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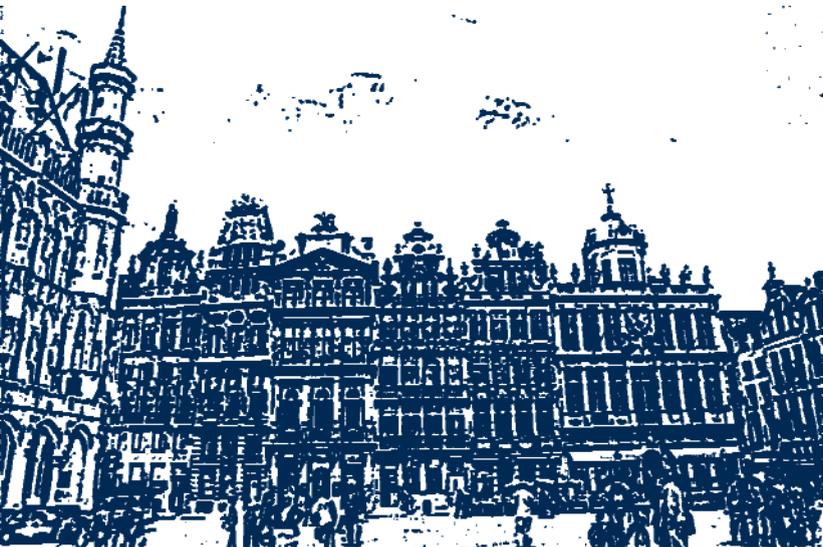
Sustaining Sustainability

a benchmark study on national strategies towards
sustainable development and the impact of councils
in nine EU member states



EEAC
the network of
European Environment and
Sustainable Development
Advisory Councils

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1 Belgium

PROCESS, PROCESS, PROCESS: EARLY COMMITMENT TO SD REFLECTED IN THE RELATED SD LAW; SOPHISTICATED INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR SD(S) MIRRORS THE COMPLICATED ARCHITECTURE OF THE COUNTRY

- Establishment of a SD council right after Rio; influence remained very limited; decisive change in 1997 with endorsement of a law for SD, which reinforced the legal basis for the now “Federal Council for SD”, the development of a SDS every four years, and the institutional framework for preparation, implementation and review of the SDS. The first SDS was adopted in 2000; the run up to the revision in 2004 had some shortcomings (no real revision).
- Complicated system as a federal country with difficult distribution of competences (federal level, 3 regions plus 3 communities), which overall leads to an emphasis on designing procedures over achieving agreements on substance.
- Working towards a national strategy (federal and regional combined) is aimed at; so far the regions have not prioritised that, inter alia because of elections. The federal level so far has therefore taken the lead.
- Europe in general plays a strong role in Belgian policies, and the EU SDS was taken as a basis for the Belgian SDS 2004. The main reason here is that anything (besides matters where the country considers itself as fore-runner, mainly social policies) coming as an external requirement or framework is easier to handle in the politically complicated system.
- Strong negotiation culture and social-economic stakeholders, institutionalised as economic and employment councils, existing on the federal and regional level. In this situation it took the federal SD council around 10 years to find its place and to become accepted as the multistakeholder forum for SD, with equal partners in the council (socio-economic partners and NGOs).
- Stakeholder consultation is taken seriously, but also criticised.

NB: This chapter refers only to policies, actions and the SD strategy at **federal level**, unless otherwise specified.

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ABBREVIATIONS

<i>PM</i>	<i>Prime Minister (the position of Head of Government is called Prime Minister, in Flemish/French: "Eerste Minister/ Premier Ministre").</i>
<i>MinE</i>	<i>In Belgium there is a difference between the Minister and his/her cabinet and the Ministries, which are called "Federal Public Service". Since July 2004 there is a State Secretary for Sustainable Development and Social Economy, under the Minister for Budget and Public Enterprise, and a Ministry for Public Health, Security of the Foodchain and Environment (in Dutch "Federale Overheidsdienst voor volksgezondheid, veiligheid van de voedselketen en leefmilieu", the abbreviation FOD VVL is not (yet) currently used; in French "Services publics fédéraux Santé publique, Sécurité de la Chaîne alimentaire et Environnement", SPF SSE). There is also a "Programmatic Public Service for SD" ("Programmatorische Overheidsdienst Duurzame Ontwikkeling", POD DO; Service public fédéral de programmation développement durable), a cross-cutting unit meant to support other Ministries in SD activities, which will be the unit for the new State Secretary for SD.</i>

A Actors and Process

In Belgium the distinction is made between “strategy” and “plan”, with the former referring to the entire approach of a policy cycle with an evaluation of existing policies in the beginning, developing the strategy, providing progress reports, reviews and new scenarios etc. The programmatic (government) document laying out the goals, objectives, policy priorities, measures and action for SD is called *SD Plan*. Internationally though usually this document is called “SD strategy”. For enabling comparison this term is also used in the Belgian chapter, whereas the overall policy cycle is called “SD process”.

1 GOVERNMENT: SDS PROCESS, GOVERNMENT COORDINATION AND REVIEW

1.1 SD STRATEGIES’ DEVELOPMENT

1991-92	Advisory Council on Climate, Environment and Development was established to prepare the Rio conference.
1993	National SD Council was established.
1997	Act on the co-ordination of Federal Sustainable Development Policy (amended 2001): sets out to establish a Federal SDS (SD “Plan”) every four years, accompanied by a Federal Report on SD every two years, and creates the institutional framework for the preparation, implementation and review of the Federal SDS (the National SD council is renamed “Federal SD Council”, FRDO-CFDD, because of a state reform which had been taken place by then).
June 1999	Task Force SD issues the first Federal Report for SD “On the way to SD?”
<i>July 1999</i>	<i>New government</i>
from Sept.99	Preparation of the Federal SDS: this task was allocated to the Interdepartmental Commission for SD (ICDO), but was after all in large part also carried out by the Task Force SD.
02-03/2000	Two months of public consultation, including advice of the FRDO-CFDD.
July 2000	Federal government approves the Federal SDS (four-year term 2000 - 2004).
from 2003	ICDO starts working on a draft for a new Federal SDS.
March 2003	Task Force SD issues the second Federal Report for SD “One step to sustainable development?”
<i>June 2003</i>	<i>Federal Elections</i>
<i>July 2003</i>	<i>Coalition agreement</i>
from Sept.03	A new ICDO reviews the first draft SDS and develops a new one, that is better streamlined with the coalition agreement. Partly initiated by a new Minister for Environment and SD.
02-05/04	Three months public consultation on the ‘pre-draft’ Federal SD Strategy 2004 - 2008, incl. advice of the FRDO-CFDD.

July 2004 *Reorganization of the federal government:* There is now a State Secretary for Sustainable Development and Social Economy, deputy to the Minister for the Budget and Public Enterprise. As the majority hasn't change, the government declaration/program remains in place.

Assessment:

Belgium took early action after Rio. Initially this was on a largely symbolic basis¹, but the Act on SD from 1997² is a very strong commitment for SD policies in general and a SD strategy in particular, including the institutional framework.

The first SDS 2000-2004 is assessed ambiguously: on one side it is valued as starting with comprehensive and solid based expert thinking with not too much political interference, which could serve as a framework, on the other hand it is criticised for being too much a 'shopping list' comprising much too many actions (around 600). Also, though the SDS was approved by the Council of Ministers (the cabinet), it was not taken seriously by Ministers not engaged in the environment/development agenda.³ This situation most likely led to a bit of unstructured review in 2003, or rather - no review was done:⁴

- the ICDO started with a new draft before the evaluation report was issued,
- a new government was not fond of this draft, nor with details of the institutional setting: a transformed ICDO redrafted a version, which also aimed at better adjusting with the then endorsed coalition agreement.

