



Building the Europe We Want

Models for civil society
involvement in the
implementation of the
Post-2015 agenda at
the EU level

STUDY



European Economic and Social Committee

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Study by Stakeholder Forum for the European Economic and Social Committee

This study was carried out by Stakeholder Forum following a call for tenders launched by the European Economic and Social Committee. The information and views set out in this study are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the official opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee. The European Economic and Social Committee does not guarantee the accuracy of the data included in this study. Neither the European Economic and Social Committee nor any person acting on the Committee's behalf may be held responsible for the use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Foreword

Stakeholder Forum (SF) was commissioned by the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) to undertake a short study concerning the engagement of civil society and other stakeholders in the implementation and monitoring of the UN's sustainable development goals and the post-2015 agenda in the European Union, with particular reference to the potential role of the EESC itself. We have the honour to present our report herewith. In this foreword the authors would like to add these personal reflections.

The stakeholders in a business undertaking comprise everyone and every organisation that is concerned with the success and future prosperity of that business whether as customer or supplier, worker or director, shareholder or owner. Even for a small business this can involve quite a number of people. But the business of sustainable development is the very largest business in the world, and concerns the future well-being and prosperity of humanity and the planet as a whole. Everyone in the world - every member of civil society - is a stakeholder in this business, and often in more than one capacity. And many would argue that the interests of future stakeholders (unborn generations) and even of other non-human species need to be taken into account as well.

So while it is easy (and almost platitudinous) to say that stakeholders of all kinds must be engaged in great global tasks such as the creation, implementation, monitoring and review of the UN's sustainable development goals this can sometimes seem an almost impossibly large demand in practice.

Governments certainly need to reach out to as many stakeholders as possible to learn of their concerns, to gain their insights, and to engage them as partners in the process of bringing about the sustainability transformation. At the same time both Governments and stakeholders need to recognise that any engagement process can only be partial at best, and must itself be constantly subject to scrutiny and renewal lest it lapse into a system that privileges certain stakeholders or interest groups through inside channels at the expense of other more marginalised groups. Some partnerships may fade away. Others spring up to address newly identified needs and priorities. There needs to be a constant process of renewal and organic change amongst partners in the long march towards greater sustainability.

The role of bodies or groupings that have some co-ordinating, convening and intermediating roles amongst stakeholders is particularly important and needs to be considered in this light. We have had particularly in mind such bodies or groupings as the Major Groups at the UN and their organising partners; the EESC and SDO and their stakeholder partners at the EU level; and such bodies as the National Councils of Sustainable Development in some European countries (or national Economic and Social Committees in others).

As standing bodies or groups with significant (though varying) degrees of mandate, security, status and resources these bodies are in a strong position to develop relationships of trust and confidence with the various parts of Government concerned with sustainable development issues and with a wide

range of relevant stakeholder groups and organisations, and to maximise the advantages of continuity of engagement.

As the strapline of the EESC itself makes clear they succeed best when they operate effectively as a bridge between the institutions they are attached to and the generality of organised civil society. They need to be fully alert to changing configurations and concerns in society and amongst stakeholders at large, and particularly to the emergence of new concerns and new patterns of positive stakeholder engagement with sustainability. They need to be agents and drivers of positive change.

As facilitating bodies and groupings helping the advancement of sustainable development they need to bring together as many different stakeholder interests as possible and build the widest possible consensus on the way forward. They can help to articulate and champion many different stakeholder interests, while always being careful not to come to regard themselves as being the sole representatives of stakeholder voices and claiming broad stakeholder authority without sufficiently engaging other stakeholder interests. They need to be true channels not bottlenecks. They need to have a particular concern therefore to be constantly identifying and amplifying new voices and stakeholder groupings with new ideas and new constituencies, and to be wary of themselves getting captured by special interests or “the usual suspects”.

