

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF THE CoR STUDY  
CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE REGIONAL AND LOCAL AUTHORITIES  
TO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES<sup>1</sup>**

**Overview of EU SDS and NSDSs in EU Member States**

- Sustainable Development (SD) strategies have been developed on the EU level as well as in most EU Member States (by 2008, 26 EU Member States were expected to have adopted a National Sustainable Development Strategy).
- Compared to the first EU SDS (Gothenburg Strategy), the renewed EU SDS outlines a more comprehensive and strategic approach for SD governance on the EU level.
- The renewed EU SDS acknowledges the importance of multi-level governance for delivering SD: Member States are addressed explicitly and extensively in the actions foreseen in the seven key challenges, the cross-cutting policies and in the implementation chapters; sub-national levels are addressed in general terms only.
- Currently, revisions of NSDSs are ongoing or planned in 14 EU Member States, most of which were expected to be finished in 2008. The main reason for the revisions is to bring the NSDSs in line with the objectives of the renewed EU SDS.
- In most EU Member States, the Ministries of Environment are responsible for the coordination of NSDS implementation.
- Most NSDSs include 5-10 main thematic objectives, broken down into actions and measures. However, most NSDSs include rather general objectives and lack quantified and measurable targets. Many NSDSs also include regional and/or local issues in their objectives; however, governance issues are rarely addressed in the formulation of these objectives.
- Most EU Member States have established institutionalised bodies that foster horizontal integration, i.e. they coordinate the activities of sectoral ministries with regard to concerted actions towards NSDS objectives. One can distinguish between inter-ministerial commissions/committees (composed only of representatives from all or majority of government ministries) and SD councils/commissions (composed of representatives from government ministries and stakeholder groups).
- A majority of EU Member States has developed regular qualitative review and evaluation mechanisms. Progress reports are the most common form. Other forms of qualitative

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assessments are external evaluations (in Austria) and peer reviews (in France and the Netherlands).

- Nevertheless, NSDS are rather weak policy strategies that in many EU Member States lack a comprehensive strategic public management approach – exemplified by, e.g. a lack of quantified and measurable objectives and targets; a varying degree of political commitment for SD, often depending on priorities of the political parties in power; no clear outline of vertical integration procedures (that would involve all political-administrative levels); and shortcomings in implementation mechanisms and distribution of associated responsibilities. Therefore, NSDSs currently have only a limited capacity to guide SD governance in particular and national governance processes in general.
- In most EU Member States, sub-national levels are involved in the NSDS process. However, the degree of involvement varies substantially between Member States. Comprehensive coordination mechanisms and systematic involvement of sub-national levels (both in NSDS preparation and implementation) are the exception rather than the rule in most EU Member States. Therefore, vertical policy integration in NSDS processes is largely missing in EU Member States.

#### **Involvement of sub-national levels in NSDS processes**

- Generally, one can distinguish four types of involvement of sub-national levels in NSDS processes:
  - *Sub-national levels are involved in the general consultation process as one among several stakeholder groups (Type I):* Although most EU Member States involve sub-national levels in general consultation processes during NSDS preparation as a stakeholder group to some degree, only a minority of EU Member States has developed a more in-depth consultation and exchange process between the national and sub-national levels. Examples of the latter can be found in the Czech Republic (regional round tables), Denmark (direct dialogues with representatives from local municipalities), Spain (conference on SD, meeting between Minister of Environment and regional representatives) and UK (consultation packs for regional bodies and local authorities).
  - *Representatives of sub-national levels (policy-makers or public administrators) participate in national SD councils/commissions or inter-ministerial committees (Type II):* Most EU Member States have established new national-level bodies or have charged already existing bodies (consisting of political representatives, public administrators, or both, and frequently also with the participation of representatives of other stakeholders) to deal with the challenges of cross-sectoral coordination associated with NSDS implementation. In several Member States, sub-national representatives are members of such bodies. Examples are Austria (Committee for a Sustainable Austria), Malta (National Commission for SD) and Slovenia (National Council for SD).