Another variable in this context was that the remit of the former Ministry for Environment was reframed to also include sustainable development, and strengthening the own profile a new plan was preferred over working with the "old" one.

A major issue in this context also is the relation of a government/coalition agreement and a SDS: For serious implementation a SDS would need budget lines, but if it had such, it would because of its overarching nature become a kind of 'master plan', conflicting with a government program/agreement. In 2000 there was a particular political situation with a socialist-liberal-green government, i.e. the first time since 1974 without Christian-Democrats, and the first time a government with the Green party. This situation was apparently beneficial for a SDS, and the question of the link to a coalition agreement was not

1 *The political thinking on SD was partly characterised by the Socialist Party, which envisioned the concept as a way of socialist planning. Nevertheless, the SD Council was established by a coalition-government led by a Christian-Democrat Prime Minister. Also the SD Act in 1997 was endorsed by a Christian-Democrat led government, with a Minister for Environment from the socialist party.*

2 *Belgian Act of 5 May 1997 on the co-ordination of Federal Sustainable Development Policy as amended by the Act of 30 December 2001; in the following "SD Act" (http://www.plan.be/websites/ferado/pdf/act97_e.pdf).*

3 *It is also stated that the Liberal Party was not fond of "plans", and/or had difficulties in the beginning to handle a multi-sectoral integrating concept such as SD. It seemed easier to continue dealing with the social-economic relation (SD was perceived as environment policy).*

4 *A revision of the full phase of the first SDS (2000 - 2004) is now planned for summer 2005.*

vital. Nevertheless, when it came to implementation, one major deficit of the SDS became apparent: it did not pave the way for allocating budget and staffing for its measures. One possible reason was the start of monetary union in 1999, which led to significant spending cuts in Belgium. It is also stated that in Belgium there is no tradition of cross-sectoral approaches, i.e. quite some learning still has to take place. The new 'pre-draft' SDS is now criticised for lacking measures, and it is interpreted that the government 'learned' from the previous SDS, which had measures, that lack of implementation is a source of criticism. The dilemma overall is seen in the way that the more a SDS is broken down to objectives and measures, with budget implications, the more it is a sign that SD is taken seriously, but the more it resembles a government declaration. This is then politically more difficult, because agreements are more difficult, with the perceptions and prejudices that accompany the concept of SD (e.g. for some it is "a concept of the Greens"). If not doing so, a SDS typically faces implementation problems (as the first phase revealed). Because of the situation in 2003 a new SDS was prepared, mainly without reviewing or considering the previous one of 2000 - 2004. An official reason also was the EU SDS, which it was felt needed to be considered then (cf. ch. C.1). Eventually re-considering the 'policy-/planning - cycle' for the SDS, and finding a solution for the long-term perspective, might be challenges for the future (cf. ch. A.1.3.2).

1.2 LEAD RESPONSIBILITY AND HORIZONTAL COORDINATION MECHANISMS

Ministers have a strongly developed "cabinet system", i.e. a clear division of the political and the administrative sphere. The Ministers have a cabinet with civil servants and other experts for the policy work⁵. The "Ministries" in contrast consider themselves as 'independent' administration (and are nowadays called Federal Public Services, "Federale Overheidsdiensten, FODs; Services publics fédéraux, SPF"), responsible for provision of information and executive functions.⁶ They may have different portfolios than the Minister. Since the 1990s there have been attempts to reform the public administration, giving the "public services" a stronger role in policy preparation, reducing the size of the cabinets (to nowadays around 30 staff members) and providing more coherence between Ministers' portfolios and the Public Service, with a significant step since 2000 ("Copernicus reform"⁷). Nevertheless it is still the cabinets that have more skills in coordination between Ministries, dealing with prioritization and negotiations between Ministries. This was one reason for the new government in 2003 to change the composition of the Interdepartmental Committee for SD (ICDO, cf. below): it should have representatives from the cabinets, and the civil servants from the Public Service should serve as experts. The former composition with civil servants from the Public Service also saw a lack of coordination with the cabinets, and sometimes the Public Service is also not so open to new approaches.

⁵ which used to be the largest in Europe with a size of up to 50-100.

⁶ Belgium is also a country with a very high number of employees in the public administration (Woyke, 2003, p.401), at least on the administrative level, i.e. without the scientific staff.

⁷ Woyke, 2003, p.401.

One challenging management aspect is that the cabinets typically consist of young and politically enthusiastic staff, whereas the public service tends to be one generation older, which is not advantageous for good cooperation. The institutional framework for the SDS, as laid down in the SD-Act of 1997, looks as follows:

- Interdepartmental Commission for SD (ICDO): responsible for drafting the SDS and implementation, and producing annual progress reports. It used to be comprised of representatives of regional governments (as observers), of civil servants from federal Ministries (here: administrations) concerned, chaired by a representative of the Ministry for Economic Affairs (energy department), and led by the Deputy Manager of the Federal Planning Bureau; with the changed composition since 2003 the chair was first a cabinet representative of the Minister for Environment and SD and after the reshuffle of the government in July 2004 the Director of the cabinet of the State Secretary of SD;
- Task Force Sustainable Development (TFSD): responsible for the biennial evaluation reports; it is a group established in the Federal Planning Bureau⁸;
- Federal SD Council (FRDO-CFDD): by law obliged to advise the government on all measures concerning federal policies for SD, in particular for the implementation of Belgium's international commitments (Art. 11 §1 SD-Act).

In addition to the three key institutions two more mechanisms were installed recently:

- in 2002 a horizontal unit POD-DO (Programmatic Public Service Sustainable Development)⁹ for capacity-building, overlooking implementation in Ministries and supporting ICDO in coordination, as well as
- "SD cells" within Ministries in 2004.

Both of these operate in the 'administrative' part of the Ministries (as opposed to the political part, the cabinets, which are now part of ICDO). The ICDO is meant to have the coordinating role, whereas the POD DO supports the Ministries (as a unit outside the Ministries), and the "SD cells" are meant to assess the effect of important decisions on SD and to promote and overlook the implementation of the actions of the Federal SD Plan from within the Ministries, inter alia by advancing the 'greening' of the Public Service itself (e.g. procurement).

The ICDO as key coordination body meets on a regular basis, which works as an "inter-cabinet": a formation of staff of several cabinets, upon whose agreements the Council of Ministers decides only formally.¹⁰ Since the ICDO includes also representatives from Ministers' cabinets (Minister's staff) the

8 "Bureau du Plan": a government agency for forecasts on the economic situation and related policy fields (e.g. energy, demography, social policy measures, SD, environment).

9 Together with turning the Ministries in "Federal Public Services" Belgium has created an interesting matrix structure with three permanent cross-sectoral units for personnel, finance and budget, and temporary "Programmatic Public Services" when appropriate, like the one for SD.

10 so-called "point A" on the agenda of a Ministers' meeting ("point B", if no agreement was reached in the inter-cabinet group).

results of its work are automatically dealt with by the Council of Ministers. On the government side there are other inter-cabinets as coordination mechanism, chaired by a cabinet member of the respective Minister. The voice of the representative of the PM office in these groups is particularly strong, which might help in linking SD to this level.

