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National Strategies for Sustainable Development: Experience, Challenges and Dilemmas

Extracts From Two IIED Reports

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IIED
3 Endsleigh Street, London WC1H ODD, UK
Tel: (+44-171) 388 2117; Fax: (+44-171) 288 2826

PREFACE

This background paper is a combination of extracts from two IIED reports on national strategies for sustainable development.

The first report, "*National Sustainable Development Strategies: Experience and Dilemmas*" (Dalal-Clayton *et al*., 1994) was published as a complement to the IIED/IUCN handbook on strategies (Carew-Reid *et al*., 1994). It examined experience of developing countries in the 1980s and early 1990s in developing and implementing National Conservation Strategies, National Environmental Action Plans and similar initiatives undertaken by countries as their response to the challenge in Agenda 21 to prepare nssd's. It also discussed a number of key dilemmas facing those contemplating or responsible for developing such strategies. Whilst countries now have much more experience of strategy intitiatives, and many have even embarked on second-generation processes, these dilemmas still present a critical challenge and are worth re-considering in the context of the UNGASS target.

The second publication, "*Rethinking Sustainable Development Strategies; Promoting Strategic Analysis, Debate and Action*" (Dalal-Clayton *et al*. 1998) was tabled as a room document at the June 1998 meeting of the OECD DAC Working Party on Development Cooperation and the Environment. It re-examines the experience to date, considers why recommendations of past reviews have not been addressed or implemented, draws out some key lessons and identifies a range of continuing challenges. It argues that a new focus and approach is required which places less emphasis on the production of a strategy document and focuses on processes which can facilitate strategic analysis, debate and action. The paper argues that such an approach should be more cost-effective, politically appealing and economically viable, and should respond to real needs locally, while enabling countries to contribute better to international decisions.

We hope these views and perspectives will help to stimulate discussion and debate during the donor - developing country scoping workshop on national strategies for dustainable development (nssds's) at Sunningdale, Nr London, in November 1998. We believe that the issues we raise are very important, particularly at a time when developing country governments and donors are considering how best to respond to the target date of 2002 set by the Special Session of the UN General Assembly in 1997 for all countries to have a sustainable development strategy in place.

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ACRONYMS

CBO	Community-Based Organisation
CDE	Capacity Development in Environment
DAC	Development Assistance Committee (of OECD)
DFID	Department for International Development (UK)
DGIS	Environment and Development Department (Netherlands Foreign Ministry)
EC	European Commission
IIED	International Institute for Environment and Development
INGP	International Network of Green Planners
INTERAISE	International Environmental and Resource Assessment Information Service
IUCN	World Conservation Union
NCS	National Conservation Strategy
NEAP	National Environmental Action Plan
NESDA	Network for Environment and Sustainable Development in Africa
NGO	Non Governmental Organisation
NSDS	National Sustainable Development Strategy
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
Sida	Swedish International Development Agency
UNCED	United Nations Conference on Environment and Development
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNDPCSD	United Nations Department for Policy Co-ordination and Sustainable Development
UNGASS	United Nations General Assembly Special Session
WRI	World Resources Institute
WTO	World Trade Organisation

SUMMARY

Agenda 21 urges all countries to introduce a National Sustainable Development Strategy. In 1997, five years after Rio, the UN General Assembly Special Session set a target date of 2002 for introducing such strategies in all countries. The OECD-DAC has set a target date of 2005 for countries to meet the same aim. Yet no official guidance has been provided on how to develop strategies. Indeed there is much current debate on what such a strategy is or should be, and how donors can help in their development and implementation. Whilst past experience indicates that a blueprint approach is not appropriate, there has been little examination of whether past strategies have had any effective impact. There remains uncertainty about how best to proceed. Evidence from past strategies shows that:

- most have continued to be environment-driven, rather than encompassing sustainable development;
- the focus has often been bureaucratic, focused on a document rather than change;
- there has been a lack of consideration given to future needs;
- participation has been weak and as a result, strategies have been poorly linked to real development trends; and
- the donor role has been ambiguous: providing resources, but often dominating the process.

This paper re-examines the experience to date, considers why recommendations of past reviews have not been addressed or implemented, draws out some key lessons and identifies a range of challenges. It argues that a new focus and approach is required which places less emphasis on the production of a strategy document and focuses on processes which can facilitate strategic analysis, debate and action. Such an approach should be more cost-effective, politically appealing and economically viable, and respond to real needs locally, while enabling countries to contribute better to international decisions. We set out IIED's first thoughts on why such a new start is required and what it might mean in practice. Our focus is primarily on developing countries, but many of the themes have relevance elsewhere.

In any country, a process of strategic analysis, debate and action for moving towards sustainable development would involve, *inter alia*:

- facilitating a process of stakeholder dialogues on key sustainable development issues and processes (that work) for sustainable development. This would need to be an iterative process over time and involve a range of approaches including, for example, semi-structured interviews with individuals, discussion groups, round tables and workshops, and other participatory approaches at national to local levels - as appropriate or feasible.

- within this context, reviewing the recent experience in undertaking nssd's and equivalent initiatives (including Convention-related action plans);

- developing capacities to analyse, debate and act strategically for making the transition to sustainable development; and

- identifying how international cooperation agencies can best help in this process.

The paper goes on to briefly consider several dilemmas which must be faced by those contemplating or responsible for developing an nssd or similar initiative:

- The political context
- What is the key objective ?
- Building strategic capacity - a single spine discipline or a tool kit approach ?
- Boundary issues - the scope problem
- Multiple national strategies
- The limits of consultation and participation

1. WHY SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT REQUIRES A STRATEGIC RESPONSE

When the world's leaders met in June 1997 to review progress since the landmark Earth Summit, the assessment they faced was a sombre one. The total number of people living in poverty had grown significantly since 1992 and inequality had surged both within and between countries. The state of the global environment had also continued to deteriorate. Looking ahead, the UN forecasted that "the next quarter century is likely to be characterised by declining standards of living, rising levels of conflict and environmental stress" unless hard choices were made to break these seemingly remorseless trends away from sustainable development (UNDPCSD 1997).

For the last decade or more, there has been growing awareness that moving towards sustainable development will require often deep structural changes in the economy, society, resource management and political life. Policies that subsidised resource depletion and marginalised the poor would have to be curbed. Markets would need to reflect the social and environmental costs or production and consumption. Governments and corporations would also have to become more open and accountable for their actions. Decision-making would have to become more prudent, with extended time-scales to respect the interests of future generations. And power would need to be redistributed to give those countries and communities currently excluded from critical resources and decisions the capacity to negotiate a better deal. In other words, sustainable development would require a strategic response of a quite unprecedented kind.

At the Earth Summit in 1992, the governments of the world progressed some way to meeting this challenge by agreeing as part of the Agenda 21 action plan that all countries should introduce a national strategy for sustainable development (nssd) (UNCED, 1992). Many governments responded to this call, but in a variety of different ways:

- Some built on earlier or existing processes such as national conservation strategies (NCSs) - often assisted by IUCN, and national forestry action plans (NFAPs).

- Others developed national environmental action plans (NEAPs), usually with World Bank support.

- Very few countries have set out to prepare something actually labelled as a national strategy for sustainable development.

- More recently, there has been a trend to sub-nationalise such approaches with attention being given to provincial strategies and plans and more local processes such as district environmental action plans (DEAPs) and Local Agenda 21s, usually at the city level.

- Some countries have prepared National Agenda 21s and others have developed national "visions" for the future.

- In addition, under the Rio conventions (Climate, Biodiversity, Climate), countries are required to develop national action plans.

- Apart from all of this, all developing countries undertake national development planning and sector policy-making and planning and many other initiatives.

Box 1: Defining National Strategies for Sustainable Develoopment

The term ***"national strategy for sustainable development*** (nssd) has come to be used as an undefined shorthand which could, arguably, encompass any of, or even the sum of, the range of initiatives that an individual country may have taken to represent its response to commitments entered into at Rio in 1992. This is the sense in which we use the term in this paper.

