

# **Report of the International Forum on National Sustainable Development Strategies**

Accra, Ghana  
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## **I. Background**

1. At the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), governments made a commitment to adopt national strategies for sustainable development: “Governments, in cooperation where appropriate with international organisations, should adopt a national strategy for sustainable development... This strategy should build upon and harmonise the various sectoral, economic, social and environmental policies and plans that are operating in the country”.<sup>1</sup>

2. Five years later, the 1997 Special Session of the UN General Assembly set a target date of 2002, when “the formulation and elaboration of national strategies for sustainable development that reflect the contributions and responsibilities of all interested parties should be completed in all countries, with assistance provided, as appropriate, through international cooperation, taking into account the special needs of the least developed countries”.<sup>2</sup> It confirmed the approach and purpose of national sustainable development strategies as “important mechanisms for enhancing and linking national capacity so as to bring together priorities in social, economic and environmental policies”. It also reaffirmed that “all sectors of society should be involved in their development and implementation”<sup>3</sup>.

3. More recently, 147 Heads of State signed the Millennium Declaration in September 2000. The associated Millennium Development Goals include one relating to environmental sustainability, to: “integrate the principles of sustainable development into country policies and programmes and reverse the loss of environmental resources”<sup>4</sup> (with no target date). Initiatives towards national sustainable development strategies should, therefore, also contribute to the achievement of this goal.

4. In view of the ongoing preparations for the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), the International Forum on National Sustainable Development Strategies was held in Accra, Ghana. Seventy-three expert participants from 31 countries, drawn from government, civil society, the private sector and international agencies, were convened by the UN Department for Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) in collaboration with the Government of Ghana, Department for International Development (DFID) of the UK, the Danish Government and UNDP/Capacity 21. The Forum reviewed experience to date in national sustainable development strategy development and implementation, shared lessons learned and best practices, and recommended approaches to integrate the principles of sustainable

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<sup>1</sup> Agenda 21, Chapter 8, paragraph 8.7

<sup>2</sup> Programme of Action for the Further Implementation of Agenda 21, paragraph 23

<sup>3</sup> Programme of Action for the Further Implementation of Agenda 21, paragraph 24

<sup>4</sup> A/56/326, Report of the Secretary General: Road map towards the implementation of the United Nations Millennium Declaration, Goal 7, target 9.

development into the policies and programmes of both developed and developing countries. In this way, the Forum aimed to reinvigorate the dialogue on national sustainable development strategies, and to encourage all countries, both developing and industrialised, to continue advancing their efforts in this regard.

The participants at the Accra Forum agreed on the following conclusions and recommendations:

## **II. Functions of a national sustainable development strategy**

**5. A national sustainable development strategy is the way in which a country is addressing the challenge of progressing towards its goals of sustainable development. It is a plan or method for achieving these goals and, thus, reflects an ongoing process and not a “one-off” document.** The Forum confirmed that effective national sustainable development strategies have common characteristics, but that they take different forms depending on national and local conditions. These common characteristics are elaborated further in paragraph 7 below. For example, established frameworks such as a National Vision, National Agenda 21, or a Poverty Reduction Strategy can all provide a good basis for strategic action towards sustainable development. The particular label applied to a national sustainable development strategy is not important as long as the common characteristics of the strategy are adhered to (see paragraph 7 below).

6. The Forum further highlighted the important functions of a national sustainable development strategy:

- a) An effective national sustainable development strategy will help to address priority problems with complex causes and complex implications. All countries should, therefore, consider a national sustainable development strategy as a priority. Countries need to understand the complex dynamics surrounding poverty reduction and environmental degradation. This requires integrated analysis of the underlying causes of problems, and integrated solutions and coordinated action. A national sustainable development strategy can help to organise the process efficiently.
- b) A national sustainable development strategy will help to encourage and facilitate institutional and behavioural change for sustainable development. Although a national sustainable development strategy is a process, it should demonstrably focus on tangible sustainable development outcomes and lead directly to concrete actions. The strategy should focus on the local level, as well as the national level and improve co-responsibility at the international level. A national sustainable development strategy therefore needs both to generate as well as to reflect expressed demand from the grassroots – fully embracing and complementing any local level initiatives for sustainable development, such as Local Agenda 21s. A national sustainable development strategy should also reflect national obligations, commitments and needs at the global level, to improve national resilience in relation to rapidly changing international conditions. This emphasis on real change will entail a national sustainable development strategy articulating short-term or immediate priority needs, as well as medium- and long-term objectives.