- *Institutionalised mechanisms are established for better coordination between the national and sub-national levels (Type III):* Only a minority of EU Member States have established institutionalised mechanisms for better coordination, namely Austria (Expert Conference of national and regional SD coordinators), Finland (Sub-committee on regional and local SD), Germany (National-regional working groups) and Italy (Technical Board on SD).
- *Links between NSDS processes and independent sub-national SD activities (Type IV):* There are several links between NSDS and independent sub-national SD activities in the EU Member States, ranging from specific coordination (e.g. Austria, Germany), guidance documents (e.g. UK), and Local Agenda (LA) 21 processes (e.g. Czech Republic, France).

### Effects of examined mechanisms

#### **NSDS preparation**

- Mechanisms of involving sub-national levels in NSDS processes strongly depend on the prevailing ‘political culture’ of a country, mainly existing patterns of interaction between national and sub-national levels, but also between sectoral ministries. Therefore the processes of NSDS preparation often come in forms and utilising techniques that do not challenge established patterns of governance.
- Various shortcomings in information provision prior to and following mechanisms for NSDS preparation are common, e.g. sub-national authorities are involved in the process of NSDS preparation at a late stage, accompanying documents for NSDS preparation are usually extensive and complex and not adjusted to the information needs of sub-national authorities, national ministries responsible for NSDS preparation present only insufficient information about the concrete role of sub-national authorities in the process, and there is a lack of feedback to sub-national authorities about the use of their inputs following the preparation process.
- The forms (public hearings, workshops, submitting comments, round table etc.) and techniques (moderation techniques, visualisation techniques, delineation of ‘expertise’ and dealing with data etc.) utilised for involvement of sub-national authorities are usually not designed to target coordination of SD objectives across political-administrative levels and associated administrative practices.
- Although representatives of regions and local authorities (policy-makers and public administrators) are involved to a varying degree in the preparation of NSDSs (see above) their influence on the final NSDS document (including NSDS objectives) and its implementation mechanisms and provisions (such as responsibilities, laws and subsequent strategies, concrete actions, but also budgeting procedures, institutional arrangements, monitoring procedures, etc.) is limited.

### **National SD councils/commissions and inter-ministerial committees**

- National SD councils/commissions and inter-ministerial committees are important institutional bodies for NSDS implementation and cross-sectoral integration. They were specifically created to support the NSDS process and can act in a spectrum of functions, such as policy agenda setting, horizontal policy coordination and integration, conflict mediation, networking platform, monitoring and evaluation, facilitation of public engagement, forum for exchange of best practices etc.
- In most cases, the number of sub-national representatives in national SD councils/commission and inter-ministerial committees is small.
- National SD councils/commissions and inter-ministerial committees are not strong mechanisms for sub-national involvement in NSDS implementation (i.e. no direct influence of sub-national levels on concrete implementation measures). However, they created effects unintended by their original objectives, e.g. better information exchange between political levels, more informal cooperation with different national government representatives, spill-over effects on the regional level such as increase in awareness and political will, i.e. substantive learning (addressing cross-sectoral policy integration) and support for regional administrators to push SD.
- Although several stakeholder groups are represented in national SD councils/commission and inter-ministerial committees, these institutional bodies could not improve cooperation among the stakeholders on SD issues in general: Firstly, these institutions focus on a national policy documents (NSDS) and the national SD process. Thus, the main exchange and cooperation activities are between national representatives and the stakeholder groups, not among the stakeholder groups themselves. Secondly, they are one of many platforms of exchange for stakeholders on SD issues, as is the case, e.g. in Austria.

### **Institutionalised mechanisms for better coordination between national and sub-national levels:**

- These mechanisms (e.g. ‘Expert Conference of National and Regional SD Coordinators’ in Austria, ‘National-Regional Working Groups’ in Germany, ‘Technical Board on SD’ in Italy, ‘Sub-committee on Regional and Local SD’ in Finland) are generally important platforms for coordination among public administrators from the national and sub-national levels on various policy issues. As policy coordination is particularly important in federal states because of the extended responsibilities of sub-national levels, they are more likely to be established in federal states.
- The main difference to national SD councils/commissions and inter-ministerial committees is that these institutionalised mechanisms serve exclusively the function of coordination and exchange between public administrators from the national and sub-national levels. Moreover, the number of sub-national representatives in these institutional mechanisms for coordination is higher than in national SD councils/commissions and inter-ministerial committees.
- Although these institutional mechanisms are meant to coordinate policies, their main impact is on improved information exchange among the public administrators from the national and regional/local levels. Therefore, the regional public administrators could not specifically

influence the general development and implementation of NSDS objectives through the institutionalised mechanisms.