Five years on, the growing urgency of the global situation led governments to set a target date of 2002 for introducing such strategies in all countries (UNGASS, 1997). And as part of the OECD's new strategy for development cooperation, *Shaping the 21st Century* (OECD-DAC, 1997a), donor agencies have committed themselves to supporting developing countries to introduce these strategies -- a commitment confirmed by the UK, for example, in its White Paper for International Development (DFID, 1997).

Yet, for all this apparent 'faith' in national strategies, there has been little examination of whether these processes have so far had any impact in practice. International organisations have undertaken research on strategies, but there has been no official guidance on how to develop such strategies or to implement them effectively. Such guidance that exists implies the generation of entirely new frameworks rather than building on locally tried and tested decision-making processes. Having set themselves new targets, it is apparent that most governments and donor agencies have given little thought to what to do next. But they are aware that blueprint strategies across the world should be avoided. This approach has not worked in the past, failing to recognise the imperative of fine-tuning strategies to the diverse conditions that exist across the world. Today, adopting a blueprint model would be even more irrelevant and positively counter-productive as nations, industries and citizens across the world struggle to cope with the implications of globalisation.

It is no longer possible to view strategies for sustainable development as somehow focused solely on the social, economic and environmental conditions within a nation's borders. In an increasingly liberalised global economy, trade and investment flows impinge critically on a country's natural resources and its ability to manage them fairly and sustainably: this particularly affects poor countries faced with unequal terms of trade, a high ratio of trade to national income, and large debt burdens.

International rules for trade, aid, investment, intellectual property and the environment now set the frame of reference within which national sustainable development strategies can be conceived. And the worldwide shift to market-based approaches to the economy, exemplified in structural adjustment programmes, along with democratic styles of governance requiring popular participation at every level of decision-making, require a rethinking of the traditional planning process, still resounding with the echoes of the corporatist 1970s and 1980s.

But it is not just that the global context within which nations develop strategies that has been transformed in recent years: most governments have been faced with a combination of intensifying obligations to sustainable development and diminishing resources, or in other words, 'policy inflation and capacity collapse'. It is no surprise therefore that those involved in sustainable development are desperately overworked.

All this means that the strategic analysis, debate and action so essential for sustainable development has to be done differently than in the past. It has to be smarter and more cost-

effective, politically appealing and economically viable, responding to real needs locally, while enabling countries to contribute better to international decisions.

2. LESSONS FROM THE PAST

Growing interest in national strategies has led to an expanding body of analysis by international organisations, governments and independent institutes. From this, five main lessons can be learned of relevance to developing countries:

- Most strategies have continued to be environment-driven, rather than encompassing sustainable development.
- The focus has often been bureaucratic, focused on a document rather than change.
- There has been a lack of consideration given to future needs.
- Participation has been weak and as a result, strategies have been poorly linked to real development trends.
- The donor role has been ambiguous: providing resources, but often dominating the process.

i. Environment-driven

Almost all strategy initiatives are undertaken by environment ministries and departments. This immediately characterises the process as being pre-occupied with environmental issues - rather than a sustainable development focus which is properly the concern of all sectors and all parts of government and society. It also places responsibility for the strategy in a ministry which is usually weak and of low influence within the government.

ii. Bureaucratic focus

Approaches to date have been dominated by environment officials and experts preparing papers and drafting chapters of a strategy document or action plan, workshops (again often restricted to officials and experts) and weak inputs from across government, political parties, the private and business sectors, NGOs and other interests, or from the public. The emphasis has usually been placed on delivering a document (often in a limited time); this has meant both rather
sketchy analysis, and an inadequate process of building consensus on the key issues and possible solutions or ways forward.

iii. Ignoring future needs

Virtually all strategy processes have based their policy recommendations on an assessment of past and current trends. None have generated scenarios which consider environmental and developmental conditions in the future and develop policies that respond to these challenges, blind spots and priorities identified in these scenarios. In effect, most strategies continue to respond to historical problems rather than the issues in a rapidly changing world. At best, some strategies have set environmental targets for the future (e.g. reduced pollution levels), but such targets have been based on present day problems. In addition, past strategies have generally failed to deal with issues such as risk and uncertainty which, for example, would have led to them addressing approaches to ‘climate change proofing’.

iv. Weak participation and links to real development

Few strategies have yet been adequately participatory. Although all countries are struggling with this issue by trying to involve as many stakeholders as possible, civil society participation is not always easy to achieve. Equally, there are usually a multitude of political,

market and civil society processes which are *not* included in the strategy which turn out to be highly significant for (or against) sustainable development. Thus, few - if any - countries have made sustainable development the centrepiece of their long-term planning exercises: this means shifting the focus to ensuring that sustainable development is contained in the strategies that count, and not just those produced by the environment ministry.

One area where progress could be made is in building bridges between national and local levels. Most current strategies are still controlled by central government institutions and experts, with occasional participation of NGOs. In the North, the Local Agenda 21 movement has achieved considerable momentum amongst local authorities, citizens' groups, NGOs and businesses. However, there is often little linkage between the efforts at national and local levels. In
developing countries, there is now considerable experience of participatory development activities at local levels, but national strategies have yet to find ways to adequately and effectively interface with the existing local experience. There continues to be a lack of trust and dialogue between central governments and local communities in a context of advancing decentralisation in many countries.

v. An Ambiguous Donor Role

The pressure for strategies in developing countries has often come from donors as a requirement for the release of aid or to generate a menu of projects from which they can choose. Seldom have such strategies been prepared as a result of a domestically-driven agenda or a general concern about broader international obligations and pressures other than aid. Frequently there has been little conviction in their utility. In principle, donor agencies now recognise in principle that this needs to change. For example, the OECD's Principles for Capacity Development in Environment (CDE) stress the importance of strategies which provide a framework for donor coordination (OECD-DAC, 1997b). Some development assistance agencies - such as the EC and SIDA -- have also tried to evaluate how their aid portfolios support sustainable development through the hosting of open, participatory round table exercises with developing country partners.

It is no surprise, therefore, that strategies for sustainable development are still seen as internationally-generated precepts which seldom exert much influence on the key decision-making processes and, of course, on political and business development processes - which lie in the national planning, finance, and major line ministries. Relatively little advance has been made in providing lessons for better and more effective approaches. Over the last few years, numerous conferences, workshops and reviews have assessed strategies and made numerous recommendations. Yet few of these recommendations have been addressed or implemented: the various reasons for this are listed in Box 2.

Much of the continuing review activity appears to repeat basic conclusions about best practice which have been well accepted for several years, but are not practised in reality - for example, the need to be holistic, integrated, cyclical and participatory.

In conclusion, there is now a need to shift from a focus on fine-tuning internationally-generated national strategies for sustainable development, or their equivalents, to a richer mix of effective processes of *strategic analysis, debate and action* for sustainable development.

Box 2: Why Recommendations of Past Reviews have not been Addressed or Implemented

Not Addressed:

- the key players involved in developing nssd's have had no 'handle' on the pros and cons of market issues/forces as a means of achieving sustainable development; or on the politics that surround decision-making;
- lack of institutional memories (within government departments and in donor agencies);
- staff turnover - with loss of valuable experience of individuals;
- nssd's in developing countries were seldom, if ever, designed to be continuing (cycling) processes, and therefore mainly ended with the completion of a strategy document and set of project proposals;
- nssd's seldom fitted with the resources (financial, skills, etc.) available;
- Ownership of most nssd processes was perceived to be, or was in practice, outside the country concerned;
- nssd fragmentation, particularly through identifying fundable individual projects which were often 'cherry-picked' by donors, leaving important strategy elements unfunded;
- nssd recommendations were often flawed due to a lack of or inadequate ground-truthing;
- nssd often set no priorities and gave no guidance to assist prioritisation.