c) A national sustainable development strategy will help to improve integration, coordinating and mainstreaming of policy goals that are important to stakeholders and lead to sustainable development. This covers several dimensions:

- integrating multiple stakeholder perceptions, needs, and aspirations;
- integrating economic, social and environmental objectives (or making informed trade-offs between them where full integration is not possible);
- integrating technical planning concerns in political decision-making processes;
- linking national sustainable development strategy processes with budget processes;
- linking different sectoral strategies; and
- linking national to local-level and global-level strategies.

### **III. Characteristics of a national sustainable development strategy**

7. Recognising that a national sustainable development strategy can comprise multiple, coordinated processes to move towards sustainable development, and that it will take different forms depending on national/local conditions, a document entitled **“Guidance on Preparing a National Sustainable Development Strategy”** was reviewed and revised by the Forum. The Guidance document may usefully be applied to sub-national strategies as well as to the national level and should be interpreted in light of prevailing economic, social and political realities by relevant stakeholders. To be fully effective, it was also suggested that the recommended process in the Guidance document be continually tested, and consequently readjusted, at the national level.

The “Guidance on Preparing a National Sustainable Development Strategy” features the following recommended elements:

#### **a) Integration of economic, social and environmental objectives, and balance across sectors, territories and generations**

- Linking local, national, regional and global priorities and actions
- Linking the short term to the medium and long term.
- Linking the national, regional and global levels
- Linking different sectors
- Coherence between budgetary and strategic priorities

#### **b) Broad participation and effective partnerships**

- Institutionalised channels for communication
- Access to information for all stakeholders and effective networking
- Transparency and accountability
- Trust and mutual respect
- Partnerships amongst government, civil society, private sector and external institutions

**c) Country ownership and commitment**

- Strong political and stakeholder commitment
- Sound leadership and good governance
- Shared strategic and pragmatic vision
- Strong institution or group of institutions spearheading the process
- Continuity of the national sustainable development strategy process

**d) Developing capacity and an enabling environment**

- Building on existing knowledge and expertise
- Building on existing processes and strategies

**e) Focus on outcomes and means of implementation**

- The means to assess and agree on priority issues in place
- Coherence between budget, capacity and strategy priorities
- Realistic, flexible targets
- Linked to private sector investment
- Anchored in sound technical and economic analysis
- Integrated mechanisms for assessment, follow-up, evaluation and feedback

8. There are considerable challenges in implementing these recommended elements. Although an effective national sustainable development strategy will both encourage, and depend on, integration, this has proven the most challenging task faced by countries to date. This is partly because many previous related initiatives tended to focus on producing large documents laying out numerous projects/plans and/or comprehensive aspirations, while largely neglecting the principal need for institutional change. True and effective participation and partnerships can also be challenging to achieve. In addition, few national sustainable development strategies have been adequately assessed and evaluated, especially in terms of their outcomes. The difficulties which countries face in attending to these critical tasks warrant improved networking and support.

**IV. Institutional arrangements for an effective national sustainable development strategy**

9. A multitude of similar comprehensive frameworks for sustainable development would be burdensome, especially for countries with limited capacity. The recommended elements in the Guidance document in paragraph 7 above, define some common characteristics of a national sustainable development strategy. Individual countries as well as the international community should make every effort to build on, and/or to harmonise, different existing country frameworks including those promoted by the different international development institutions, in line with the recommendations in this Guidance document.