A lead responsibility of the PM office would be appreciated¹¹, but is not seen as highly important:

- because of the broad coordination mechanisms, which is a typical approach for the country, or because
- political realities are not questioned: In the government of the first plan period (1999/2000) the Green Party was represented for the first time and wanted the SDS responsibility under “their” State Secretary of SD and Energy. The new government of 2003 did not reconsider this: the Flemish Socialist Party, who took over the Greens’ “heritage” in their profile, wanted to maintain the responsibility for SDS. Above this, the PM was not interested.

The government reorganization in 2004 goes somewhat in this direction: With the creation of a new post of a State Secretary for Sustainable Development and Social Economy, deputy to the Minister for the Budget and Public Enterprise, the lead responsibility has been given to a powerful Ministry.¹² It remains to be seen though whether the fact that responsibility is now on the State Secretary level “only” has a negative impact, and whether the required commitment for SD exists.¹³ It is assessed as positive that there is now (again) a difference between the competence for environment and SD, and that the State Secretary is expected to have more time to spend on SD.

Assessment:

The sophisticated coordination mechanisms, which will be further increased with a move from a federal strategy to a national one, i.e. with the regions more strongly involved, has good potentials, but also shortcomings and pitfalls, which became apparent during the first revision phase, i.e. the preparation of the second SDS (cf. next ch. A.1.3).

The lead responsibility with the Minister for Environment and SD was in some cases considered as negative, but seems to have no severe shortcomings (probably because there is no strong environmental bias because of the limited federal competence), though creating ownership in other Ministries remains a problem (the new situation with cabinet members in the ICDO might enhance that), and overall leadership and steering seems a bit weak. The now

¹¹ *But some also refuse this, because of the concern that a PM, more than the Ministers, has to deal with day-to-day tasks, and the long-term perspective would be focused even less.*

¹² *This post existed similarly under the previous government (1999 - 2003): as State Secretary for Energy and SD, under the Minister for Mobility (NB: In both cases it is party politics that lead to a certain combination of Minister and State Secretary for SD. In the recent case this State Secretary e.g. comes from a new party ‘Spirit’, which forms a group with the Flemish Socialist party, which has one Vice-Prime Minister in the federal cabinet, - the Minister for Budget).*

¹³ *Cf. e.g. The Netherlands, where giving the responsibility for the environment portfolio to the State Secretary level is perceived as a weakening. The difference in Belgium though is that the creation of a State Secretary for SD (which was previously shortly with the Minister for Environment) is rather an addition than a leveling down.*

renewed position of a State Secretary for SD (and social economy) goes in the direction of 'levelling up' SD and is expected to have positive impacts.

1.3 MONITORING, REGULAR REVIEWING AND LONG-TERM PERSPECTIVE

In the system described above there are clear review terms and mechanisms in place since 1997: review every four years, accompanied by a biennial evaluation report. Since the coalition agreement of 2003, the federal cabinet has planned to organise a yearly assessment of the progress of SD-policies based, among others, on an opinion of the SD council.¹⁴ The ICDO, respectively the different Ministries represented in it, also produce annual progress reports, which contain some elements of evaluation.

The first review processes though had some shortcomings:

- the mid-term evaluation report (2nd report) was issued too late and only covered the period 1998-2001 (and not 2002),
- ICDO had already started to draft a new strategy, which did not refer to the previous one.

The latter might have been mainly politically driven (cf. above, new government agreement) From the administrative side it is stated that it was strongly aimed at not "endangering" the SD-Act, with its provision for a SDS every four years: Calculating that with two years preparation time, there was a need to start early 2003. An official reason also was the EU SDS then in place, which ought to be considered (cf. ch. C.1).

The former seems to reveal a bit of an architectural deficiency with practical consequences:

- a preparing an evaluation report needs too much time for it to be fully current and ready in time; reasons for this are that the task also comprises preparing a prospect, which exceeds ex-post evaluation only, and that a plan with 600 actions is difficult to evaluate; also the capacity of the TFSD was used for other tasks (including to draft the first SDS);
- b the division of tasks has pitfalls, because each party depends on the delivery of others, i.e. the process would have to be managed and steered very well, which is difficult with all the interdependencies (and becomes even worse if there is e.g. competition between the different bodies or persons in charge), and not given without a powerful steering lead. In the situation of 2002 the Ministries did not deliver their results in time, and the division of tasks between ICDO and POD DO was not clarified.

Another reason for the start of the new SDS (too) early is that supposedly in Belgium it takes two years to prepare a SDS, which is rather long compared to other countries; even when taking into account that it does take more time if all Ministries are involved during the preparation via the ICDO (and not one is in charge alone), and that all texts have to be translated in three languages, two years seems very long.¹⁵ The government stated that imple-

¹⁴ The SD council advises linking this to the Spring Summit and insists on starting with this in 2005.

¹⁵ In the 2003 evaluation report it was still stated that it takes roughly one year (FPB, 2003, Figure 1.5, p.22; as did Gouzee, 2002, p. 7).

mentation of the first SDS (2000 - 2004) would continue, and announced a systematic review for the summer 2005 only (while the 2nd SDS enters into force in December 2004).

It has apparently also been the subject of dispute that the Task Force SD, who for practical reasons co-drafted the first SDS, also prepared the evaluation report (for which they are responsible). This argument can be followed in principle, but in practice it should not make so much difference, given the relative independence of the Federal Planning Bureau from the government departments.

Altogether:

- the monitoring system seems to be a bit tight in its sequence, particularly because both the evaluation reports and preparing a strategy takes longer than originally estimated; 2004 faces the peculiar situation that a 'pre-draft' SDS is under consultation, whereas the third evaluation/progress report is missing;
- the second evaluation report 2003 only partly (10 themes), hence not systematically, scrutinizes and measures progress of the first SDS (around 50 out of 200 pages), but draws again the wider picture (90 pages) and proposes principles and approaches (70 pages). This is partly due to the SD Act, which requires the review to also develop scenarios, and it is the Task Force's self-image to "explaining the framework for SD" and to "seek to constitute the basis for the next SDS" (neither of which is evaluating the previous one).

Both might be useful to reconsider.

1.3.1 Indicators, targets and timetables

The first SDS 2000 - 2004 contains strategic, and partly quantitative, objectives¹⁶, which are partly international commitments or EU objectives (e.g. one on reducing energy consumption by 2010, which later turned out to be in line with the burden sharing agreements), partly national ones (e.g. a market share of organic products of 4% until 2003). That they are usually not mentioned might say something about their relevance. Quite surprisingly the first evaluation report does not refer to these objectives.

Indicators are not yet agreed upon, and, if used, so far taken from e.g. OECD publications.¹⁷

The 'pre-draft' SDS 2004 - 2008 has some qualitative objectives, and partly quantitative ones. The targets of the EU SDS proposal of the European Commission¹⁸ were considered from the view of what is feasible for Belgium (e.g. the target for renewables is not feasible, because Belgium starts at a much lower point), which basically relates to what the government is already doing. ICDO did not propose quantitative targets itself, but asked the participating Ministries to do so, with the aim of creating ownership.

Indicators have been aimed at over the years, but are still called "work in progress".

¹⁶ E.g. p. 22/23, 69/70, 77/78, 85/86 (*Secretary of State for Energy and Sustainable Development, 2000*).

¹⁷ E.g. *Secretary of State for Energy and Sustainable Development, 2000, p.23*.