Not Implemented:

- nssd's have not matched the level of institutional capacity in individual countries - they have often been too comprehensive/complex for the prevailing institutional climate;
- no clear targets for communication and advocacy (lack of communications strategy);
- some review documents have been too generic for decision-makers (lacking a clear "hook");
- some reviews have been very descriptive with too little analysis;
- reviews have been too focused on environmental issues;
- lack of indicators;
- lack of ownership within countries/agencies - and thus reviews perceived as the opinion of their authors;
- need to look at all policies (i.e. is a NEAP the right tool ?) and to include countries with no NEAP when undertaking a review;
- reviews have not asked if nssd's/NEAPs have been effective;
- reviews have not adequately addressed how to incorporate nssd/NEAP outputs into other policy processes;
- reviews have not adequately examined situations where people have been motivated to change (i.e. determining the effective points of entry);
- reviews have not adequately addressed the issue of nssd teams having capacity to address inter-related issues; and
- lack of a follow up by IIED/IUCN to their 1994 Strategies Handbook;

3. TIME FOR A NEW FOCUS

The focus now needs to shift from the framework of formal strategies as such to the broader issue of *improving decision-making processes in a time of rapid change.* Figure 1 loosely illustrates three things:

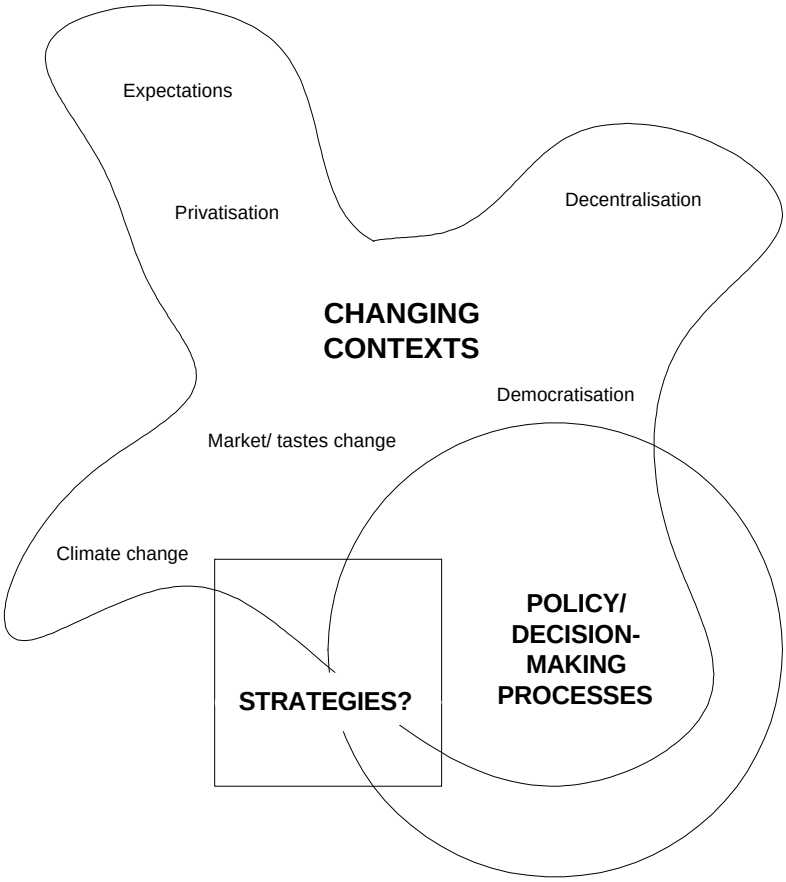

Figure 1. Formal strategies in context

(i) There is an immense and fluctuating arena of change, including: major trends of globalisation, privatisation and decentralisation; significant changes in the expectations of stakeholders; and huge swings in all sorts of systems from markets to the global climate (see Box 3).

(ii) There are existing policy-making processes and other decision-making processes (such as the market) which have been able, *to some extent only*, to keep track of change and to make appropriate responses. These responses will vary from ignoring change, to adapting, to actively trying to influence the change process itself. Many of these processes will be long-standing e.g. development planning mechanisms and traditional village governance.

(iii) Finally, there are the recent formal strategies - NCSs, NEAPs, green plans, TFAPs, etc. The implication is that a better exploration of the arena of change is required, and of the role not just of strategies but also of existing forms of policy- and other decision- making processes in dealing with change. If we remain confined to an examination of strategies' efficiency, we may *both* lose sight of areas of change in which they have not yet been effective, *and* ignore other processes that might be more efficient and can be incorporated in strategic approaches in future. Furthermore, we might make the mistake of attributing progress to a strategy alone, as opposed to other processes that have been going on in parallel.

Box 3 The Challenge of Globalisation for Strategy-Making

The process of globalisation has been driven by a variety of factors: trade liberalisation, increasing foreign investment, falling costs of communication, rapid technological innovation, the spread of economic reform programmes and the proliferation of multilateral institutions and agreements. But the impacts of globalisation have been weakly addressed in national strategies for sustainable development so far. Yet globalisation has profound implications for sustainable development in developing countries and there is an urgent need for a new approach to the international dimension of national strategies.

Trade and investment provide a critical source of capital for driving economic growth in developing countries, and are becoming increasingly important with the decline in aid flows. Increased trade and investment in developing countries could have a significant impact on the environment if increased productive activity -- such as mineral extraction and new manufacturing processes -- is not accompanied by robust social and environmental controls. Inequalities within developing countries could also widen as poor people find themselves less able to exploit new economic opportunities and become more vulnerable to a loss of access to resources and environmental degradation associated with privatisation and industrialisation.

Steering globalisation towards sustainable development depends on the capacity of governments to stimulate and regulate market access arrangements that prevent environmental degradation and ensure that benefits are widely distributed. Critical policy areas include:

- **Structural Adjustment**: Stabilisation and adjustment can exacerbate unsustainable use of natural resources and environmental degradation due to weak institutional capacity and regulatory frameworks and lack of clear tenure over resources. In many cases, the poor are the worst affected by these impacts. This remains a central issue for national strategies for sustainable development.

- **Trade:** Export-led development is now regarded as a major route to prosperity for poor nations, but the least developed countries still stand to lose out from the Uruguay Round of trade reforms. Furthermore, the wider implications for resource use and sustainable development of trade liberalisation have yet to be fully assessed. Strategic analysis is required to enable countries to understand the wider implications and use these to negotiate countervailing measures.

- **Foreign Investment:** Recent OECD negotiations for a Multilateral Agreement on Investment have highlighted the need for developing country governments to take a strategic perspective on the how to balance the need for a secure investment regime to attract and retain foreign capital with mechanisms to encourage corporate responsibility for social and environmental performance.

- **Development Assistance:** Aid levels are now at their lowest levels for 25 years with little sign of reversal. This stagnation means that strategies for sustainable development are critical for deciding priorities for donor support and providing the framework for donor coordination.

- **Policy Coherence:** The long-term prospects for sustainable development in poor nations are often highly dependent on decisions in other countries, for example, on agriculture and fisheries policies. Sustainable development strategies could help to identify the costs of policy incoherence in other countries as a first step to policy reform.

National strategies for sustainable development provide an opportunity for developing countries to anticipate the adverse social and environmental effects of globalisation and benefit from its advantages. Addressing the international dimension in national strategies will require greater dialogue and partnership at two levels: *internally*, between central government ministries, the private sector, local authorities and communities to identify global impacts; and *externally*, with foreign governments, corporations and NGOs to negotiate new deals for sustainable development.

Given that the donor community has re-focused on nssd's and many agencies are now reviewing how they can best assist developing countries with such processes, the time has come to determine what actual influence nssd's (or their equivalents) have had on policies and practices and sustainable development outcomes, and to explore what changes in approach would improve their influence and contribution. The need for such a 'stocktaking' is even more imperative given the added burdens placed on governments, and the considerable potential for overlap, in meeting obligations to develop and implement action plans under the Rio conventions (particularly those for Climate Change, Biodiversity and Desertification, but also the Intergovernmental Panel on Forests and the WTO agreements).