10. Strong institutional leadership is required to launch, drive, build on and sustain the national sustainable development strategy process. Whether a single government institution such as the Ministry of Planning should lead the process – or whether numerous institutions collectively or individually should promote it – depends upon each country’s situation. A single body can be an important champion, particularly in the early stages. There is a general consensus that this should be an authority with a cross-sectoral mandate, such as a Planning or Finance ministry. However, in other contexts, such as countries with several levels of government, a number of bodies at different levels could provide leadership. After a while, the inclusive approach of the national sustainable development strategy process can encourage shared leadership, with different institutions taking the lead on specific issues. Ultimately, a multiplicity of efforts is desirable, but strong coordination will be required.

11. Country-driven, multi-stakeholder ‘ownership’ is crucial to the development and implementation of an effective national sustainable development strategy. Because it presents a potentially huge agenda, there is an inherent risk that a national sustainable development strategy may be perceived, by many stakeholders, as primarily serving *other* people’s needs. It is essential to communicate the national sustainable development strategy as a means or opportunity to meet *each* stakeholder’s own needs, through collective debate, solution finding and action. It may be necessary to include incentives to encourage stakeholders to bridge the institutional ‘walls’ that separate them, particularly along sectoral and functional lines. A national sustainable development strategy should, therefore, be presented as a mechanism to harness options, partnerships and innovation.

12. A national sustainable development strategy should serve as an overall comprehensive framework for formal national planning and budgetary systems. Formal planning systems are potentially valuable means for providing the integration, balance and participation required of national sustainable development strategies. Many planning systems commonly employ a number of approaches to integration – consultation, dialogue, committees/councils, and methods such as environmental impact assessment and cost-benefit analysis. However, ultimately the planning authorities themselves tend to make the decisions; and the integrating approaches used may be one-off, rather than a regular process. Successfully integrating budgetary processes and investment programmes under the umbrella of the national sustainable development strategy is essential and a test of the effectiveness of the strategy. This has, however, tended to be weak in many countries, at best showing some links with certain investment budgets rather than with the recurrent budget.

13. Institutions at the local level could be a stronger driving force for a national sustainable development strategy than they have been so far. There has been a tendency to design integration ‘on paper’ at centralised levels, with inadequate commitment to implementation. In contrast, people at the local level can have very real incentives for forging integration. Decentralisation processes can present key opportunities to introduce the institutional changes necessary for sustainable development, provided resources are made available locally. However, local authorities may need to be strengthened to produce an enabling environment and to empower local stakeholders to call for integrated approaches. The experience of Local Agenda 21s has been valuable in identifying needs, and in producing integrated

plans, empowerment and action at local levels. Thus, more effective links should be made between Local Agenda 21s and national sustainable development strategies.

14. Other means to improve institutional integration should be sought and built on. In addition to the planning and budgetary systems and decentralisation, a number of methodologies could also be part of implementing the national sustainable development strategy. These include methodologies to:

- develop integrated scenarios for the future, and use these to test the resilience of policy options;
- develop and apply rigorous protocols on achieving consensus;
- develop new ways of working by piloting appropriately funded and integrated activities to cross institutional divisions; and
- work on shared tasks, e.g., shared reporting, planning and assessment in relation to sustainable development priorities (rather than this being done by sectoral agencies, followed by rationalisation by a central body, as often happens at present).

15. Trade-offs cannot be ignored. Consensus building should be a key factor in the national sustainable development strategy process, however, trade-offs must be faced – particularly in the short term – for a national sustainable development strategy to be credible and effective. Where potential conflicts are identified, efforts should first be made to find creative solutions – including reviewing goals and re-evaluating options. Trade-offs should be made transparent and accessible and be accompanied by mitigation, compensation, training, etc. Where trade-off cannot be dealt with immediately, it is also important to make this transparent.

## **V. Participation and partnerships in a national sustainable development strategy**

16. Multi-stakeholder participation is needed at all stages in a national sustainable development strategy process (i.e., analysis, debate, planning, implementation, reporting and assessment). A participatory process of informing, involving and engaging various sectors of society should drive this iterative, ‘cyclical’ process. The views and concerns of all stakeholders should have an equal opportunity to impact on the actual decision making process.