¹⁸ COM (2001) 264.

There is some continuity between the first and the second SDS regarding the themes covered, but basically the priority fields of the EU SDS were taken up (cf. ch. B)

1.3.2 Review terms, long-term perspective and role of the Parliament

In general the country seems relatively “politicised”: The leaders of the coalition parties in fact determine the Ministers, and it is not unusual that staff in public administration are recruited on the basis of membership of a political party. They also have a strong influence on the government program, and have an indirect influence on the policies of “their” Ministers by holding regular meetings to discuss the Ministers’ cabinet proposals.¹⁹ In such a situation it is almost unimaginable for most actors that a SD strategy could be longer lasting than one government term: As it is comprehensive, the relation to a coalition/government agreement is by the nature of the case very close. The SDS is prepared by civil servants, consulted with experts and the wider public and approved by the federal government. In the case of 2003 a new government came in, draw up a coalition agreement, and was not very fond of the first draft for a new SDS. In consequence a new draft was prepared by a new ICDO (made up of cabinet staff, cf. A.1.2) and adapted to the coalition agreement, in order to avoid conflicts during the implementation phase.²⁰ Some measures of the coalition agreement were incorporated in the SDS, which at the same time also contains new measures.

The coalition agreement typically has the support of the Parliament (there is no tradition for minority governments), whereas the SDS is neither officially presented to Parliament nor approved by it. The first SDS though recommends that Parliament should discuss long-term issues once a year, but this is not followed on a regular basis. Parliamentary standing committees have organised around four meetings since 1998, but as they have been always different committees, there has been no continuity of the discussion, and the concept and outcome was apparently not clear. This situation also reveals the problems of Parliaments with SD, given their similar sectoral organisation.

Long-term objectives are apparently not so much seen as a way to enhance the long-term perspective, as they might remain not grounded, if no measures are linked to them (and with measures it gets ‘too’ close to government agreements, cf. above).

A compromise for the future could be a division into a long-term strategy (with ‘less’ political combating) combined with a more short-term action plan (which would then be close to a coalition agreement).

¹⁹ Woyke, 2003, p.397, 400.

²⁰ *The timing of the first SDS 1999/2000 was apparently more congruent in this respect: The evaluation report (on existing policies) was in place when the new government came in (with a State Secretary for SD), which then developed the draft SDS according to the SD Act.*

1.3.3 Approach for a SD strategy

Belgium's SD approach is largely perceived as a learning process. In terms of objectives, targets, timetables and flexibility the picture remains a bit fuzzy: There are voluminous reports and strategies, and it is difficult to identify an architecture from broad to fine, and to understand the difference between 'actions' and 'means of implementation' in the first SDS. Regarding priority fields the second pre-draft strategy appears clearer, though objectives are somehow hidden in the actions and hence harder to find.

Quantitative targets seem to be difficult to agree upon, which is probably why they remain a bit arbitrary. The same applies to indicators, which are not yet in place. Some people say that EU priorities and objectives are therefore easier to handle for Belgium: the national, even only federal, agreement procedures are massive and eventually lead nowhere. In general it is said that objectives are fairly easy to agree upon, but battles start when it comes to measures (cf. ch. A.1.1 implementation problems of the first SDS).

The government, or rather the country (i.e. including self-criticism of other actors), is partly criticised for its emphasis on procedures, which decreases capacity for substance and implementation.

1.4 VERTICAL COORDINATION: LINK TO THE REGIONAL AND LOCAL LEVEL

The Belgian federal system was established with a new constitution in 1970, which was a result of strong tensions between the ethnic groups (the two main regional/ethnic ones Flemings and Walloons, and the three language communities Flemish, French and German) since the 1960s.²¹ Ongoing conflicts about competences of the regions led to three more constitutional reforms in 1980, 1988-89 and 1993-94, the two latter allocated competence for inter alia environment, water, spatial and urban planning, housing, agriculture and rural development, and partly for energy, transport, regional economic and labour policies and development aid.²² Also in 2001 there was a reform via a Special Law that foresaw transfer of some competences and institutional reforms (e.g. regionalisation of development cooperation). The regions as well as the communities are also competent to conclude international treaties in the fields of their competences. A new reform is in sight, with a commission coming in place and different aspirations of the regions.

The federal government is responsible for national matters as a whole, i.e. defence, finance and currency, justice/legal system, foreign affairs²³. There is also still competence for development cooperation, as well as for the coordination of the Belgian international environmental policy and partly for social and economic policies, which lays the basis for the federal SDS.

²¹ *The traditional conflict lines in the Belgian society before where catholic - liberal, and socialist - capitalist (the latter strong because of early industrialization, dividing society particularly in the coal and steel regions of Wallonia). With having resolved these conflict lines in the 1960s the underlying tensions between the language groups became more relevant again, and resulted in the division of e.g. political parties in a Flemish and a Walloon segment, and finally in the federal system (Woyke, 2003, p.408).*

²² *Woyke, 2003, p.389/390.*

²³ *somehow shared with the regions and communities: the latter e.g. have competence for research and international relations connected with that.*

As opposed to e.g. the federal system of Germany there is no federal “frame-work” competence (and no difference in competence for law making and implementing), i.e. no higher hierarchy of the Belgian federal level, but so-called “coordination agreements” are pragmatic tools for dealing with the complicated situation.²⁴

In administrative terms Belgium is divided in 10 provinces, though these have significantly lost relevance since the two last constitutional reforms. Discussion on competences in a way never seems to end, which has been reflected in SD policies, too:

After starting up as a *national* council for SD, though without a commitment of the government to prepare a SDS, it was re-named to “federal” council, as a consequence of a state reform in which it was decided to call institutions working on federal level accordingly. The provisions for a SDS in the SD-Act of 1997 hence also refer to a “federal” SDS. Among the regions Flanders in 2004 started to work on its own SD strategy.²⁵ The regional governments have been represented in the federal ICDO, but nevertheless the federal and regional activities have so far been relatively separated, one reason being the different competences of the federal and regional level, and hence a SD strategy focuses by the nature of the case on different matters. Another reason is most likely that the relation between the two levels is sensitive, and hence at least originally the regions did not want to recognise a federal ‘frame’. There are recent fresh attempts towards a national SD strategy with a new federal-regional commission installed on an informal basis looking into this. Elections in the regions, and the communities with new governments have slowed down the agenda though, and the fate of the initiative is currently uncertain. The federal and regional councils are to some extent already involved in this attempt towards a national SDS, but not in all cases officially. The recent proposal of the SD council to create an inter-ministerial conference for SD (i.e. comprised of the federal and regional level) is apparently taken up by the government.²⁶

There is no connection between the local and the federal level regarding SD, but some between the regional and local level²⁷. The function of the local communities is supposedly the subject of permanent arguments between different political levels. Their formal independence is restricted by financial dependence: they receive 90% of their budget from a central fund by a certain ratio, which itself is repeatedly argued about politically.²⁸

LA 21 processes seem not to have played an important role in Belgium but there are some initiatives in Flanders and Brussels (altogether less than 12). Besides that the majority of the Flemish municipalities as well as some Walloon ones have special programs on social development, environment and/or devel-

²⁴ This also applies for the relation to the European level, cf. ch. C.1

²⁵ It installed an inter-departmental Working Group in March 2004. The Flemish Environment Council *Mina-raad* in January 2004 advised on the SDS, urging the government to take SD as a political principle in their program. No information is available about Wallonia and the Brussels region.