Alternative and/or substitute approaches will need to be constructed around ingredients that can be seen to have worked ('*practices that work*'). It will be necessary to find those approaches which work, given the state of institutional development in any given country. For example, existing forms of participation can readily be employed, but a more complex or comprehensive approach to participation might be inappropriate at present. Information on this should surface through stakeholder dialogues at all levels and be agreed - to the extent possible - by consensus. Future approaches will redress the 'policy inflation/capacity collapse' problem by emphasizing capacity development for:

- information generation;
- debate;
- analysis, especially cross-sectoral (e.g. for assessing impacts);
- valuation;
- conflict resolution; and
- consensus-building.

Such improvements in capacity should suit different forms of political and institutional environment and are applied individually or in aggregate.

Furthermore, from international experience in developing and implementing nssd's over the last decade, we can now identify a range of challenges that will need to be addressed if nssd's are to become more effective. Annex 1 lists a range of such perceived challenges. But these perceptions need to be refined and others identified and addressed.

4. PROMOTING STRATEGIC ANALYSIS, DEBATE AND ACTION

In any country, following such an approach of strategic analysis, debate and action for moving towards sustainable development would involve, *inter alia*:

- facilitating a process of stakeholder dialogues on key sustainable development issues and processes (that work) for sustainable development;

- within this context, reviewing the recent experience in undertaking nssd's and equivalent initiatives (including Convention-related action plans);

- developing capacities to analyse, debate and act strategically for making the transition to sustainable development; and

- identifying how international cooperation agencies can best help in this process.

Some suggested basic elements of such an approach are shown in Box 4.

Box 4: Strategic Analysis, Debate and Action: An Iterative Approach

- Country baseline surveys (interviews, meetings, etc.) to;

  - gather information on a core list of key sustainable issues as well as other important factors;
  - provide multiple perspectives on the nature, adequacy and effectiveness of the main decision-making process(es) that are dealing with the issues;
  - assess the type and degree of involvement of different actors; and, in this context, and
  - evaluate the relevance of the existing strategy, and its influence and impact on national policy-making and development actions.

- Round tables;
- Workshops, discussion groups, other participatory processes (national-local levels); Iteration, funneling of lessons, surfacing of approaches;
- Evolving country 'case-books' (to capture the flow of the process and the emerging lessons) and preparation of country reports;
- Initiating more in-depth follow-up, where possible;
- Promoting improved approaches to NSDSs - processes of strategic analysis, debate and action for sustainable development;
- Promoting capacity development for such approaches; and
- Liaison and collaboration with governments, UNDP and donors.

Stakeholder dialogues

This would need to be an iterative process over time (probably at least as much as one year, possibly longer) and involve a range of approaches including, for example, semi-structured interviews with individuals, discussion groups, a series of round tables and workshops, and other participatory approaches at national to local levels - as appropriate or feasible.

Box 5 gives an example of a round table process that IIED and NESDA are following in a number of African countries over the next two years. The round tables will focus on priority themes and are intended to complement the other dialoguing and provide periodic fora for reflection, learning and consensus-building.

Outcomes

The process would aim to provide a funnel for information, issues, experiences and lessons on approaches that can be effective in providing a framework for thinking and acting strategically about sustainable development. It should also identify hitherto missing and critical elements (including traditional, political, and private sector approaches) that may be required to build a process that has a chance of being accepted across government and society and being genuinely influential. The outcome should be an indication of what an improved nssd process should look like and also what external assistance might be required.

Follow-Up and Role of Donors

The process of stakeholder dialogues should make it (increasingly) apparent what a more effective and nationally-relevant NSDS process should involve in a country. In response to the needs and priorities identified, more in-depth follow-up activities/processes may need to be pursued.

Box 5: Outline Country Round Table Agenda

In their work in sub-Saharan African countries, IIED and NESDA are proposing to adopt a round tabling process as part of country stakeholder dialoguing. Issues will be scoped in the round tables, sometimes based on overview papers. It is envisaged that the definition of issues at the round tables will progressively help to structure analysis, which will then be taken forward for further debate in subsequent focus group meetings and round tables.

Round table 1 (Scoping):

(a) *Brief overview of positive and negative changes in sustainable development (SD) in the last five years:*

- historical and political time line of main changes/events
- general progress in:
  - understanding SD issues
  - agreeing/planning SD responses
  - implementing SD
- What are the key areas for attention ?

(b) *Preliminary identification of the NSDS or equivalent(s):*

- Where can the NSDS be correlated with key positive changes ?
- Where it has helped, what component institutions and processes have been useful ?

(c*) Preliminary identification of international issues affecting progress towards SD:*

- Development assistance
- Policy coherence (e.g. aid, trade, investment, agriculture, environment)
- Harmonising a "new" idea of an NSDS that is useful locally and acceptable internationally as a vehicle for taking forward national obligations

Round table 2 (Processes that Work):

(d) *Identifying institutions and processes that work:*

- Key actors, institutions, policies, processes, projects, programmes, and procedures that have contributed to the progress identified above - through providing better information, analysis, debate fora, consensus-building, and instruments for action
- Those used in the NSDS
- Others in political, governmental, civil society and market areas
- Others from the international scene

Round table 3 (Ingredients for an improved approach):

(e) *The role and form of an improved approach to an NSDS:*

- Bringing together the above into a concept for a useful approach to an NSDS, e.g.:
  ↓ a way of co-ordinating indigenous processes and institutions that work ?
  ↓ a framework for identifying and addressing SD issues tactically through the above ?
  ↓ a set of criteria by which a local NSDS can "match up" with international requirements as laid down in Agenda 21

(f) *The role of international co-operation in the above*

Countries would be in a strong position to articulate their goals for sustainable development, and their needs and priorities, at international fora, and to negotiate with donors how the latter can provide assistance to

- promote an improved approach to NSDSs - an ongoing structured process for strategic analysis, debate and action for sustainable development that builds on the nationally and locally tried and tested approaches that work (as revealed during the stakeholder dialogue); and

- promote capacity development for such approaches.

5 DIFFICULTIES AND DILEMMAS

Individual strategies are often claimed to be successful on the basis that they are beginning to tackle systemic environment/development problems. In some cases, however, the "success" of a given strategy might more easily be ascribed to just a few of its components, as opposed to the strategy as a whole. Therefore, a fundamental question is to what extent is a national, comprehensive strategy or action plan fundamental to sustainable development ? Agenda 21 assumes it is, but is not clear about the exact ways in which national strategies may be helpful, and about precedents for success, and about any complements that must accompany them.

The 1996 Directory of Country Environmental Studies (WRI, 1996)- a product of the INTERAISE Project[1] shows that there are numerous environmental plans, profiles and strategies. Many of these appear to exist in parallel with national policy affairs, rather than as an integral part of them. It is, therefore, legitimate to ask: do they really serve the purposes of sustainable development, and are they properly understood, subscribed to, and acted upon? There is reason to be cynical, particularly when 'anti-planning' governments agreed to no less than five new types of action plans and strategies to be prepared at a national level after UNCED. Governments especially have a propensity to call for the preparation of such 'plans', particularly as a result of international initiatives. International agencies, international NGOs and consultancy companies - eternally concerned with finding legitimate roles and making order out of apparent chaos - also tend to favour such plans, and often benefit financially by becoming involved in their development.

A number of "alternative" purposes of strategies may be postulated:

- to initiate real change (in a situation of tremendous change - as depicted in Figure 1 - and flux in economies, faced with major environmental change and with a lack of precedent about how to deal with such extensive change, developing *plans* and *strategies* is the accepted means to set out the issues and options);

- to rationalise the status quo - repackaging and justifying existing short-term, unsustainable approaches in the language of sustainable development;

- more cynically, to create a delaying tactic, or a 'smokescreen', or a way of marginalising some interests, thus ensuring inaction on challenging issues; or

[1] INTERAISE: The International Environmental and Natural Resource Assessment Information Service, a project undertaken collaboratively by IIED, WRI AND IUCN and sponsored by members of the OECD Development Assistance Committeee (DAC).