17. The Government has a key role to play in creating an enabling and equitable environment for participation. This may require legislative support. However, there are limits to central government leadership in promoting participation, which tends to be based on a consultative process. A decentralized process can facilitate broader-based participation in the various stages of the national sustainable development strategy development.

18. Capacity-building and availability of the same information base for all stakeholders, particularly the less privileged groups, should be ensured. The role that each stakeholder can play should be recognized and mutually respected in order to achieve equal participation. Most strategy processes have faced the issue of who represents each stakeholder group. In one successful case, each group had its own

selection mechanism and has over time developed the capacity needed for effective participation.

19. Partnerships among different stakeholders should be built around concrete initiatives that make the best use of stakeholder capabilities, offer incentives and ensure their commitment. In this way, the business sector, for example, could bring in its pragmatic, solution-seeking abilities into public-private partnerships. Civil society could contribute its community-based experiences and networks. Counter-parting of resources – whether financial, human or physical – provides for stronger ownership by the partners involved.

## **VI. Capacity requirements for an effective national sustainable development strategy**

20. The capacity needs of a national sustainable development strategy are manifested at the human, institutional and systemic levels.

21. The human dimension of capacity building relates to a variety of abilities, with an emphasis on interdisciplinary and process skills. It includes the acquisition of technical skills on both an individual and a collective basis. It encompasses abilities for negotiation, conflict resolution and consensus building, through teamwork and effective communication (“demystifying” the complex codes, symbols and jargon that are often associated with sustainable development). It also includes the capability to internalize diverse experiences and perspectives, to enable effective learning. The dynamics associated with this level of capacity development are often influenced by subjective determinants such as attitude, perception, cultural orientation and intuitive faculty.

22. Institutional capacity requirements focus on collective learning and institutional change. In addition to tangible skills associated with programme and project development, the principal requirements include institutional capacities to:

- understand and deal with multiple perceptions;
- develop a common vision and sense of purpose that binds stakeholders;
- catalyse internal change processes;
- encourage innovative behaviour;
- encourage incentive mechanisms to enhance capacity development;
- develop effective monitoring and evaluation capabilities for learning purposes;
- coordinate and mobilize activities at different levels; and thus
- adapt to new contexts and challenges

23. The systemic dimension of capacity building is closely associated with the “enabling environment” – i.e., appropriate policy and legal frameworks, a clear definition of institutional roles and mandates, widespread access to information, upstream/downstream linkages, the availability of a “culture of dialogue” and enhanced networking capabilities linking diverse stakeholders. These attributes are essential to sustain the growth of institutions and individuals, as well as to generate learning dynamics.

24. Innovation is important. The testing of new approaches at the local level can often assist learning processes through validation, and thus facilitate integration at the policy level.

25. Indigenous knowledge needs to be taken into consideration. Indigenous knowledge systems, as growing bodies of locally relevant experience and means for resilience, can also make positive contributions to a national sustainable development strategy, and institutional processes need to be able to value and encourage them.

26. Whereas conventional tools such as manuals, guidelines, and formal training and research are of key importance, other means of education and awareness should also be promoted. Different approaches and entry points can be utilized to achieve such improvements. This will include the promotion of “built-in” performance-based incentive mechanisms that encourage continuous improvement. Traditional organizational models based on hierarchy and compartmentalization should be complemented by more inclusive approaches in order to stimulate greater interaction and shared learning. Institutions should focus on learning from failures as well as from successes. Finally, time and patience are key ingredients – it takes time for capacity-building to evolve and mature into capacity retention.

27. Local governments, private sector, and civil society need to play a stronger role in national sustainable development strategy development and implementation. Capacity-strengthening exercises and resources that are made available need also to be relevant to the local levels – and not only be confined to the national level.

