press and wider public, the latter the closer involved addressees of the review outcomes.

With the review week planned for early April, the Steering Committee in February decided that there should only be one central point of "going public", namely when the review report is ready to be presented, which should take place at a conference end of June. The issue remained contentious with strong voices promoting to going public both right after the review week and after the issuance of the report: the former for the wider public, and the latter for the interest groups and government.

Both options have advantages and disadvantages, thus the decisions will depend on the individual country. Regarding media attention some arguments might speak for the option of already going public at the end of the peer review week, with all the peers present giving some exotic flair to the subject.

However, in the Netherlands the interest of the media was low, despite many efforts of the organisers tried to raise the attention. Newspapers were not very interested in the peer week and in the meeting of the peer group chair with the Prime Minister. Eventually three interviews with the chair were held: one for an expert-magazine, one for a regional and one for a national newspaper.

LESSONS:

- A communication plan should be developed by the organiser prior to the scoping meeting.
- The most appropriate ways of "going public" – both for the concerned parties and the wider public – will remain specific to the individual country.
- Efforts need to be planned in to interest media.

¹⁹ A design could be: Starting with an informal dinner the evening upon arrival, having one day of reflection on objectives, discussions on scope including invited experts, and a 3/4 day for identifying peers responsible for certain topics, agreeing on scope as well as methodology for the review week, discussing invitees for the review week, adjourn with a late lunch.

²⁰ See also: overall capacity to be provide by peers (chapter 2.b)

3. Undertaking the review

3.a) Gathering more in-depth and analytical information

Information for the review should be gathered from the national administrations and civil society. A range of potential sources of and methods for gathering and presenting this information can be used.

The RMNO compiled more detailed background material both before and after the scoping meeting, which was put on a password protected page on their website. The peers assessed this method as effective.

The RMNO was the responsible body for further information gathering. It had been assumed that the background report would be the main information basis for the peers, and additional information was requested later. Peers should have been more alerted to bring experience and material from their country to feed into the process.

As already addressed in the beginning of this report, there is an inherent information gap, or rather: information load, particularly in the case of a "stakeholder peer review", which is characterised by much more limitations in capacity and resources than an "expert peer review" (like the one of the OECD), which performs a full policy evaluation. All actors should include this already in the considerations during the preparation phase. It has an impact on the scope and depth of the review, and the realistic expectations regarding the outcome. In consequence it also has an impact on the range and depth of information provided for the peers, and what they are able to digest.

Capacity of the organiser allowed for gathering relevant information, but, again in contrast to an "expert peer review", very limited regarding processing such information, i.e. for example providing summaries and briefings. This is also due to the fact that in case of a stakeholder peer review much capacity needs to be spent for involving civil society and other experts.

This situation caused that peers tended to feel an information overflow and desired a better prioritisation and classification of documents.

Because of the scoping meeting, where not all objectives were achieved (see chapter 2.c), the capacity problem aggravated, as, for example, more meetings and telephone conferences needed to be organised.

The peers considered these interviews prior to the review week as very effective. For reasons of efficiency this should better take place in the scoping meeting, and in the review week itself. Although there was a general agreement on the scope, which included to emphasise structural and process questions, some peers would have desired to look more into policy fields.

LESSONS:

- The scope and depth of further information gathering should be better determined in the scoping meeting.
- It should be made clear how much capacity is available on the organiser side for processing selected information, in particular providing summaries and briefings.
- Making individual peers responsible for certain topics would also help in this respect. However, it should be clarified repeatedly that a detailed policy evaluation cannot be performed with this type of peer review.
- Peers should be more prepared to deliver material from their country, both in preparation of the review week and for the final report.

3.b) Review week

Member States should hold a review workshop involving the peers and selected representatives from government and civil society. Depending on the approach taken to information gathering, it may be possible to combine steps 3 (a) and (b).

The date for the review week was announced three months ahead.

Structure and purpose of the review week

The guidelines recommend 3-5 days for the review week, depending on the amount of information gathered previously. The length of the review week, however, rather depends on the desired depth of recommendations, and of course the time peers are willing and/or able to spend. This is also reflected in the assessments of some peers, which range from "too long" (if private holidays have to be invested), to "perfect", to "too short" (for achieving optimal results two weeks would be appropriate).

In the Netherlands in principle a full week (5 days) were aimed at. For agenda reasons then the week before Easter was chosen as review week. Because this implied one day less time (Good Friday), the review week was already started Sunday noon, and hence was in a total 4,5 days long.

□ Structure of the program (see Annex):

- Sunday afternoon: discussion and agreement on methodology for the sessions, presentation of MNP ("Sustainability outlook"), visit of Rotterdam (local flair and main topic: energy),
- a bit more than 2,5 days for hearing sessions with invited participants,
- less than a half day plus 2 hours for reflections of peers,
- a bit more than a half day for forming recommendations, and 4 hours for presenting the results to two different audiences (to Steering Committee members first as a test run, and the final presentation to government members).