- more narrowly, to 'spin' money by paying the professional fees of those engaged in strategy preparation.

The point is that strategies could easily end up as unproductive and even damaging efforts (eg, by tying up skilled personnel who are needed elsewhere, by diverting financial resources needed for other priorities, or by raising expectations which cannot be satisfied), whilst at the same time giving the impression of there having been a rational process to agree on priorities. This also runs the risk of prejudicing the ideas of sustainable development, participation and multi-sector approaches. The challenge is to think about these possible implications - to address the possible dilemmas and not merely to go through the motions of the tasks involved in developing a strategy. The principal question is not **what** should be done for sustainable development - it is easy to create a "planner's dream" - rather, as we have argued above, **how** it should be done, and **who** should do it.

Below, we briefly consider several dilemmas which must be faced by those contemplating or responsible for developing an nssd or similar initiative:

- The political context
- What is the key objective ?
- Building strategic capacity - a single spine discipline or a tool kit approach ?
- Boundary issues - the scope problem
- Multiple national strategies
- The limits of consultation and participation

Our aim is to stimulate discussion; not to provide answers.

Dilemma One: The Political Context

Political considerations represent a critical boundary condition in working towards sustainable development. Strategies need to face up to great structural constraints and inequalities in local, national and international power structures, i.e. they must grapple with political issues. Strategies are also about defining values and making choices, which are overwhelmingly political tasks.

The critical questions are:

- Who makes the choices ?
- Who will be the winners and losers ?
- How far are political means, and democracy in particular, required as processes for making the choices ? and
- How much must the strategy process therefore overlap with party politics ?

These issues are important because the answers collectively determine *who* prepares the strategy, *how* (through what processes) and in *whose* interests.

Some of the likely agenda items for an nssd are already highly politically-charged, such as land ownership, environmental degradation and poverty. At the very least, the nssd process must be strongly aware of the political dimensions of the issues with which it attempts to deal. Strategies could misinform, and misdirect efforts, if they give the impression that politically neutral planning alone can deal with such issues.

At a more ambitious extreme, however, the long-term goal of an nssd could be to create an *alternative* national consensus. After all, the scope of Agenda 21 was arguably almost as wide as politics and government itself.

Many observers have commented that significant progress towards sustainable development can be achieved only in a democratic society, where "stakeholders" have reasonable opportunities to engage in planning and decision-making processes. This observation, however, does not deal with the complexity of the issue. The answer to the question "is democracy necessary for a successful strategy?" really depends upon how democracy is defined. If it means effective representative systems and participation, the answer is "yes, democracy is needed".

However, the answer is "no" if democracy means the supremacy of an individual's rights to produce and consume irrespective of the effects on others. The answer is also "no" if the electoral cycle means politicians push short-term goals to win votes from individuals with strong aspirations to consume more resources, as opposed to doing what is sustainable in the long term. Many would argue that radical change is necessary for sustainable development, because of the inequality prevalent in distribution of resources and in the costs and benefits of their use. Yet democracy has tended to lead to slow incrementalism, and is not good at introducing radical change.

An important question, therefore, is whether it is the intention of a nssd - or whether its effect will be - to bypass the current democratic process in a country, or to accelerate it, or to supplement it ? We suggest a middle course. It is clear, as we have discussed above, that some form of participation is necessary in a strategy. It is suggested that a broad range of political views is represented amongst participants, but that party politics do not form the main forum for strategy formulation. A key element in developing a successful strategy is to identify, and support, a pluralist *national* "engine" to drive and manage the strategy (comprising mixed government, private sector, academic and community interests which, between them, will cover a broad political spectrum) - but also to link it up effectively with many *local* interests throughout the country. NGOs and local authorities may form better links and catalysts than can the party political system - at least initially - for the capturing of many perspectives and the generation of commitment. Party politics tends to polarise the issues; sustainable development, in contrast, may be more easily negotiated with a committed "middle ground" of interest groups. Whilst such a national-level "engine" alone can result in the realistic, broad definition of needs and issues, it certainly cannot result in nation-wide understanding and commitment.

Sustainable development will entail quite radical changes in institutional roles - and for this reason, in some circumstances, it may be quite legitimate for governments to start with a strategy which concentrates on government roles and especially their integration, before going on to a wider, participatory process. This may well be the case for highly-developed government systems, which perceive risks of moving from centralised, sectoral norms towards more experimental, integrated, participatory modes of operating.

Dilemma Two: What is the Key Objective ?

Governments have started on processes to develop nssd's for various reasons - sometimes to promote domestic development agendas, but commonly in response to their commitments under Agenda 21 or international conventions and agreements and, in the past, also in order to satisfy World Bank requirements to qualify for loans (this requirement was removed under in the mid-1990s for IDA-11 loans). Very often strategy objectives change during the process - either as the result of local negotiation or (rather more negatively) because of external impositions. In Tanzania, for example, in 1994, a short consultancy exercise to write a NEAP document was

virtually imposed on the country as the World Bank lost patience with the slow progress of developing the National Conservation Strategy for Sustainable Development.

If the prime intention of the nssd is to provide an *environmental* "report card" - and in a form that is useful to the policy process - then the end-product will be very different from one designed to elicit broader policy changes.

On the other hand, a true strategy for *sustainable development* will need to enrich the policy debate with issues of productivity and equity as well as environmental sustainability. It will need to identify the gap between the current situation and a realistic scenario of sustainable development. It will need to continually chart a course through a period of transition to sustainability, and identify the benefits and costs to different groups on the way. It will need to be based on adaptability in the face of change, rather than resisting change by propping up the status quo. The iterative or cyclical process that this entails will be far more open-ended than a traditional, one-off planning exercise or "report card".

There can be no key or sacrosanct objective; different groups will want to achieve different things by preparing nssd's. The point is that the constituency involved needs to agree on objectives, and the final objectives should determine the process - and not the reverse of this, as has often happened. In the past, all too many strategic plans have been driven by process considerations, and their promoters have been surprised when they fail to meet any objective at all. Even worse, some processes have been set up that are simply ignored when the outcomes are surprising or conflict with the promoters' hidden agenda.

Dilemma Three: Building Strategic Capacity - a Single Spine Discipline or a Tool Kit Approach?

Many nssd's to date have focused on conservation and physical planning. However, it is now well accepted that sustainable development is about the more fundamental tasks of balancing social, environmental and economic objectives. It can be contended that economics should be the central discipline for balancing these objectives. It is certainly true that economic analysis often drives national policy and planning processes. It is also argued that economics should provide a common "currency" for comparison. It is certainly the case at present that options for sustainable development need to be approved by the economists who advise key ministries such as the treasury, and who are central to corporate planning. The world to some extent hangs upon the economist's decisions, even though it is acknowledged that economics has been ill-equipped to handle many environmental and social issues ("externalities" which are considered outside the main structure of the discipline) and to handle the needs of many who are too poor to operate through the market system.

One major problem with making economics the 'spine discipline' of the strategy process is that there is still a world shortage of environmentally-literate economists; and indeed, few strategy processes have yet involved economists beyond cost-benefit analyses of the projects in their action plans. A further problem is that sustainable development must entail decision-making and other institutional improvements which are not circumscribed by an instrumentalist, economics-based viewpoint. Hence, in involving economists in strategies, there must be room to bring in other disciplines and participatory processes to develop these improvements. The policy challenge of making the necessary trade-offs is to balance "science" with "participation". In other words, the various social science, environmental science and economics disciplines need to be complemented by a wide range of people-centred approaches which capture local values, knowledge, opinions and other perspectives, and gain local commitment. No one group is able to speak for the others' values and ideas, or able to engender their commitment.

Others may contend that law will increasingly become a central discipline for future strategies - as we move away from strategies which emphasise projects and investment alone, towards those which lay out fundamental change in institutions and the distribution of resources.