## **VII. Financial requirements of a national sustainable development strategy**

28. Adequate, predictable and regular financial resources are required to implement the national sustainable development strategy in order for it to be part of an effective, iterative and inclusive process, rather than having a one-off ‘project’ producing a document. Such financial resources are required to initiate a national sustainable development strategy process, to operate the systems necessary for continuous improvement, and to implement resulting policies and programmes. This, in turn, could potentially make a national sustainable development strategy expensive, however, by improving integration, priority settings and institutional roles, the strategy could effectively enhance efficiency, effectiveness and equity.

29. The ability to internally reallocate available resources improves ownership of the national sustainable development strategy. Such flexibility will result in a greater chance that the strategy will end up better integrated with budget/investment processes in addition to fundamentally improving the financial flows towards the national sustainable development strategy. It is important, therefore, to assess current finance flows within the country in relation to the national sustainable development goals, and to identify entry points whereby the national sustainable development strategy can influence finances to flow into sustainable development investments. This is unlikely to be achieved in a single effort – a continuous improvement approach is more likely to succeed. Given that investors are seeking clarity of goals and evidence of priorities, excellence in the national sustainable development strategy process is likely to elicit more funding than the unprioritized ‘wish-list’ strategies of the past.



## **VIII. The role of external partnerships**

30. Many developing countries will need external funding to help start, implement, coordinate and/or maintain the national sustainable development strategy process. Whereas good communication with external agencies is essential, national ‘ownership’ can be adversely affected if external agencies impose a particular process and/or dictate the strategy’s outcomes. Development assistance approaches by international institutions engaging in the national sustainable developments strategy process should be fully consistent with the recommendations in the Guidance document (paragraph 7 above), to ensure national ownership.

31. Development assistance ‘consultative groups’ can assist in forming good partnerships for the development and implementation of a national strategy for sustainable development. The ‘consultative groups’ and ‘round tables’, that are standard mechanisms for donor coordination in most developing countries, have proven effective in forging good partnerships for a national sustainable development strategy, when based in the developing country concerned and having a multi-sectoral orientation.

32. A national sustainable development strategy development and implementation, when engaged in by both external agencies and developing countries, can strengthen partnerships, based around shared objectives, clear responsibilities, and mutual accountability for agreed indicators. To be most effective, international partnerships need to move from micro-managing projects, to supporting policy, strategic processes, programmes and capacity development.

33. A national sustainable development strategy is a principal means for articulating and acting on national aspirations and fulfilling obligations internationally. This has been inadequately acknowledged in national sustainable development strategies to date. Foreign relations, trade, aid, debt and ecological footprints need to be considered.

34. Networking among those involved in a national sustainable development strategy from different countries can also be useful. A strategy presents complex and new challenges, and is realising different potentials; thus there could be utility in ‘*twinning*’ countries for mutual support and learning.

## **IX. Assessing progress in a national sustainable development strategy**

35. Assessments play a central role in a national sustainable development strategy as part of the cyclical process of continuous improvement towards sustainable development. Both process assessment and outcome/impact assessment are needed. Countries need to be able to assess the effectiveness of their national sustainable development strategy, allowing them to move toward continuous improvement through a learning process. Assessment of process quality addresses the question: ‘is the strategy going to be effective?’ Assessment of outcomes and impacts addresses

the question: ‘has the strategy been effective?’ A good assessment system will be able to link the two – since the quality of the process can often be correlated with successful (or problematic) outcomes or impacts.

36. The relative mix of process assessment and outcome/impact assessment will change according to the maturity of a national sustainable development strategy.

Process assessment has been very useful in the formative years of a national strategy development when issues of participation, in particular, affect credibility, ownership and practical chances of success. There are, however, diminishing returns to process assessment. Stakeholders soon need to know what the impacts are on the ground, which is important for maintaining political support. In addition, an emphasis on process assessment may not be politically acceptable in many developing countries, where the overwhelming priority is to make a demonstrable difference to livelihoods rapidly. Furthermore, a continuing, heavy focus on process assessment can give a false sense that the process is achieving something – purely because the process appears to be going well. Outcome/impact assessment may, therefore, provide the biggest feedback effect – and one that can less easily be ignored.

