Rat für
NACHHALTIGE
Entwicklung

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# Maturing the Sustainability Strategy

## Statement regarding the 2009 review of the European Union Strategy for Sustainable Development, EU SDS

What once began as a great political move known as the Gothenburg Strategy on greening European policies over the years evolved into the EU SDS, and is today losing momentum and political say. It needs a renewed and fundamental political push. Therefore, it is most welcome that the Swedish Presidency has once again taken the lead and put the review of the EU SDS on the European agenda.

This recommendation addresses the German Federal Government. At the same time, our understanding is that active contribution of stakeholders is welcome, and we therefore consider this statement a public opinion directed "to whom it may concern".

Following up its own previous statements on the substance and process of sustainable development in Europe to be found on www.nachhaltigkeitsrat.de/en/documents/statements/ the Council for Sustainable Development (RNE) now takes advantage of the continued sharing of experiences within the network of EEAC, the European Environmental and Sustainable Development Advisory Councils, www.eeac-net.org . In particular, the widely shared vision on "Sustaining Europe for a long way ahead" (to be found on the website) provides deep insight into the long term sustainability agenda as seen from the network. Of significant importance are the findings of the Sustainability Observatory within the European Economic and Social Council www.eesc.europa.eu/sections/sdo/index_en.asp , and discussions and debates of the annual meetings of the European Sustainable Development Network, www.sd-network.eu .

### Stop sending confusing signals

The recent EU Com communication on the EU SDS (COM (2009) 400 final, Brussels July 24, 2009) compiles both positive and negative observations, and keeps the reader very confused. The positive self-assessment of what has been done rests in deep contrast with the observation that means and measure do not draw reality onto a sustainable pathway. The key

line is: “Despite considerable efforts to include action for sustainable development in major EU policy areas, unsustainable trends persist.” What is this supposed to tell us? Are we on the right track, or not? Facts and figures, e.g. the ones provided by EEA (European Environmental Agency) and Eurostat, are clear enough: Europe is far from achieving overall sustainability goals. So, why is the sustainability narrative still so confusing?

It is most welcome that the EU SDS provides a policy framework with ambitious commitments and indicators, but it clearly lacks a working scheme that puts the machinery into gear. At this point in time, rather than plotting another set of far reaching commitments, the EU needs some very basic working features that would connect the Brussels machinery with actions on the ground, be it in respect of the European instruments, and in particular the implementation of financial funds, or be it in respect of the strategies of the Member States.

**Getting serious**

The Commission’s Communication on mainstreaming sustainable development concludes with the question on whether to launch a comprehensive review of the EU SDS. Such a review would clearly be welcomed, but it would need guidance and focus. Therefore, we recommend three basic steps to reinvigorate the EU SDS:

1. We recommend sharpening and adding to the **institutional machinery** that would go clearly beyond of what we have now. It would encompass the reporting routine and ask for compliance and control measures for the institutional performance against the SD objectives. We seem to need a new thinking around the implementation of sustainability indicators in order to guarantee consistency among national and European processes. This machinery would also make use of soft management and modern management-by-objectives instruments.
2. The EU SDS should benchmark the long term **development trajectory** for the EU taking into account the global context of low carbon competiveness, green recovery and financial sustainability, and demography. A sound covering of those issues would be complimentary to the well known issues already being covered by the EU SDS. As a red threat we recommend taking first steps to merge into a **budget sustainability control** (plus assessment and rating) mode that helps organize sustainability. Comprehensive sustainability impact assessments (SIAs) should be further developed by involving stakeholders, both in the development of such tools and the assessment processes proper, and should be used as a specific sustainable development governance tool.
3. A renewed EU SDS process might take advantage of the 20$^{th}$ anniversary of the Rio Agenda 21 that will take place in 2012. This date provides strong momentum not only to take stock and communicate the idea of sustainability to the broader public. It might also be a focal point for the ongoing debate about how to achieve more results and how to encourage more collective action. We recommend for the European Union to set up a high profile **Peer Review Process on Sustainability Strategies** and the Rio Agenda that would present its findings right in time for the preparation of 2012.

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