We believe that what is needed is an interdisciplinary approach that uses different disciplines, often working together in interdisicplinary techniques, to improve the decision-making process, and is linked to processes of public participation. The total system must be able to acknowledge different perspectives and deal with uncertainties, but it must also have the qualities that enable decisiveness - such as those that law and economics can offer.

Many methods of analysis can contribute to these processes: by building up a picture of the tasks necessary to promote sustainable development (e.g. political change, good governance, institutional coordination, equitable resource distribution, etc.); by offering resources which can be applied to those tasks; and by contributing to the development of a national consensus leading to purposive action. The emerging approach of Strategic Environmental Assessment offers an important platform for integration and inter-disciplinary analysis (Dalal-Clayton and Sadler 1998a,b).

In examining past strategies, it is possible to conclude that the capacity of agencies, communities and other groups undertake strategic analysis, debate and action (i.e. to think and work strategically) is at least as important as any strategy exercise or plan. We know that we cannot "plan" our way into sustainable development, which entails close awareness of changes, and appropriate adaptation. Yet there have been considerable problems in strategies in finding people who know how to work strategically, and in identifying institutions that support this approach. Time and again, people involved in strategies have become wrapped up in the minutiae of detail, and of short-term objectives - both by inclination and because the institutional environment forces them to do this. Extensive training, and the creation of institutional environments that encourage and reward strategic (i.e. participatory, adaptive, collaborative) working styles, will be necessary for truly cyclical nssd's. This is one reason why a government-only strategy may not be a bad idea initially - to help government get its own house in order before entering a more fully participatory effort.

Dilemma Four: Boundary Issues - The Scope Problem

Implementing Agenda 21 raises a number of boundary issues. Sustainability defined locally will have national sustainability implications and *vice versa*; and sustainability defined nationally will have regional and global implications and *vice versa*. At any level, it is possible to avoid the need for contentious trade-offs by "importing sustainability", but this just transfers the problem elsewhere. A key dilemma here is that of sustainable consumption, an issue which is greatly resisted in many industrialised countries.

(a) *How to tackle controversial and uncertain boundary issues such as "ecological footprints" and the rights to access and shares of "environmental space" ?*

If we accept the concept of sustainable development, we must acknowledge that there are resource limits, and that greater equity in the use of resources is desirable. Sustainable development rests on two fundamental propositions: first, that the world has limited carrying capacity to support human and other populations; and second, that within these limits priority should be given to meeting the needs of the poorest. In the run-up to Rio and since, there has been an explosion of new and vivid phrases designed to capture the prevailing sense that the industrialised world is consuming more than its 'fair share' of global resources. These include

"environmental space", "ecological footprints", "shadow economies" and "ecological rucksacks" (Mileudefensie 1992; McNeill *et al.* 1992; Rees 1992; Schmidt-Bleek 1992).

How can we interpret these concepts in practice ? For example, is ecological space defined per nation, or per individual ? How is the appropriation of ecological space by another person, group or nation (i.e. the ecological footprint) to be compensated for ? And should such compensation cover historical appropriations ? If it should, the USA, for example, might owe amounts in the order of the national debt for historic emissions of greenhouse gases (calculated at rates that are currently being mooted for carbon taxes). Who should be the recipients of such compensation ? The concepts of 'environmental space' and 'ecological footprints' have been considered in some detail in the Netherlands and Canada, respectively (Box 6).

Box 6: Environmental Space and Ecological Footprints

In its "Action Plan for a Sustainable Netherlands" published in April 1992, the Dutch Friends of the Earth, Milieudefensie, made a rough calculation of available per capita global carrying capacity (or 'environmental space') for key energy, water, raw materials and arable land resources. It then identified the cuts in current consumption levels necessary in the Netherlands to return to sustainable levels by 2010: these ranged from 40% for fresh water to 80% for aluminium use. As a result of these and other calculations, the Dutch government was one of the few at Rio to acknowledge that it could only sustain its lifestyle by exploiting the carrying capacity of other countries (VROM, 1991).

The parallel concept of 'ecological footprints' was coined by William Rees to describe the tendency of urban areas "through trade and natural flows to appropriate the carrying capacity of distant elsewheres". Looking specifically at the Lower Fraser Valley of British Columbia, Canada, Rees found that the land area required to support the community (in other words, its 'ecological footprint') was at least 20 times the land it occupies. Looking at the issue from a Southern perspective, Anil Agarwal at the Centre for Science and Environment in India has estimated that the total biomass currently exported from the developing world to industrialised countries is 10 times greater than during the colonial period (Weiszacker, 1994). These exports of carrying capacity do not necessarily pose a problem if they are drawing on true ecological surpluses, and if enough remains for meeting local needs. Currently, there is no guarantee that trade flows are really based on these principles.

These issues have great implications for sovereignty, trade, inter- and intra-generational equity. They raise the issue of **needs** (as opposed to **demands**, which are exercised through the market place, and hence are amenable to economic analysis). They also make the issue of changing values - away from welfare based on material consumption - inescapable. To an extent, all these issues can be dealt with through attention to increasing efficiency. Some of the issues may be dealt with through international agreements, or through payments for "global services". Either way, there has to be acknowledgement that people at one level - e.g. the nation - are giving something up in order to provide benefits for people at another level - e.g. the world as a whole. Two needs follow from this. The first is that the strategy process at each level needs to be able to capture information on these cross-boundary issues. The second is that there should be cross-boundary processes of negotiation and compensation to deal with these issues. Within a nation, NGOs, local authorities, and participatory processes offer promise for such cross-boundary brokerage. Internationally, the UN system and other intergovernmental bodies offer some promise. At the moment, the UN Commission on Sustainable Development is concentrating on information on sustainability; this is a good basis for future resource payments based on who is subsidising whose consumption.

Governments are also struggling to understand how the above concepts can be incorporated in their strategy processes. At the international level, a debate has now started on how to operationalise these ideas within the drive towards 'sustainable consumption'. At the national level, a few countries have 'flagged' the issue in their strategies. For example, the Dutch placed the idea of 'environmental space' at the heart of their second National Environmental Policy Plan, launched in December 1993 (VROM, 1993), while the UK chose to adopt the 'footprint' phrase to describe the positive and negative impacts of its economic activities on global and overseas carrying capacity in its first strategy for sustainable development (HMSO, 1994).

But governments have steered clear of addressing the host of controversial issues that lurk beneath the surface. The governments of the North are generally reticent about the redistributive implications of these concepts, fearing a return to the debates of the New International Economic Order in the 1970s. And although the South has called for adequate 'environmental space' for its future development, developing countries are also uneasy about actions that the industrialised North might take to reduce its 'footprint', which could lead to further obstacles to their exports. It is becoming increasingly clear that notions of 'environmental space' and 'ecological footprints' challenge head-on commonly accepted interpretations of sovereignty and trade policy, and raise perplexing issues for the inter-generational management of global resources. Some of these issues could be dealt with through a new set of international environmental agreements, whereby countries could trade their quotas of 'environmental space' for financial support. Development assistance could thus be transformed from a humanitarian obligation to a payment for ecological services received.

Before such trading can take place, a far greater degree of popular understanding is needed of the ecological entanglement being created by the accelerating process of globalisation. A first priority is for strategy processes in North and South to capture pertinent information on these cross-boundary issues. For an industrialised country, this could mean closer scrutiny of the impacts of private sector direct investments and portfolio investments in emerging markets; while for a developing country, more attention could be placed on the social and environmental consequences of commodity diversification. Beyond this, new frameworks for dialogue and negotiation need to be developed both at a bilateral and multilateral level.

(b) *What relationship should regional strategies have to national strategies ? Which leads ?*

Nations need to realise that democratic, intergovernmental bodies are required to negotiate, legislate and enforce rules of access to "global commons" and to deal with cross-boundary sustainability impacts. It may frequently be better to begin such efforts at the regional level, where strong and tangible common concerns can be identified.

