



Assisting Developing Countries with the Formulation and Implementation of National Strategies for Sustainable Development: The Need to Clarify DAC Targets and Strategies

Members of the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the OECD met on 11-12 May 1999 at the level of Development Co-operation Ministers and Heads of Aid Agencies. They endorsed the note clarifying the role of development co-operation in assisting partner developing countries in the formulation and implementation of national strategies for sustainable development. This will serve as a reference point for the donor community.

I. Introduction

The OECD Development Assistance Committee's (DAC) strategy document *Shaping the 21st Century: The Contribution of Development Co-operation* (1996), sets a target date of 2005 for national strategies for sustainable development (*nssds*) to be in the process of implementation in every country, so as to ensure that current trends in the loss of environmental resources are effectively reversed by 2015. The document commits DAC Members to support partner developing countries in the formulation and implementation of *nssds*. In 1997, at the UNGASS "Rio + 5" meeting, a target date of 2002 was agreed for the introduction of sustainable development strategies in all countries.

Based on experiences in the past and on extensive discussions within various fora, it is timely to clarify the opportunities and risks presented by the *nssd* target and in particular to specify the role of development co-operation in assisting partner developing countries in the formulation and implementation of *nssds*.

II. Opportunities in Formulating National Strategies for Sustainable Development

The formulation of a *nssd* offers a number of opportunities to integrate the economic, social and environmental goals of sustainable development:

- The formulation of a *nssd* can serve as both a catalyst and an umbrella to reorient a country's existing policies, plans and investment programs towards the goal of improving economic efficiency, social justice, and environmental sustainability simultaneously. *Nssds* offer the opportunity to analyse a country's or region's economic, social and environmental development trends, to take stock of interrelated policies and plans, and to identify key problems. On this basis, *nssds* are a way to formulate strategic goals and begin necessary action towards sustainable development, to design and implement institutional reforms, to improve policy coherence across sectors, and to benefit from synergies. At the regional or sub-regional level, *nssds* offer the opportunity to identify common challenges between neighbouring countries with different social, economic and environmental circumstances and to facilitate the emergence of regional approaches to address them.
- Sustainable development requires the mobilisation of society at large. *Nssds* potentially are new types of participatory planning processes based on continuous democratic dialogues and debates amongst broad sections of society. This involves building ownership in, not only government and administration at all levels, but also in civil society such as the business community, NGOs, the rural and urban communities, the media, the scientific community etc. Thus, *nssds* offer the opportunity to expand the knowledge base amongst all relevant actors on

issues relevant to sustainable development; to promote broad based policy learning and capacity development; to create transparency and awareness of the strategic choices and dilemmas facing a country; and to initiate actions to address them.

- *Nssds* are internationally recognised as the way of giving shape to governments' commitment to the goal of sustainable development as spelt out in Agenda 21, balancing sound technical analysis with participatory planning processes. As such, *nssd* processes acknowledge the dynamics of planning for sustainable development, as they are based on concerted efforts across sectors; and on negotiation, conflict management and crisis prevention.

III. The Need for Clarification of the DAC NSSD Target

Based on experiences with other national planning efforts, e.g. national environmental action plans and national action plans under the various global conventions, there is a need to acknowledge a number of risks in making the formulation of *nssds* a strategic target of development co-operation:

- In the past, many *nssds* or related initiatives had little practical impact because they focused mainly on the production of a document as an end-product. While the preparation of strategic documents plays a role in mobilising stakeholders and identifying common objectives, making the formulation of a *nssd* a strategic target of development co-operation could lead partner developing countries and donor agencies to concentrate efforts on the preparation of expert documents while neglecting the process dimension of *nssd* formulation and the environmental change results, thereby missing crucial opportunities.
- The *nssd* target could be perceived by partner developing countries and donor agencies as yet another addition to existing planning and reporting requirements. There is a risk that a further proliferation of planning processes, notably in response to international conventions, could overburden government departments and divert resources and attention from concrete development activities to planning exercises which are overlapping and duplicative.
- Setting a uniform timeframe for all countries bears the risk of neglecting the specific needs and circumstances of a country. *Nssd* formulation needs to take account of the differing situations with regard to, e.g. the practicalities of participation by civil society, levels of governance and democracy, the capacities of NGOs and the media, availability of information and the environmental situations confronting the country. Large countries might need to prepare plans at decentralised or sector focused levels first, before engaging in a *nssd*.

Clarifying the Role of Development Co-operation

1. The DAC should reconfirm its commitment to support partner developing countries in formulation and implementation of *nssds*. However, the *nssd* target as spelt out in the DAC *Shaping the 21st Century* document should be clarified to highlight the opportunities offered by *nssds* and to minimise the risks involved. In particular, the following clarifications should be made:

- *Nssds* should be recognised as strategic and participatory processes encompassing analysis, democratic debate, capacity development, planning and action towards sustainable development. Partner developing countries and donor agencies should focus their efforts on designing and organising the process of *nssd* preparation, rather than on the preparation of planning documents as such. Partner developing countries and donors should acknowledge the complexity of *nssd* processes and make sure that investments in products, processes and results are balanced accordingly.
- The fact that the DAC target on *nssds* is linked to environmental sustainability goals should not be interpreted to imply that *nssds* are primarily environmental plans. Partner countries and donors should seek ways to ensure that *nssd* processes address all aspects of sustainable

development, *i.e.* economic efficiency and social justice as well as environmental sustainability. Efforts should be made to mainstream *nssds* in overarching development strategies, *i.e.* by involving non-environment staff in donor agencies and by increasing communication and co-operation between different government departments.

- All efforts should be made to avoid a diversion of capacities through further proliferation of plans. There is a need to understand *nssds* as an umbrella, building on existing plans, seeking synergies, improving policy coherence across sectors and strengthening co-ordination, including notably amongst donors. It should be acknowledged that *nssds* can have many different promoters and entry points, *e.g.* government or NGOs; national planning or local initiatives; environmental and other sectoral plans; and international convention commitments.
- It should be emphasised that government commitment and ownership by all relevant stakeholders including civil society are crucial for *nssds* to mobilise capacity for implementation. Therefore, the *nssd* target should be understood as a long term commitment by DAC Members to assist partner developing countries in formulating and implementing their *nssds* and to make maximum use of the opportunities involved with *nssd* processes, rather than as a requirement to produce planning documents.
- The timeframe set out in the *nssd* target should be interpreted as a timeframe for achieving progress, rather than as a strict deadline. In this context, monitoring progress should be based on indicators reflecting the quality of the planning and implementation process rather than the existence of planning documents. This should be complemented by efforts to develop the necessary capacity to monitor actual progress towards sustainability objectives.
- To avoid the risk of overburdening partner countries, attention should focus in the first instance on selected priority initiatives likely to have a big impact on sustainable development prospects and where rapid and visible progress is achievable.
- Since *nssds* are a new type of strategy, donors should, in partnership with developing countries, work towards elaborating best practices in assisting developing countries in the formulation and implementation of *nssds*. In pursuit of this objective, key institutional processes, factors of effectiveness, indicators of implementation progress and priorities for donor support and improved co-ordination should be identified and widely disseminated.