Two of the sessions were done in parallel groups, one with cross-cutting themes (planning bureaus and science/education) and one with policy fields (water and energy). The method of parallel groups could be extended to save time, respectively to be able to work through a broader spectrum, or: to work through the selected spectrum more intensively. Some peers stated that in the scoping meeting they had agreed on parallel workshops, which was then implemented to a limited extent only.²¹

Most peers found the time provided for reflections among each other and for developing recommendations too short, and some stated that therefore the process was not open in terms of results. The planned one-and-a-half hour session per day was also too short, because time was needed by the chair to organise the hearing sessions, including dividing of tasks among the peers, for example preparing summaries of the sessions. The situation also caused discussion when the final report was drafted, as some peers felt that a number of recommendations made had not been agreed. In the Netherlands the time-pressure was aggravated by the fact that due to the end of the first 100 days of the new government, it was desired to produce an executive summary of the recommendations within one week, i.e. before finalising the report. It was at the same time a unique window of opportunity for stimulating initiatives for SD to presenting a summary of the findings to policymakers and politicians..

The session days were overall felt a being very full, which limited concentration during the one-hour reflection session of peers.

Some peers found the excursion informative and motivating, and for some it was not necessary.

²¹ The consultant had recommended to have all hearing sessions in plenary.

❑ Method for the hearing sessions:

In the preparation meeting Sunday afternoon the peers agreed on a "mini-parallel"-method:

- Each two or three peers to discuss in small groups with 2-x Dutch experts (20-30 min.),
- Each sub-group to present bullet points (30 min.),
- Overall discussion (30 min.).

Given the circumstances of the very short preparation time, this method worked relatively well. But the price needed to be paid for having missed to discuss and agree on a methodology in the scoping meeting. The peers assessed that with enough preparation time much better results could have been achieved. Although the participants were confronted with key questions, the discussion resulted in rather openly collecting items, which were difficult to summarise and draw conclusions from. Better preparation on the peer side would have also made it easier for stakeholders to prepare themselves.

LESSONS:

- The preparation of the review week consumes a lot of capacity of the organiser for arranging all invitations of stakeholders, and making sure that all groups of society are well represented, if this option of a 'stakeholder peer review' is chosen.
- The methodology for the sessions with invitees needs to be well discussed and prepared in order to achieve good results.
- Invitees should be asked to prepare themselves (see also recommendation for a meeting already prior to the scoping meeting).
- It should be planned for small group sessions and sufficient time for a plenary to pull the results of these sessions together.
- Each session should have a short introduction with setting the scene / communicate the state of art of peers' insight, both for cross-cutting issues and policy fields.
- Both peers and invitees should be reminded about the respective chapters in the background report.
- A balance needs to be found between sessions with stakeholders/government and reflection of peers and developing recommendations: 1,5 days should be reserved for the latter two, and it might be recommendable to have a break in between. Each day at least one hour needs to be planned for peer reflection.
- The more specific topics should be dealt with in parallel sessions in order to save time, and also here a format of smaller sub-groups is recommendable.
- Starting on the evening prior to the review with a social event (which could also include some local and content introduction) is a good idea.

Participants

Overall, the range of invitees was assessed as broad and the seniority as sufficient. Given the very full program, some peers recommended that a smaller number of invitees would have worked better. Some peers found the government and public sector over-represented, and the number and range of stakeholders present a bit deficient. Some also assessed that the discussion and results would have been different with a broader range of stakeholders.

LESSONS:

- The number of invitees should be balanced with the available time. Days should not get too full.
- It requires a lot of capacity to make sure that a broad range of stakeholders is present. This option seems to be more appropriate for a peer review of SD policies.
- The program should find a balance between plenary, parallel sessions and individual interviews.

Chairing of the peer group and sessions during the review week

The chair of the peer group was overall very well appreciated. He also chaired the review week in terms of welcoming and closing plenary sessions.

For the parallel workshops chairs were appointed ad hoc from among the peers. In each of the "mini-groups" there were one to three peers, with also sometimes ad-hoc chairing, and a rapporteur for each group.

LESSONS:

- A chair for the peer group should be appointed during the scoping meeting.
- Also with respect to having chairs well prepared for breakout sessions it would be recommendable to allocate responsibilities for certain topics during the scoping meeting.

3.c) Finalising conclusions and recommendations

The reviewed country should discuss a draft of the review document, including draft conclusions and recommendations, with the review team. Following discussions a final document should be produced. This should include conclusions and recommendations and be immediately placed in the public domain.

As already addressed in the previous chapter, the time-pressure for producing results was higher in the Netherlands due to the government's desire to receive the key recommendations within one week.

Due to the unfortunate situation that not all recommendations were signed off by all peers during the review week, the finalisation of this executive summary was not smooth, required a lot of e-mail communication, and with this additional time and capacity, and partly caused irritation. A compromise needed to be found in one aspect, for which no agreement could be achieved, at least not in this way of communication. Intensive reviewing then in parts continued during the finalisation of the longer report, as some details remained contentious.

Peers were asked to contribute to the final report with examples from their country, but the delivery was rather low.