In some parts of the world, regional strategies and overviews on the theme of sustainable development have been prepared. Examples from before UNCED include the Mediterranean Blue Plan (MBPRAC 1988), the Kampala Agenda of Action Towards Sustainable Development in Africa (1989), and 'Our Own Agenda' of the Latin American and Caribbean Commission on Development and Environment (LACCDE 1990). In 1993, the comprehensive "Environmental Action Programme for Central and Eastern Europe" spelled out a process to equalize environmental conditions in the East and West, with an emphasis on the urban environment.

The question arises as to which strategies and plans should take precedence.

In Western Europe, the environmental dimension has become an increasingly critical part of the European Community's programme of economic and political union. Following the 1972 Stockholm Conference, the European Economic Community launched the first of five multi-

annual environmental action programmes to define policy and legislative priorities at the regional level. One major result has been the construction of an impressive array of EC environmental law, which member states are obliged to implement.

The history of the Community's current fifth environmental action programme reveals, however, that the question of the right balance between Community and member states is far from resolved (CEC, 1993). Launched in March 1992 by the European Commission, the EC's administrative arm, the
programme - appropriately entitled 'Towards Sustainability' - received little prior input from member governments. Once published, a procedural quirk meant that member states could neither change the text of the programme, nor update it in light of the Rio conference. Instead, the 12 environment ministers agreed a resolution that approved the general approach of the programme, laying down their EC-wide priorities for implementation. As a result of this process, some governments, notably the UK, lack a sense of ownership over the fifth programme. One consequence was the playing-down of the EC dimension in the UK's own strategy for sustainable development (HMSO, 1994).

But strategy-making for sustainable development in the EC has also fallen victim to the after-shocks of the debate on 'subsidiarity' that shook the Community during the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992. Defined as "placing decisions at the most appropriate level", 'subsidiarity' has sometimes become a code-word for limiting the scope of Community-level action, and returning power to the member states. In the environmental policy context, this has meant that the Commission has been reluctant to consider any close coordination of the fifth programme with the national strategies that all member states have committed themselves to delivering as part of the follow-up to Agenda 21.

Although 'turf disputes' over legal competence, power and resources are unlikely to go away, the accelerating economic and political integration in Europe and other regions means that a more sophisticated and open process of strategy-making will have to be developed, linking creatively the regional, national and local levels. One critical challenge is to find ways whereby meaningful participation can be engineered for regional strategies that goes beyond consultation with alliances of environmental or industrial lobby groups.

Regional strategies do not appear to be built upon pre-existing national ones. Rather they tend to be developed as independent exercises by ad hoc teams and without national involvement. Furthermore, they usually involve no public participation. In fact, national publics are generally ignorant about such strategies and they receive little press coverage.

(c) *How should local Agenda 21s (or local strategies) be related to national strategies. Again, which leads ?*

National strategies can set broad policy aims and provide institutional and legal impetus and structures to foster sustainable development. But the real action and business of implementing sustainable development is undertaken by 'ordinary' people at the local level. A national strategy cannot be simply converted into provincial, district or more local strategies, particularly in large countries. Issues which are key at a national level may not be important locally, and *vice versa*. It is important, therefore, that the development of local strategies should not merely flesh out a template provided by the national strategy, but should also be driven by local priorities. Such local experience can then positively contribute to the further development and revision of national strategies. Indeed, many national strategies are now at a stage where, to be realistic and implementable, local issues and action need to be defined. National strategies tend to be based on analyses of sectoral or resource issues; but local strategies more easily encompass livelihood issues, which are key to attending to the problems of power structure and access to resources

which currently constrain sustainable development. Building sustainable development thus needs to be a two-way process, linking national and more local concerns, priorities and experiences.

Dilemma Five: Multiple National Strategies

Different strategies and related initiatives have often overlapped in time, scope and content. They have also frequently displaced, undermined or duplicated good past strategies or existing strategy processes, causing confusion and exasperation amongst local staff responsible for their preparation, and ensuring that they are run as fast-track bureaucratic processes, as opposed to participatory processes of reflection, planning and joint action.

There has tended to be a presumption that past strategies and plans, including those recently completed, are inadequate, perhaps because of who has prepared them, or because of a perceived difference in objective and mandate. They have frequently been ignored, despite most of them being rich in information, analysis, agreed priorities and commitment. The key problems with them (e.g. lack of implementation capacity) have not been pinpointed and tackled; rather, they have been abandoned wholesale.

The unnecessary proliferation of multiple strategies and plans over a short period wastes money and absorbs needlessly the attention and energies of often hard-pressed staff in government and other institutions, and particularly so when they duplicate or ignore past efforts. But the problem is inexcusable when such strategies are undertaken concurrently. For example, at one stage in Tanzania in the early 1990s, three separate strategies were being developed in parallel, causing confusion and uncertainty: a National Conservation Strategy for Sustainable Development, a National Plan for Agenda 21 (Framework), and a World Bank-promoted NEAP.

The problem of duplication has been compounded further by the The Conventions on Climate Change, Biodiversity and Desertification each of which requires countries to prepare national plans, outlining what measures are needed to deal with problems and meet obligations. The administrative, institutional and financial implications of undertaking so many action plans in addition to preparing an nssd or equivalent, routine development planning (i.e. 5-year plans, etc.) and dealing with other commitments, places a severe burden on most nations, and particularly developing countries. Furthermore, it can overwhelm government staff and other expertise (academics, NGOs, etc.). Either routine duties has to be neglected, or work on these plans is less than thorough or is undertaken in unsatisfactory ways.

In the past, it has been suggested that that a single nssd should provide an umbrella of broad objectives, institutional roles, decision-making and monitoring processes and guidelines, under which more detailed strategies (local or sectoral) should be formulated and implemented. The Forestry Advisory Group, which keeps a watch on the Tropical Forestry Action Programme, recommended this option. It was argued that to be effective, the scope of such an umbrella nssd shuld cover all the issues that these other plans and strategies would need to deal with. Key issues differ in each country. In some, they may, in fact, be the same key issues that a climate, biodiversity or desertification strategy would embrace. For instance, in Sahelian countries, it would be likely that the key issues for sustainable development would be the same ones that would emerge as paramount in a desertification plan or strategy, e.g. water availability, land degradation, pastoral land tenure, etc. In the countries of East Africa, biodiversity issues would be likely to emerge as key issues in any umbrella nssd. In most countries, those steps necessary to plan effectively for climate change would be the same ones that would be necessary for

working towards sustainable development, since both depend upon building capacities for resilience and adaptation.

The idea of a single umbrella nssd has a neat logic. But as we have already pointed out, in practice, countries have adopted mutliple responses to the challenge of sustainable development. The dilemma of navigating amongst, and seeking synergy and harmony between, these multiple strategies is likely to remain.

Dilemma Six: The Limits of Consultation and Participation

There are a number of risks associated with consultation and participation and, as yet, not too many precedents for dealing with them in a strategy context:

- The vision/direction of the strategy may be less clear initially, given the fact that multiple perspectives need to be incorporated. It may, therefore, take more time to focus on agreed priorities.

- The relatively high costs of initial iterations of consultation and participation frequently cause a premature halt to these activities. The costs of locating, meeting and discussing with the different actors, and of giving them time and resources to consult with their own constituencies, need to be incurred before launching into the strategy policies and action plans. Yet the sponsors of the strategy may be impatient for these products.

- Momentum may be lost, as the time taken for participatory strategies is longer.

- The necessary balanced approach to social, environmental and economic problems may be more difficult to reach if a single system of analysis is not dominant. However, real life is much more complex than single systems of analysis, and it is healthy not to be able to over-simplify.

- Control over critical resources (e.g. environmental quality) may be lost if responsibilities become spread too thinly amongst participants.

- If improperly managed, participatory processes can result in expectations being raised too high or covering inappropriate issues; too many issues being identified than can be dealt with; and impasses and conflicts if consensus or compromise cannot be reached.