²⁶ There is already such an inter-ministerial conference for environment policy.

²⁷ In Flanders e.g. there are contracts between the regional and local level for measures on environmental integration.

²⁸ Woyke, 2003, p.411.

oping co-operation, which could be seen as a kind of (minor) LA21. Overall the country seems to be captivated, almost surrendered, with their architectural, procedural and competence-related matters. In such a situation the past approach was probably sensible: to first prepare strategies separately on the federal and regional level, in order that both sides are able to develop their own thinking, priorities and measures, - eventually also realising that much does not work without mutual support of the two levels. Only the future will tell about the fate of the new national initiative.

2 NON-GOVERNMENTAL ACTORS

The political culture of Belgium has been characterised by the tensions between the language communities and regions since the 1960s (cf. ch. A.1.4 and footnote 21), resulting in conflict solving by combination of negotiation and competition between the Flemish and Walloon regions, segments of parties and interest-groups.²⁹ It is stated that the Belgian culture is a combating one, which leads to fewer results but is possibly “less hypocritical” than e.g. the anglo-saxon culture with open debates, sharing thoughts, which creates space so that nobody feels a loser in the end.

Because of the early industrialization the Belgian trade unions are among the oldest and strongest in Europe, with 75% of the work force organised. The latter nowadays is also due to advantages of trade union members regarding social benefits. The employers’ federations are well organised, and particularly the one of industry has strong political influence.³⁰ Negotiations between social partners have been institutionalised since the early 1950s in an Economic and a Social Council (CCE and CNT)³¹, which perform this particular task jointly and has divided tasks for other questions (macro-economic, anything related to working conditions etc.). The collective agreements between the social partners have legal binding authority, which explains to some degree the so-called privileged relation between the social partners and why they are relatively strongly attached to their specific forms of co-operation in the Economic and in the Social Council.

Against the background of an in general large culture for stakeholder consultation environment and development NGOs have increasingly evolved, and have played an important role in the preparation of the Rio conferences. They hence have become increasingly nationally involved and members of the SD council.

The new SD paradigm implicates a larger stakeholder process, which has created adaptation problems for the social partners, who now also have to deal with new interlocutors (NGOs).

Business particularly criticises the complicated split of competence between the federal and regional level, whereas they have to see the global dimension. Being forced to be part of several cooperation processes leads to lost time and inefficiency, and adds to the integration challenge of SD.

²⁹ Woyke, 2003, p.409.

³⁰ Woyke, 2003, p.407.

³¹ *Conseil Central de l' Economie (CCE), Conseil National du Travail (CNT)*. In contrast the Belgian regions and the Netherlands have this combined in one Social-Economic Council SER. The political culture though differs with consensus-orientation in the Netherlands, and more competition and negotiations in Belgium.

2.1 CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY (CSR)

Several initiatives to promote CSR exist and imply different accents. There are e.g. laws on the social label, on the additional pension schemes, on a “Recycle Fund”, on the transparency for stock market companies. The Walloon and Flemish region also initiated activities about information and management instruments promoting CSR.

A number of large Belgian companies are organised in “Business and Society Belgium”, member of the European umbrella “CSR Europe”. This organization started in Belgium in 1998 with another name, with the sole aim to act against social exclusion. The member companies took initiatives to integrate socially weaker groups into the labour market. In 2000 the organization enlarged its activities to CSR, integrating the three SD dimensions. As SMEs have less means to apply CSR tools, governments and the employer organizations initiated programs adapted to their size.

There are also initiatives to raise companies’ awareness of their responsibility towards developing countries (e.g. Kauri, Corporate Funding Program), but so far these have not been coordinated. The federal government intends to start a working group within the ICDO, which is asked to elaborate a framework for CSR by the end of 2005.

2.2 STAKEHOLDER CONSULTATION

There have been attempts, both bottom-up and top-down, to extend the traditionally strong influence of social partners to (organised) civil society, and broader stakeholder consultation in planning processes has become common in Belgium since the 1980s. The regions also have a tradition for consultation, for example on environment plans.

For the first SDS e.g. the ICDO/TFSD performed a wide consultation through websites conferences and local authorities, with advertisement on TV, in newspapers, via posters e.g. in libraries. Also subsidies to NGOs were given. There were 1.800 responses with around 16.000 contributions³², which were dealt with in a very transparent way: they led to 30% changes of the proposed text, which were published on the internet in track-change mode.

Nevertheless, it is stated that the first SDS was not supported by civil society, and the consultation was not successful because the SDS lacked priorities in themes and actions, as well as budget provisions for the implementation.³³

Consultation was performed similarly for the pre-draft of the second SDS in 2004, with a lower number of responses (800) and contributions (8.000).³⁴

³² With 10 Mill inhabitants; as comparison: Sweden with 9 Mill inhabitants asked 2.000 stakeholders for input and received about 250 replies. The differentiation between responses and contributions/responses (i.e. numbers of points made in total) might be interesting for other countries/consultation processes.

³³ One business federation also criticised it, because its statement, as representing all companies, “counted” as much as the one of an individual citizen. In a way this feeling touches upon the question of representation and legitimacy of stakeholder consultation, though overall the impression prevails that the traditionally strong stakeholders are mainly trying to defend their status in a situation of greater importance of civil society. E.g. it was not mentioned whether this point was discussed with the authors of the SDS.

³⁴ Although around 300.000€ were spent for the first consultation, and for the second the double.

It is interpreted that civil society did not feel involved in this second strategy, because it was/is primarily directed to the government (actions particularly intended for government) and contains too many actions ‘business as usual’.³⁵

3 SD COUNCIL (FRDO-CFDD)

Since 1993 a “National Council for SD” has existed. Supposedly its influence was very limited, and it has been difficult to increase it, given the fact that SD was a new item, there was

- limited ownership within the authorities and the members
- no strong legal basis for the council (ministerial decree instead of an act)
- no major government activity to which it could respond, and there was no clear commitment yet to developing a SDS.

With the SD-Act of 1997 the legal basis for the council was reinforced, and its name changed to become “Federal Council for SD (FRDO-CFDD)”. According to Art. 11 §6 SD-Act the government is obliged to state its reasons for deviating from advice of the council³⁶, which is a rather strong provision vis-à-vis advisory councils.

The composition of the council, laid out in the SD Act is representational: there are 38 members with voting rights, from employers’ organisations, trade unions, NGOs and universities.³⁷ In addition to this there are 40 members with observing status: from each Ministry, region, scientific advisors and other observers.

It has six permanent working groups: SD strategies, energy and climate change, international relations, product norms, scientific research, sensibilisation and communication.

Other underlying challenges for the FRDO-CFDD and its predecessor have been grounded in:

- a the above-mentioned strong negotiation culture, and
- b the traditionally strong councils for economy and employment, with their institutionalised negotiations on wages etc. (cf. also 3.2 below).

Especially this perception and attitude of the social partners has made it difficult to achieve a common understanding of the nature of the SD council. There are e.g. voices from business that consider a concept for a SD council as laboratory of civil society, with no representation and negotiation function, as a “conseil des sages” (council of wise men), which would not be valuable or desirable. This attitude goes as far as considering negotiations as the only and best way for policy-making, which once more reflects this as a strong aspect of the political culture in Belgium. Giving advice in contrast,

³⁵ The SD Council also had a lot of critical remarks on the way the money for the consultation was invested (cf. also the main lines of the FRDO-CFDD’s opinion on the pre-draft: www.FRDO-CFDD.be/en/puben/2004a04e.pdf, in English).