37. The assessment criteria are best established at the time of designing the national sustainable development process – making them entirely consistent with the national sustainable development objectives. Indeed, a consideration of process assessment criteria can help tighten the goals of the national sustainable development strategy process. In the same way, a consideration of outcome/impact assessment criteria can help to tighten the policy decisions being made through the strategy process. Local development or interpretation of such criteria is, therefore, key.

38. As far as possible, assessments should be participatory and forward-looking. They might, therefore, be connected to multi-stakeholder groups that are set up to manage the national sustainable development strategy, e.g., National Councils for Sustainable Development (NCSDs), and involve a range of participatory exercises that address the changing context. Although assessments are retrospective evaluations of performance, the goal of assessment should be promoted as ‘not to prove, but to improve’.

39. Few national sustainable development strategies have been assessed to date and a number of difficulties are commonly faced with strategy assessment, such as:

- lack of a culture of assessment within a country
- assessments driven by external sources – these can be politically difficult as well as involve assessment skills not conducive to participatory assessment by local stakeholders (for example, stressing third party assessments because of the need to ensure accountability for funds)
- fear that assessment may lead to inappropriate comparisons internationally
- lack of agreement on definitions and indicators, which would result in inconsistency of data
- obtaining access to data and (especially for process assessment) access to concerned stakeholders
- integrating different assessments, e.g., civil society and government assessments, or those of different ministries and ensuring complementarities between them

- framing the assessment in ways which reduce the risk of it being ‘buried’ because of political opposition

It is notable that an effective national sustainable development strategy process itself is a good means to directly address these difficulties over the long term.

## **X. Summary of recommendations**

40. To summarize, the Forum adopted the Guidance document to serve as a tool in national sustainable development strategy development and implementation. In addition, the following specific recommendations were made:

- a) Make efforts to build on, and to harmonize, different existing integrated frameworks for sustainable development in each country, including, where relevant, those supported by international development institutions.
- b) Ensure that the national sustainable development strategy process is driven by a multiplicity of efforts of various groups and entities within the country, effectively coordinated by an authority with a cross-sectoral mandate, such as the planning ministry or a multi-stakeholder National Council for Sustainable Development (NCSD).
- c) Promote local empowerment through effective decentralization efforts and local capacity-building, in order to enhance the enabling environment for an effective and participatory national sustainable development strategy.
- d) Emphasize equitable multi-stakeholder participation at all stages of the national sustainable development strategy process. Formal mechanisms such as NCSDs could be helpful in this regard.
- e) Promote capacity-building and equal access to information by all stakeholders, particularly for the less-privileged groups, in order to ensure equitable participation in the national sustainable development strategy process.
- f) Undertake concrete initiatives (e.g., joint projects and pilot projects) to promote and facilitate partnerships among different stakeholders.
- g) Provide adequate financial support for the national sustainable development strategy on a regular basis, especially through internal mobilisation to improve ownership. Whilst many developing countries need external funding support, this must not compromise national ownership of the process.
- h) Encourage national sustainable development strategies as a principal means of articulating and acting on a nation’s international obligations and aspirations, and as a means for developing international partnership and improving co-responsibility.

- i) Develop mechanisms for networking amongst those involved in national sustainable development strategies, to maximize opportunities for mutual support, learning and review.
- j) Ensure that assessment mechanisms for both process and outcomes/impacts are participatory and made an integral part of the national sustainable development strategy process.

## **XI. Conclusion**

41. To be effective, a national sustainable development strategy should be integrative, participatory, nationally owned, built on existing knowledge and processes, and focused on outcomes. Furthermore, it should be based on timely action, and recognize and reconcile necessary trade-offs while constantly seeking win-win outcomes. To achieve this, national capacities need to be utilized and strengthened.

42. A national sustainable development strategy should not be seen merely as a set of government plans, programmes and projects, but as an embodiment of commitments to action by all stakeholders concerned. A national sustainable development strategy should recognize that, ultimately, sustainable development is not something that governments do for people; it is something people achieve for themselves through individual and collective change.

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