These risks could be minimised through good planning for participation, and good management of the participation process. In addition, a number of challenges need to be faced in the task of building appropriate participation into a strategy:

- How to overcome the professional biases of planners and professionals who may not believe that it is worth consulting the people ? This will entail bringing in the evolving new techniques for assessing the "trustworthiness" of the results of participation, and hence putting these results on a par with the "statistically sound" results of scientific appproaches.

- How to turn professionals from "experts" to facilitators; and to ensure that the strategy, and the professionals' inputs, are considered to have a mandate given to them by local groups ?

- When to bring in conflict resolution ? To a certain extent, consultation and participation can focus on "win-win" situations, where different groups can get together to achieve joint objectives. Many strategies have emphasised these. After a time, however, it becomes clear that "win-win" possibilities are limited, and progress is constrained by issues of conflict (e.g. the many uses of a large forest by different actors) and the critical issue is to determine

- How can the tendency for plans and strategies to centralise and to become top-heavy and top-down be countered; what is the appropriate balance between centralisation and decentralisation ?

- The nssd presupposes a high degree of social partnership and decentralisation of decision-making and independent action. Is this realistic given the attitudes of many governments to local government and, beyond that, extra-parliamentary decision-making ?

- The participatory aspects of an nssd presuppose an ethically-motivated, educated and socially-aware public. What if the public is simply not interested in the issues of sustainable development ? Clearly, a two-way process of education and consultation is needed.

Some of the approaches to dealing with these challenges may include:

- Institutional reviews of the main agencies that should be promoting and supporting participation (because they have a cross-sectoral mandate, or deal with a resource that is used by many interest groups);

- Training in participatory methodologies (which form a good first step in defining and creating appropriate institutional and professional change);

- Close monitoring of early strategy participation exercises, and particularly their risks; and

- Promotion at high levels of the benefits of consultation and participation.

6 Conclusions

Developing and implementing national strategies for sustainable development requires holistic tactics which seek to integrate environmental, social and economic objectives, where possible.

Traditional policy-making is not useful for complex systems, or for goals which are not the concern of government alone - such as sustainable development. Here, an interactive, strategic approach is required. But this clearly is not the same as just writing a "strategic plan". From experience so far, a strategy in itself may have assured that a comprehensive view of a subject has been taken; but this may not have been the most strategic thing to do! Hence, while we can suggest that preparing an nssd can be a "policy that works", it is only one of many ways to be strategic.

Successful policies tend to evolve over time. Rarely are they deliberately integrated. Such deliberate strategic planning has always been difficult, even for individual sectors, e.g. in a country like Finland where many people and sectors have a clear involvement in forests. The

transition from exploitation towards sustainable forest management in certain temperate countries has been made through incremental responses in association with general economic and societal trends, political awareness and public opinion. Careful monitoring/adaptation is important to move towards gradual integration of policies for sustainable forest management. This implies the need to look at successful examples of incrementalism vs. radical change.

In the context of sustainable development, any one policy should be compatible with other policies. However, it would be a counsel of perfection to suggest that policies must be integrated initially, since not all possible fields of conflict can be foreseen, nor may it be politically apt to raise potential sources of conflict. It is at the stage of policy implementation that any strains become obvious, and here there is an obvious merit in strategic approaches to gradually get close to the goal of policy integration for sustainable development.

Participatory monitoring, round tables, political debates, and other strategic methods can be invaluable for this. Strategy experience so far (particularly NCSs and NEAPs) should have taught us about how and when to use these strategic approaches.

It is these capabilities - to think and operate strategically - and obtaining the space within which we can operate strategically - which should now be stressed. Strategy experiences to date have started the process of creating that space. Yet there is now a danger that the proliferation of international requirements for strategic plans - for biodiversity, climate, desertification and sustainable development - will not actually result in such strategic capability. Rather, if followed to the letter, "strategic planning" as a methodology could result in countries preparing more overly-comprehensive plans to which no-one but a donor is committed.

Countries have four years to meet the UNGASS target of having a sustainable development strategy in place by 2002. The target provides a stimulus to rethink approaches to developing such strategies, to listen to the views of stakeholders about what would be useful - and what already works - in domestic circumstances, and to support processes which address priority issues and needs. In this way, by 2002, there should be in place not just a series of country strategy documents. but real national processes making a real difference.

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Annex 1:

Challenges for More Effective Strategic Analysis, Debate and Action for Sustainable Development

A number of perceived challenges were identified during a workshop held at IIED in November 1997.

(a) Scoping of Need - a needs assessment is required which:

- provides a baseline assessment of conditions and needs at national to local levels;
- identifies available skills & training needs;
- identifies the pre-conditions for a strategy process; and
- enables the bureaucracy to look at the 'big picture' rather than its own domain.

(b) Conceptual Framework - this should:

- provide a strategy design which reflects the needs assessment;
- ensure clear relationship between objectives and implementation;
- identifies the broad framework for the strategy is, e.g sustainable development, natural resources, biodiversity, etc.;
- makes sure that the strategy is integrated into macro- and micro-economic framework(s);
- ensures the strategy adapts and builds on existing plans and strategies for coherence;
- ensures that the strategy is cyclical (not a one-off project), is not too product-oriented, and sets priorities.

(c) Process

(i) Communications strategy is required which:

- captures and systematically shares experiences through networks;
- seeks to sensitize governments and raise awareness levels;
- ensures written outputs are easy to read and accessible to all;
- provides for communication with all interested and affected parties; and
- ensures the strategy is an iterative and learning process.

(ii) Participation (stakeholders) - the strategy process needs to be:

- truly participatory involving as many stakeholders as possible;
- build alliances and partnerships;
- bring stakeholders on board from the beginning;
- improve environmental management at the sub-national and local level; and there is a need to
- develop indicators for effective and relevant participation.

(d) Analytical and Policy Content - strategies need to***:***

- address the poverty and social agenda;
- pay more attention to changing consumption and production patterns;
- involve better use of economic analysis;
- integrate gender issues in their analysis and development.
- provide for a link between the needs of the Rio Conventions; and
- provide for greater coherence with international policies, e.g. trade, investment, aid, etc;

(e) ***Institutional Arrangements/Cross-Sector Linkages*** **-** strategies processes should address both horizontal (H) and vertical (V) linkages, and:

- be integrated with other decision-making and planning and policy processes [H];
- offer a programme approach to avoid fragmentation of the process and implementation [V +H];
- put in place support systems through decentralisation processes and extension processes [V];
- be developed by strategy teams which take a broader vision [V + H];
- manage co-ordination at all levels [H];
- bridge between levels [V] ;
- address sub-regional environmental problems [V];
- manage/address global issues in national context [V]; and
- focus locally and on ground strategies in local realities [V].

(f) ***Resources (Funding + Human resources)*** **-** there is a need to*:*

- avoid heavy reliance on external funding (need to ensure long-term sustainability of process and implementation);
- develop appropriate skills for strategy management, development and implementation
- deal with problems of high staff turn-over and motivation; and
- assess value-added and opportunity costs for strategic processes.

(g) ***Political Considerations/Issues*** - strategies need to:

- be inspiring for national leaders;
- generate domestic political will and government buy-in to the process;
- mobilise public support;
- build new alliances and constituencies; and
- develop mechanisms for resolving conflicts with vested interests.

(h) ***Donor issues:*** - strategies need to:

- Provide a framework within which donors' contributions can be co-ordinated
- Identify precise areas where donors can help the process;
- Include mechanisms for minimising donor-driven processes;
- Recognise the reality of donor conditionality; and
- Stimulate donors to take a longer term and more flexible approach.

(i) ***Learning (including Monitoring & Evaluation*** **-** there is a need for*:*

- Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems for strategies including clear performance goals and targets, and indicators for sound environmental management;
- Mechanisms for M&E to trigger change or adjustment of strategy process and implementation;
- Measure impact (what works, what doesn't);
- Link to pilot demonstration(s) for action and learning;
- Strong monitoring of performance capacity; and
- Effective M&E for learning from implementation.