³⁶ similar to the Netherlands.

³⁷ Environmental NGOs (6), development NGOs (6), consumer NGOs (2), trade unions (6), employers’ organizations (6), energy producers (2), universities/academia (6), plus 3 vice-presidents and one president. www.FRDO-CFDD.be/fr/conseil/membres.htm

at least whenever it includes assessment of government policies, is partly considered as unacceptable “imposing”. Government though does not have this perception. The trade unions seem to have a less polarised attitude: for them the economic and social councils have both negotiating and advising function, and for the SD council the think-tank function is supported (though there is a problem with the ‘double-hat’, cf. below ch. A.3.2).

3.1 ROLE AND FUNCTIONS OF THE SD COUNCIL

Role vis-à-vis the SDS:

The establishment of the national SD council was not linked to the decision to elaborate a SDS, which became a reality only in 1997 when also with the SD-Act the institutional framework was created, and a clear function in the SDS process allocated to the FRDO-CFDD (cf. ch. A.1.2): It is by law obliged to (Art. 11 §1 SD-Act):

- Express an opinion on all measures concerning federal policy on SD, taken or envisaged by the federal authorities, in particular for the implementation of Belgium’s international commitments;
- Provide a forum for exchange of views on sustainable development;
- Propose research in all fields related to SD;
- Promote the widest possible co-operation of public and private organisations as well as citizens in order to realise these objectives.

The FRDO-CFDD gave the following key advice on the SDS:

- Pre-draft of the first SDS 1999: criticising that the objectives Belgium wanted to achieve by the plan were not described clearly and specifically enough and that the plan didn’t address the consequences for budget or staffing, and with a recommendation to systematise data on “what should be done, by whom and when” into summary tables.³⁸
- Follow-up and advice on national and EU SDS, governance (national, EU and international), indicators and impact assessment as well as on key policy fields such as mobility and transport, energy, natural resources, climate, products norms, development cooperation, international agreements, international trade, health and food security, promotion, communication and research, Local Agenda 21.
- Round-tables on Spring Summits (2003 and 2004) and WTO-issues (2001, 2002, 2003, 2004).
- ‘Pre-draft’ SDS 2003: assessment that taking the six themes of the EU SDS as a framework was an appropriate point of departure (vertical integration), but criticising that the draft was too much “business-as-usual” and failed to pay sufficient attention to the long-term vision on SD for Belgium, and ignored the question how fundamental SD objectives like achieving growth without placing additional burdens on the environment or realising more sustainable production and consumption can be achieved, and recommending a more multi-sector, multi-level (‘national’ SDS) and multi-actor approach and a reviewing of the policy cycle (strategy -- report).³⁹

³⁸ www.FRDO-CFDD.be/en/puben/2000a02e.pdf.

³⁹ www.FRDO-CFDD.be/en/puben/2004a04e.pdf.

General functions, - views are shared by (parts of) the council and government:

- Advisory board to the government, from a view point of civil society: parts of the council would like to enhance the role of a “voice of civil society”;
- reminder/watchdog for the holistic/integrated view vis-à-vis the political world, the media, the members and the population;
- promoting SD policies to interested parties, e.g. by organising seminars and websites (e.g. Billy Globe);
- stakeholder/expert dialogue “among each other”, creating an understanding of each other’s point of view, including that consensus building among the members should take place: in principle this view is shared by council members, the view on how to get there though differs (some negotiation attitude); also, council members are partly bound to represent their organisation;
- stakeholder members to take the views of the council into their organisations;
- think-tank (minor function since no means available; also some council members would not agree because of the negotiating attitude).

3.2 INTERNAL ASPECTS OF OPERATION

Council members operate on equal footing:

- The council has developed slowly towards a cooperative approach with all stakeholders on equal footing and consensus aimed at. If no consensus is achieved (applies to in around 30% of the cases) it is highlighted and explained which group of council members, or which individual, does not agree to a certain statement, analysis, assessment or recommendation.
- It has an independent status with government members only as observers.
- “Double hat” of council members: Particularly during the first years this has caused some problems, as council members e.g. in wider (external) consultations stood for the view of their organization only; from a trade union it is stated that their representatives to the council may not deviate from the unions’ position, if only because of the internal democratic decision making process.
- The social-economic partners have to some extent perceived the council as an environment one, because it has tackled several environmental themes, or is at least biased. On the other hand the council as a whole has worked hard on awareness-raising that SD is not “only” environment policy.

Relation to and role of socio-economic partners:

As introduced above there has been a rather competitive attitude from the council for economy towards the SD council, which caused inter alia little impact of the SD council in the early years. With the SD Act it got a legal basis and an explicit role. Though it took still a while until the attitude of the

social partners started to change. In 2004 national directors of major stakeholder groups became members of the board of the council, which considerably reflects ownership, and might lead to more authority of the council. In 2004 the SD council organised several expert hearings, together with the economic and the social council, in order to prepare its opinions (as requested by the government) on the pre-draft of the second federal SDS and the EU SDS review (the economic and the social council had decided to prepare an own initiative advice).

Relation to government departments:

The relation to government departments is in general very constructive and open. There are governmental council members as observers, who typically do not frequently participate in plenary, but are, when appropriate, invited to working groups as experts. Some cabinets and administrations are co-operating very actively with the council, while others remain more passive, and some Ministers have never asked for an opinion or organised any round tables (e.g. finance, budget). The relationship often depends on individuals. There is also a constructive relationship with the governmental SD-institutions (ICDO, TFSD, POD DO, cf. ch. A.1.2).

3.3 ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE COUNCIL

1 Government's view

- Acknowledged as a stakeholder advisory body with high quality work.

2 SDC's view

- Ministers increasingly realise the added value of asking the council for advice, because it contributes to agreements between stakeholders and builds a certain social basis for government policy.
- Improves the quality of government papers by giving additional view points/angles/dimensions to the government.
- The council contributed to the preparation of the first and second SDS:
 - Advice on the pre-draft of the first SDS (April 2000),
 - Hearing on the pre-draft for the second SDS (January 2004),
 - Advice on the pre-draft of the second SDS (May 2004).

It also formulated a Memorandum to the new federal government (May 2003).

- The council gave advice on the 6th EAP (June 2000), the EU SDS (April 2001), and an opinion on the review of the EU SDS (October 2004).
- Agenda setting of particular issues:
 - SD-indicators,
 - national strategy SD,
 - multilevel governance.
- Development of a popularising website for SD (www.billy-globe.org)⁴⁰.

- Conducted two surveys on the social basis of SD (1999 and 2002)⁴¹, and a third one is in preparation.
- Networking:
 - Upon the proposal of the FRDO-CFDD the Working Group SD of the EEAC was established;
 - Building and maintaining relationships with the other Belgian advisory councils.

Success-factors of a SD council

- Independence (towards government and political parties);
- Members should try to develop an attitude of experimentation;
- Broad representation as stakeholder-forum and getting to understanding and agreements between stakeholders;
- Strong chair and high level Board (composed with national directors of major stakeholder groups);
- Having members from the academic side (some prominent);
- Obligation of the government to react and argue if deviating from the council's recommendations. For the opinions on the SDS the government elaborate a special "motivation paper", for other opinions the Ministers or their representatives react to the opinions received at the first General Assembly of the year.

⁴¹ The later one was not only quantitative but also qualitative. 54 prominent political, socio-economic and cultural actors have been questioned.