- However, the examined institutional mechanisms fostered several important developments in SD governance: (a) through regular meetings, personal contacts and informal exchange on SD issues among public administrators from the national and regional level could be improved; (b) moreover, such as is the case of Finland, an increase of horizontal information exchange and coordination among sub-national authorities and between sub-national authorities and other stakeholders has also occurred; (c) the cooperation in the institutionalised mechanisms led to the development of common projects, e.g. development of SD indicators for the national and regional level in Germany or the competition on implementing environmental plans prepared in Finland; (d) regular exchange among the public administrators from the national and sub-national levels created more awareness of regional and local perspectives on SD issues, i.e. of sub-national levels as ‘landing place of SD’; and (e) the long-standing institutional mechanism in Austria (Expert Conference of SD Coordinators) fostered the idea of developing the first common strategy of the national and regional level in Europe.
- Generally, institutional mechanisms could not achieve vertical integration in the NSDS processes: They have not created a strategic framework of responsibilities for implementing NSDS objectives across political levels.

#### **Links between NSDSs and sub-national SD activities**

- The study revealed several important features in the link between the NSDS processes and sub-national activities:
  - Regional SD strategies and similar programmes take NSDS documents into account, but are largely developed as bottom-up strategies reflecting regional circumstances. Due to the fact that coordination and cooperation mechanisms in most EU Member States have only limited impacts, the link between the NSDS processes and the regional SD strategies is weak.
  - In some EU Member States (e.g. Italy, Spain), the regions are more advanced in SD strategy development and implementation as compared to the national level. This is particularly the case when there are no NSDS implementation measures foreseen at the national level and the cooperation between the national and sub-national levels on SD issues is traditionally weak.
  - Sometimes, tensions exist between the national and regional levels regarding the implementation of SD objectives (e.g. in the UK).
  - SD strategy processes on the sub-national levels foster the cooperation between regional/local stakeholders and increase network-like governance structures.
  - Both regional and local authorities develop their own SD policy objectives. Our study shows that many sub-national authorities address energy policy and climate change issues and show considerable political commitment in their implementation efforts (e.g. Denmark, UK). This focus on energy and climate policy, however, is more a

result of the current importance of these topics rather than a result of the NSDS processes.

- Although LA 21 is referred to in many NSDSs, the national level lacks effective tools to steer these bottom-up initiatives and, therefore, their relevance in NSDS processes and for NSDS implementation is rather limited. In most countries, the major role of LA 21 lies in fostering cooperation among different stakeholder groups and between local and regional public administrators (e.g. Germany, Italy).
- Local Agenda 21 processes still exist in many countries, but their importance for SD policy-making on the local level is decreasing. There are two reasons for this development that at first glance seem contradictory but exist in parallel: As current challenges require more comprehensive approaches, more and more local authorities establish programmes and processes which reflect the integrated character of SD that are not referred to as LA 21. On the other hand, local authorities increasingly address specific environmental issues with clear objectives and targets, e.g. climate and energy policy. Therefore, the rather ‘soft focus’ of LA 21 on citizen participation seems to be replaced by efforts for policy integration and targeted sectoral approaches.

### Policy recommendations

Mechanisms for involving sub-national levels in NSDS preparation and implementation in the EU Member States are limited and depend to a large part on existing patterns of interaction between national and sub-national levels. Therefore, it is ***necessary to establish a stronger interaction and cooperation between national and sub-national levels on governance issues in general and SD policy in particular.*** The importance of sub-national levels in NSDS processes mainly lies in their role and responsibility in implementing NSDS objectives. Our results show that public administrators from both, the national and sub-national levels would welcome a stronger cooperation between the different political-administrative levels on SD issues and the NSDS process. In this context, we would like to present several suggestions:

- In order to ***increase the meaningful contribution of sub-national levels in NSDS preparation,*** at the national level it is necessary to (a) involve regional and local authorities at an earlier stage in NSDS preparation (i.e. before the main objectives are predefined); (b) design mechanisms and procedures for the process of NSDS preparation that involve regional and local authorities and ensure coordination of SD policy objectives across political-administrative levels; (c) distribute information to sub-national representatives that is suitable for their information needs; and (d) provide clear feedback to the sub-national levels on their contribution during the preparatory process to increase trust and willingness to support the NSDS process at the sub-national levels.

