EEAC Working Group Sustainable Development
Günther Bachmann, Derek Osborn, Ingeborg Niestroy

Working Paper

Monitoring the EU Sustainable Development Strategy- A 10-point Conceptual Frame

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Harvesting experiences from the involvement in national policy processes, advisory councils of the EEAC network share some basic views as regards monitoring national Sustainable Development Strategies (SDS), which also apply to the EU SDS or at least may provide some useful reference. Asked by representatives of the European Economic and Social Council (EESC) during its Stakeholder Forum on April 14 and 15 in Brussels, the EEAC Working Group Sustainable Development put together some recommendations on a conceptual frame for monitoring the EU SD Strategy. These recommendations add to the larger effort to benchmark national SD concepts in EU Member States (see the recent EEAC background study [1]).

Unfinished Business

(1) Monitoring is a highly complex task as is sustainable development. Complexity, comprehensiveness, technical and political assessment issues can best be accomplished when monitoring will be conceived as a political landmark with high visibility and focus. Coming with the conceptual framework for the monitoring a brand name for the public communication of the monitoring efforts needs to be considered.

(2) Monitoring the activities and results around an SD strategy should be conceived as a process with regular updates, rethinking periodes, and public involvement of stakeholders including views from ecology, economy and social affairs. A sound monitoring procedure may create and increase reliability and ownership. In sustainability policies, however, primacy lies with action not with monitoring action.

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[1] Sustaining Sustainability. A benchmark study on national strategies towards sustainable development and the impact of councils in nine EU member states, by Ingeborg Niestroy, Lemma, Utrecht, 2005. www.eeac-net.org

(3) The monitoring scheme should keep a clear vision on how sustainability is conceived. As a long term and global concept safeguarding the environment and the social cohesion the approach of sustainable development challenges current production and consumption patterns, because present generations live at the expense of future generations. Key issues are energy supply, climate change, biodiversity, ageing society, decoupling of wealth and prosperity from resource deterioration.

(4) As evidence based program an SD Strategy invites stakeholders to check realitiy against what needs to be done in the long run in order to safeguard the functioning of all three pillars of sustainability. For indicators und objectives, the issue is to give directions, both in the long term and for the assessment of current policies. They are expected to serve as landmarks in a transition process that counters unsustainable trends. Indicators are a feature of prime importance, but indicators are no goal in itself.

Data and other tools, impact assessment

(5) Selecting appropriate headline indicators building on more detailed basic indicators is a very important issue in the process of the EU SDS. EU indicators need to be refined and further elaborated. Stocktaking the indicators is about 50% of the monitoring story. Indicators tend to encourage the illusion everything can be managed. While there is the need to provide long term dates for calibrating indicators they tend to be strong by interpreting the past and weak by showing future changes and transition trends.

(6) A proper assessment of ecologic, economic and social impacts is a long standing requirement. The Commission has recently tabled some experiences with implementing impact assessments case-by-case. The instrument of impact assessment is an important tool for a proper SD monitoring. It needs careful further development, and process quality should be improved. Within the monitoring framework, the balancing of ecologic, economic and social issues in impact assessements needs careful quality assurance.

(7) Monitoring arrangements have to seek cooperation with data handling institutions which provide accurate data footwork in order to properly build the case for evidence based, but not necessarily exclusively indicator based, analyses of transition trends.

(8) The societal stocktaking is as important as the statistical footwork. Societal stocktaking requires new methods and tools, and it is to some extent experimental. There are quite a few examples in Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, the Nordic countries and other member states. The German example of an evaluation report under the title of “snapshot on society and sustainability” produced by the national SD Council that involved more than 1000 stakeholders and contributed to the government’s SD progress report, might show one possible direction. Objectives and indicators need to be continuously re-emphasised, and new initiatives identified. Stakeholder involvement, be it through advisory councils or other mechanisms, provide a useful tool to check or refine the agenda and to assure the quality and the resonance of the monitoring results. Also the involvement of Parliaments may be supportive in this respect.

Process quality and link up procedures

(9) Any SD Strategy is as good as the monitoring process is credible. A monitoring process independent from those responsible for the SD Strategy may enhance credibility. Credibility and the creation of ownership may be improved by external quality assurance and/or peer audit routines. A conceptual frame for the monitoring task needs to put all players in the picture and to balance the interdependence and coherence between economic, social and environmental aspects. Keeping the focus balanced is a task that needs broad background and leadership. Involving all players on an equal footing beyond the restrictions of their respective institutional frames may require high-level coordination.

(10) The monitoring scheme would not be complete without reflecting the state-of-the-art of SD performance and evaluation of EU member states. Reference can be made to relevant data aggregation like the Environmental Sustainability and the Growth Competitiveness Index, also by further exploring their correlations. Cross-national "peer reviews" of member state SD Strategies might be an innovative tool. Monitoring may use best practice or benchmarking and rating approaches.