B Themes and scope

Priority fields of the **first SDS** (2000-2004) are directly derived from Agenda 21 and are arranged under four clusters:

- 1 Actions on patterns of consumption and production, including policies for
 - information, education and public awareness,
 - products,
 - consumption by public administrations.
- 2 Actions on poverty and social exclusion, over-indebtedness, and health, including policies for
 - combating poverty and social exclusion,
 - reducing over-indebtedness,
 - environmental health.
- 3 Actions on agriculture - marine environment - biodiversity, including policy for
 - promoting sustainable development of agriculture,
 - protection and managing the marine environment,
 - conservation of biodiversity.
- 4 Actions on energy - transport - ozone and climate change, including policy for
 - promoting sustainable development of energy,
 - promoting mobility compatible with sustainable development,
 - protecting the atmosphere.

These policies are accompanied by means of implementation (international policy, research policy, fiscal policy and information for decision-making), and the role of major groups shall be strengthened.

The **new pre-draft SDS** (2004-08) focuses on the priority fields of the EU SDS⁴²:

- 1 combating poverty,
- 2 ageing population,
- 3 addressing threats to public health,
- 4 managing natural resources more responsibly,
- 5 combating climate change, and
- 6 ensuring sustainable mobility.

It is more difficult to identify objectives, targets and actions.

Belgian SD policies have from the beginning always tried to be comprehensive and, at least on the programmatic level, succeeded. So in this respect there was no disadvantage in the partial lead responsibility of the Minister for Environment (later: and SD), though on the level of implementation there is still apparently a long way to go. The SDS covers all federal competences, which leaves the environmental dimension a bit limited, because that is mainly a regional competence. Emphasis is given to the social dimension. The new pre-draft SDS is criticised for having taken over the priority themes of the EU SDS without its fundamental objectives (e.g. decoupling).

⁴² *The first two were not endorsed by the Gothenburg Summit as EU SD strategy, but were proposed by the Commission (COM (2001) 264, 15.5.2001).*

C Relation to the EU (SDS) and other international strategies

1 CONSIDERATION AND IMPACT OF THE EU SDS

Belgium has a strong international and EU perspective: the first SDS was oriented towards Agenda 21, and the second one (the current 'pre-draft') even fully takes over the priority fields of the EU SDS. The EU SDS could not be considered in the first SDS, as it was only issued a year later. Nevertheless, there are identical strategic topics (climate change, mobility, national environmental health action plan, installing a federal agency for food safety and promoting the establishment of a European one, actions on poverty and social exclusion).

EU legislation is politically easier to handle in Belgium, which also applies to programs including the EU SDS, even if it is not binding. It also increases continuity (cf. ch. A.1.3.2), as governments do not easily dismantle EU policies, and public administration tends to defend it. This was one reason to choose the priority fields of the EU SDS in the pre-draft SDS 2003; in general the approach has been to pick from the EU SDS "à la carte". The EU level helps to overcome competence problems in a federal state: International obligations are a driving-force for the seven Parliaments that have to endorse a Belgian ratification, whereas without such a driver the endorsement processes sometimes may get stuck.⁴³

At the same time Belgium gave quite some input for the preparation of the EU SDS.

The Lisbon process is also considered as important, and it is perceived as an overarching strategy, including environment, though only covering the short/mid-term, and the SDS is the long-term approach. For some the Lisbon strategy should be the central social, economic (and environmental) agenda. For others, it needs to be integrated in the wider EU SDS framework. In line with, inter alia, the priorities of the Dutch Presidency, it is said that potential areas should be identified, where environment can serve the economy. It is favoured that the environmental dimension in the Lisbon strategy is strengthened, not only in function of socio-economic goals but as an important objective as such.

2 SD COUNCIL (FRDO-CFDD): EUROPEAN AND INTERNATIONAL DIMENSION

The FRDO-CFDD published an opinion on the occasion of the consultation about the EU-SDS review 2004, and has also done so for the EU-SDS preparation in 2001.

The FRDO-CFDD has been involved in European cooperation through EEAC since 2001. Before that the council was still in a consolidating phase, especially with respect to the relation to the social and economic councils. In

⁴³ *The implications of the Kyoto Protocol are an example of very difficult agreements between the regions on the distribution of burden sharing, i.e. as opposed to other nations the regional distribution of burden comes first, and only then the one between different industry branches, - a situation which is called by the business community as "absence of level playing field" even within the country.*

this context there were some doubts because EEAC comes from the ‘environmental sustainability’ side.

Other international activities included:

- CSD: The council always participates with two members at the CSD. During CSD 9, the council participated in a side-event on “Public participation in SD-planning and the role of SD-councils”. This side-event was organised by the Belgian and the Danish governments;
- WSSD: participation of delegates in the Prepcoms 3 and 4 for the WSSD. The council was represented with a group at the WSSD as part of the Belgian official delegation.

As a preparation for the WSSD it organised two symposia (sustainable production and consumption; Rio+10 in Belgium: the gap between commitments and policy), and also gave two pieces of advice.⁴⁴

Other advice addressing the international dimension include:

- Kyoto protocol,
- Trade and WTO (roundtables with Ministers in charge with this field),
- Development Cooperation.

The FRDO-CFDD is also represented in a committee responsible for coordinating the Belgian SD policies on international level, for example preparing the Belgian position for CSD meetings. The committee is composed of representatives from the federal administration and cabinets, from the regional authorities and from civil society.

3 LISBON PROCESS: PREPARATION OF SPRING SUMMITS

The Committee of Director Generals for European Affairs (DGE) coordinates all Belgian positions to the Councils of Ministers. Each of the eight Councils typically contributing to the Spring Summit are prepared nationally by inter-cabinet working groups, each chaired by the respective Minister, which feed back to the DGE.⁴⁵

For the Spring Summit preparation itself it works similarly: the DGE starts, creates different informal inter-cabinet groups, and finalizes the input itself. The MinE is included in this process, which is considered as quite an intensive one.

The FRDO-CFDD has given input to the Spring Summits via round-table discussions with the Minister or State Secretary responsible for SD, and it is aimed to organise one with the Prime Minister on the occasion of the Lisbon mid-term review and the EU SDS review.

⁴⁴ Advice for the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg - 16 April 2002, Second advice for the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg - 18 June 2002, First advice following the World Summit on Sustainable Development - 15 October 2002.

⁴⁵ Because of the complicated competence structure there are coordination agreements on who represents Belgium in the Council of Ministers: a) exclusive federal competence (only the federal Minister represents), b) mixed competence (b)1. the federal Minister represents, with the regional Minister being the second one, or b)2. the other way round, - applies for environment), c) exclusive regional competence (only the regional Minister(s) represent; for the regional Ministers in cases b) and c) there is a 6 month rotation.

4 POLICY FIELDS UPSTREAM AND DOWNSTREAM

Upstream action - EU activity is desired/required

The first SDS states that the Belgian government will support the following work that is to be accomplished on the EU level:

- take SD aspects into account in future trade negotiations (WTO), e.g. reduce quotas and import duties for developing countries,
- adoption of labels for fairer trade, and
- reduce VAT-levels on products that bear environmental or ethical labels,

Other issues for which EU activity is desired include:

- set decoupling targets for different sectors;
- tackle mobility problems, for which taxation would be needed (though it is assessed as unrealistic that an agreement can be found at EU level);
- energy;
- to spend more for R&D, e.g. on biofuels.