- The results of this report show that the particular and complex nature of SD policy-making and NSDS processes (i.e. integration of various policy fields and political-administrative systems, inclusion of stakeholders, etc), ***require formal and informal mechanisms of cooperation and exchange between national and sub-national authorities***: On the one hand, formal mechanisms (e.g. national SD councils or commission, inter-ministerial committees) have an official character and a clear mandate for sub-national involvement in NSDS processes. On the other hand, informal mechanisms are increasingly important as they support network-like governance structures and informal exchange among national and sub-national actors (policy-makers and administrators) and possibly also non-public stakeholders. We suggest that mechanisms that create opportunities for repeated and, at least, partly informal interaction of a relatively stable group of persons (be it at the political level, administrative level or combined, and with or without the inclusion of non-public stakeholder representatives) foster the development of groups with shared values which can enable effective policy integration.
- ***Sub-national representatives (either policy-makers or public administrators) should increasingly be involved in formal institutional mechanisms for exchange and cooperation in NSDS processes***: Although in practice these mechanisms (i.e. national SD councils, inter-ministerial committees and institutionalised bodies for coordination between political-administrative levels) only rarely contribute directly to vertical policy integration, they serve other important functions related to the NSDS process: better information exchange between political levels, more informal cooperation with different national government representatives, spill-over effects on the regional level such as increase in awareness and political will, i.e. substantive learning (addressing cross-sectoral policy integration) and support for regional administrators to push SD. ***Therefore, in the long-term, these mechanisms have a positive impact on SD governance.***
- However, in order to ***guarantee a meaningful involvement of sub-national authorities in these institutionalised mechanisms***, it is necessary to establish certain provisions: (a) sub-national levels must be a major stakeholder and/or partner in these institutions and not only one stakeholder amongst many others; (b) the role of sub-national levels must be clearly defined and communicated in order to enable full commitment of regional and local authorities and avoid wrong expectations; (c) enough space and time must be provided for the exchange between national and sub-national authorities in important NSDS issues, particularly on NSDS implementation which concerns regions and local authorities the most; (d) these mechanisms need broadly accepted structures, must evolve over time, and enable formal and informal exchange; and (e) the involvement of sub-national authorities should be guaranteed within their resource capacities (e.g. budget, personnel, time).
- ***A better link between NSDS processes and sub-national SD activities should be established in the EU Member States***: Firstly, it is important for NSDS processes to utilise bottom-up initiatives at the sub-national level that reflect regional circumstances and challenges and involve regional stakeholders. Secondly, experiences on the sub-national level with addressing SD issues ‘on the ground’ could provide meaningful insights for NSDS

implementation. Finally, the objectives of SD strategies, programmes and initiatives on all political levels should be coordinated in order to achieve best results in SD policy-making.

- ***Better integration of Local Agenda 21 initiatives and NSDS processes is preferable:*** LA 21 initiatives can make an important contribution to NSDS implementation (increase cooperation between stakeholders, foster "ownership" of NSDS at the local level, increase learning and capacity-building for SD in general, etc.). It is, therefore, advisable for the national governments to develop effective tools to steer LA 21 initiatives in the context of the entire NSDS process. Moreover, to address the need for more comprehensive approaches at the local level, other programmes and processes which reflect the integrated character of SD and which are not referred to as LA 21 do exist (Brundtland towns, Healthy Cities, sustainable cities, sustainable community initiatives etc.). These also offer important potential contributions to the NSDS.
- One of the most significant challenges of SD governance (and therefore of NSDS preparation and implementation) is to ***establish mechanisms for effective cross-sectoral (horizontal) policy integration***, both at the national and sub-national levels. Cross-sectoral policy integration goes beyond mere integration of environmental concerns into other policy sectors (i.e. 'environmental policy integration'). In order to develop inter-linkages between the various policy sectors in a strategic manner and at every political-administrative level, the necessary prerequisites are high-level political commitment for SD as well as clear and strong institutional responsibilities for SD. We would suggest that the responsibility for SD be placed at a central and strategic position in the political-administrative hierarchy, e.g. at the Prime Minister's Office (at the national level) and the department of regional first ministers or mayors (at the sub-national levels).