LESSONS:

- There need to be a clear agreement and signing off of the key parts of the recommendations, as well as on the main content of the final report. All peers need to be present.
- The peers should be aware of the political and communication culture when drafting conclusions and recommendations: If for example the culture is rather outspoken, the country would like to see more criticism and recommendations of this kind.
- Up to two months should be planned for the finalisation of the report. More time is needed if, for example, it is aimed to produce an executive summary shortly after the review week.
- If a consultant from abroad is chosen to write the final report, it is recommendable to provide for a domestic "twin".

4. Dissemination of the review findings

4.a) Reporting back to government ²², stakeholders and the public

Actors from the review and partner countries should take steps to disseminate the results and key lessons from the review, to the NSDS stakeholders and the wider public.

The peer group chair wrote a letter to the Prime Minister shortly after the review week addressing some key recommendations and offering to discuss the results. A meeting was then arranged with the Prime Minister, and the Ministers for Environment and Development Aid in May.

The results of the peer review were presented to stakeholders and the public in the framework of an "SD festival" in June:

- The peer group chair in this setting was able to present some key results to a wider, interested public, and
- a separate session during this festival was organised with a smaller group (around 60 participants). Here a moderator was commissioned, who managed a lively discussion with an interesting method. All participants received the final report in printing.

Prior to this meeting the chair handed over the results of the peer review to the Environment Minister, a video of which was shown at this festival. The RMNO placed all relevant information on its website (for example the video, the background report, and the final report, the letter to the Prime Minister)

Interviews with the chair were published in two newspapers and one expert journal.

LESSONS:

- It is very recommendable to arrange for a high level meeting of the peer group chair with government, ideally the Prime Minister.
- The timing of publishing the final report should be well considered, taking into account the political situation, where windows of opportunity might occur or can be created.
- Contacts to senior civil servants should be kept after the review week in order to support this and to accommodate new actions.

4.b) Exchange of lessons with the Member States

Member States should ensure that key lessons emerging from their respective reviews are exchanged and discussed, and best practice identified. Insights relating to the review process should also be considered, with a view to improving the review framework itself.

Some follow-up activities of the peer review between the Netherlands and the peer countries, as well as other countries have taken place so far:

- The Minister of Foreign Affairs sent a letter to South Africa expressing his compliment about the role of the country in the Dutch review and looking for possibilities to cooperate in future SD initiatives.
- The RMNO has disseminated the outcome of the review and the process to other advisory councils in Europe.
- The Ministry of VROM has disseminated the outcome of the review and the process in the ESDN network and OECD sessions.

LESSONS:

The mutual learning aspect should be stressed more throughout the entire peer review process, including the follow-up.

²² For the Guidelines: "Government" should be added in this header.

5. Implementation and review

5.a) Setting out implementation plans

The review country should produce a report outlining its plans as regards implementation of the review recommendations.

An implementation plan has not been produced in the Netherlands, but, as a major novelty in governance, a small coordination unit was established in the Prime Minister's Office soon after the peer review.

5.b) Reviewing process in implementation

The review country should regularly revisit progress in relation to its implementation plan.

ANNEX: Programme Review Week



Programme Review Week
1-5 April 2007

Sunday April 1, The Hague and Rotterdam

- 13.00 - 16.30 Meeting peers to reconnect and start-up
- 17.00 - 17.30 Harbour cruise Rotterdam, starting with reception
- 17.30 - 18.10 Presentations, Sustainable Development in the Rotterdam region, with a focus on energy
- 18.10 - 19.30 Discussion
- 19.30 - 21.30 Dinner

Monday April 2, The Hague

- 9.00 - 10.30 Plenary session Government (ministries, provinces, cities, water boards)
- 10.45 - 12.15 Plenary session NGO's and Business
- 12.15 - 13.30 Lunch
- 13.30 - 15.00 Plenary session Politicians (parliament, but also provinces and cities)
- 15.15 - 16.45 Parallel session Planning bureaus
- 15.15 - 16.45 Parallel session Science and Education
- 17.00 - 18.30 Reflection among the peers
- 19.00 - 21.00 Dinner

Tuesday April 3, The Hague

- 9.00 - 12.15 Plenary session Rural area's/agriculture
- 12.15 - 13.30 Lunch
- 13.30 - 16.45 Parallel session Water
- 13.30 - 16.45 Parallel session Energy
- 17.00 - 18.30 Reflection among the peers
- 19.00 - 21.00 Dinner

Wednesday April 4, The Hague

- 9.00 - 12.15 Plenary discussion on process
- 12.15 - 13.30 Lunch
- 13.30 - 18.00 Peers discuss and form recommendations
- 19.00 - 21.00 Dinner

Thursday April 5, The Hague

- 9.00 - 12.15 Peers discuss and form recommendations
- 12.15 - 13.30 Lunch: Presentation of recommendations to steering committee
- 14.00 - 16.00 Presentation of recommendations to high ranking civil servants and feedback on recommendations (steering committee will attend)
- 16.00 - 17.00 Drinks