It is also desired that member states use at least partly the same set of indicators; an improved set of the structural indicators used for the Spring Report should be taken into account.

Downstream impacts - EU policies hampering national SD processes

Liberalisation/privatisation in general is seen as problematic for SD. In particular the planned liberalisation of public transport endangers the beneficial Belgian system.

When the internal market has increasing impact on EU social policies it might hamper Belgium's advanced social system, which the country wants to protect. Education and health are mentioned in this respect.

Conditional implementation

- The implementation of an energy/CO₂ - tax in Belgium is linked with an agreement at EU level;
- legislation on labelling will be reviewed in consultation with the EU, in order to prevent the proliferation of labels.

Overall assessment

Belgium takes EU legislation rather seriously and has been committed to transpose Directives into national law, though it usually takes longer because transposition requires approval by all seven Parliaments. The government also strives to influence EU policies towards SD in some fields, with some focus on the international trade dimension, and has exerted an influence on the EU SDS itself. Belgium has always been (very) active at CSD level (vice-chair at CSD-11).

D Achievements and shortcomings in the national SD agenda

1 SUCCESSES AND SHORTCOMINGS

As in other cases, key achievements in Belgium are basic ones, namely that the SD process has

- led to an understanding of concept (no SD without environmental integration; no environmental policy without social policies and economic growth), and that it
- has created a common language, and consciousness and willingness of several Ministries to discuss.
- The interdepartmental cooperation is assessed positively, because of willingness to learn and have real discussions, though it is observed that participants fall back to department egoisms when it comes to measures. Also, not all Ministries participated actively, and a lot depends on individuals: There have been cases where a Ministry representative actively participates in e.g. the ICDO, but the Minister has never requested advice from the SD council, and is also otherwise not interested, and the other way round. Also again the distribution of competences with the regions plays a role: Policy fields for which the federal level is only to a minor extent competent tend not to cause conflicts to the same extent as in centralised countries.

New cross-sectoral mechanisms were installed during the last two years; one promisingly has the specific task to advance ‘greening’ of the Public Service, which might become a role model for other countries.

From the government side it is said that the federal SDS is just *one* incentive to take action, but having one “helped”. Examples given are the objective for 0,7% of GDP for development aid, in which the SDS is stronger than the EU, because it has a timeline (2010), but that the final trigger for this objective was Monterrey and the European Council’s conclusions. This objective is considered as achievement of the SDS.⁴⁶

Other achievements in policy fields include:

- nuclear phase out decided by the former government (industry does not perceive this as a sustainable measure);
- climate policy: fiscal incentives and subsidies for private households for measures to increase energy efficiency and renewables (solar);
- integrated product policy: with the establishment of a federal agency for the safety of the food chain, as a result of the dioxin crisis, some aspects of product policy are now integrated;
- taxes on batteries, disposable cameras and packages of beverages;
- public procurement law adapted (2003) to now also include environmental and social criteria;
- objectives and measures for ozone;

⁴⁶ In order to reach the 0,7% objective by 2010, Belgium has increased its share of spending to 0,43% in 2002 and 0,61% in 2003.

- Health and Environment Plan (NEHAP): agreement between the regions, communities and the federal level.

2 MOST DIFFICULT POLICY FIELDS

Taxation and ‘getting prices right’ is stated by many actors as an important and difficult field, as are economic and budgetary policies in general.

Related ones and others include:

- energy (e.g. energy supply structure; energy intensive industry like petrochemicals, port of Antwerp; taxation as federal competence): The first SDS 2000 proposed an energy tax, which Belgium also promoted for the EU level (Presidency 2001); this failed, but the new government took up the issue of more ‘green’ taxation unilaterally (government agreement 2003), given that competitiveness and hence employment will not be endangered. Measures are mainly proposed for housing (incentives) and transport (fee system for lorries).
- climate change: A national climate change plan has been aimed at for long, but is not yet achieved. Since around 2003 there is a national climate change commission, but it does not work yet effectively. There are regional climate change plans, and some agreements on the federal level, but a national plan would be needed to make the different regional and federal objectives and measures coherent (e.g. the federal level is competent for taxation). Belgium reached only late a national (federal and regional) compromise on allocation plans; the regional distribution of quotas still needs to be done by the regions, because of their competence for industry policy.
- mobility (car industry, transfer country): Also here a national plan has been aimed at, but a proposal of the previous government could not be agreed upon. Again taxation was and will remain the key political problem. There are already regional plans and a new national proposal will be discussed early 2005.
- sustainable consumption is included so far with the goal of decoupling and dematerialisation, but progress remains very limited.
- International trade and WTO policy is a controversially debated issue in the SD council (eg whether or not to include environmental and social norms in WTO policies).

It is seen as a key challenge in Belgium to tackle the social component in relevant policy fields and SD, and the impacts of immigration remains a big concern (integration, education and employment of immigrants).

The SD council has submitted its view in a Memorandum to the new government in 2003.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ <http://www.FRDO-CFDD.be/en/puben/2003a04e.pdf>

3 IMPROVEMENT POTENTIALS FOR THE NATIONAL SDS

Procedural: improve the review process.

Content: approve a national SDS and agree on systematic indicators and objectives.

4 NATIONAL SDS: ACHIEVEMENTS AND CHALLENGES

Achievements and challenges are assessed in a summarised way as follows⁴⁸:

- + Comprehensive strategy; environment is a bit limited (at least on the measures side) because of limited federal competence;
- + The EU SDS plays a strong role;
- + Stakeholder consultation is taken seriously;
- +/(◆) SDS as a “living document” with clear priority fields and strategic approach, but underpinning objectives are missing or a bit arbitrary. Moving towards a national (vs. federal) SDS will be a challenge;
- +/(◆) Getting all concerned departments committed is still a challenge, but the institutional setting has beneficial potentials. Lead responsibility is again given to a State Secretary for SD, now attached to a powerful Vice-Prime Minister;
- +/◆ There was no systematic review of the first SDS yet (but a second SDS was developed), which is partly due to its reputation as being a “wish-list” and some problems with time frames; it might be worthwhile to reconsider the review terms and mechanisms;
- (+)/◆ Overall, the emphasis in Belgium seems, due to the complex institutional context, to lie a bit too heavily on the procedural component, and substance gets lost a bit;
- ◆ Agreeing on more clear, and quantitative objectives and (key-)indicators will be a challenge.

⁴⁸ + achievement
(+) partial achievement
+ / ◆ mixed: achievement and challenge
(◆) partial challenge
◆ challenge

E Recommendations for the EU-SDS review

Detailed recommendations are given by the SDC in the course of the consultation on the EU SDS review (October 2004). Drawing from experience in Belgium, key points are:

- A SDS should be a dynamic strategy. The EU should not only define the non-sustainable trends, but also long term objectives (taking into account international agreements, among others the Johannesburg Plan of Action); the EU SDS on this basis needs to lay out how to make progress towards those objectives during the four years-phases.
- The strategy needs first of all to serve as the framework for the different relevant strategies or policies from different DGs. It needs to define how to make those go in the right direction and to ensure that assessment mechanisms exist to evaluate the progress, also during the four-year period (priorities, mix of instruments). The strategy must thus be dynamic and not static.
- It should contain a number of strategic economic, social and ecological objectives (i.e. not be confined to the environmental dimension); green-ing procurement is a powerful example from the Belgian SDS. It should better integrate the international dimension (e.g. fair trade).

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INTERVIEWEES

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Colophon

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