The key message that emerges from our study therefore is that the central task for the Major Group organising partners at the UN, for the EESC and SDO in Brussels, and for National SD Councils (or similar organisations) at national level in relation to the post-2015 agenda and the implementation of the SDGs is to act faithfully as facilitators for maximising engagement and participation of stakeholders of all kinds in the sustainability transformation in an open, balanced and transparent way.

Since the SDO was first created in 2006 it has helped the EESC to work gradually forward to operating in this open and inclusive way on sustainable development issues of all kinds, and has built up useful partnerships with other stakeholder groups in Brussels concerned with sustainable development, and to a more limited extent with the Major Groups organisations at the UN and with various stakeholder groupings at national level within the EU and in some countries outside the EU.

Now the creation and implementation of the SDGs presents the opportunity and challenge for expanding this wider engagement process further. The goals and the means of SDG implementation are still under discussion internationally, regionally and nationally. So there is not yet an established process for the EESC and SDO to relate to. On the contrary there are key elements still to be shaped and further opportunities for the EESC and SDO to seek to influence that shaping before joining in the implementing, monitoring and review processes.

We have therefore presumed to interpret our brief broadly and to offer suggestions as to how the EESC/SDO with other stakeholder partners might seek to feed ideas and views about optimising stakeholder engagement into the remaining stages of the SDG negotiations at the UN, into the deliberations of the European institutions about European implementation of the SDGs and the role of stakeholders, and into the deliberations of EU member states about how they too should set about

implementing, monitoring and review and engaging their stakeholders in the process. At the same time of course the EESC and the SDO need to make themselves ready to play their part in the implementation, monitoring and review arrangements when the configuration of these have been fully established.

The UN is thinking ambitiously of establishing a multi-level system for linking the implementation, monitoring and review processes at international, regional and national level in an interconnected and reinforcing cycle. Stakeholder groupings and particularly major intermediating institutions such as the EESC need to be equally ambitious in building wider linkages amongst stakeholders of all kinds at the different levels in order to maximise the potential of stakeholder engagement.

This has been the central mission of Stakeholder Forum itself over the years and we have been proud to be invited by the EESC to conduct this study of possible ways forward within the EU and in the wider world. We hope that we may continue to work with the EESC and the SDO in the pursuit of this shared mission, and in helping them to deepen their own outreach to stakeholders of all kinds.

Sometimes in the stupefying tedium of a UN General Assembly formal debate where every speaker appears to be rehearsing totally familiar and unchanging positions one may plumb the depths of existential despair about the possibility of ever achieving real progress on sustainable development. But hope dawns again when one learns of the real progress being made in the sustainability changes that are needed in many parts of the world by local communities, civil society organisations, businesses and stakeholders of all kinds.

Facilitating groups such as the EESC and the SDO have already played a significant part in bringing these stakeholder messages of the possibility of sustainable transformation to bear on the decision-making of the established institutions of power, and in the creation and expansion of the many and various stakeholder partnerships that are helping to shape a more sustainable future.

Now the creation of the SDGs and their implementation offers the world a challenge and an opportunity for mankind to make a further giant leap forward towards that more sustainable future. This report suggest some small steps (and some not so small ones) which the EESC and SDO might take to help achieve that leap, and to make themselves more fit to play their part in that great transformation.

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July 2015

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Stakeholder Forum would like to acknowledge and thank the EESC and the SDO and their staff for all the help and assistance they have given during this study. Thanks are also due to various stakeholders in Brussels, at the UN and in the three countries studied who have contributed information and ideas. Special thanks are also due to Jean Pierre Schweitzer of the Institute for European Environment Policy who undertook a small survey of stakeholder attitudes in Brussels as part of the study and analysed the history of stakeholder engagement with European policy-making on sustainable development.

The ideas and suggestions in the report are solely the responsibility of Stakeholder Forum and the authors of the report and should not be taken as implying any agreement or endorsement by those who have been consulted in its preparation.

Executive Summary

The universal Sustainable Development Goals which the United Nations are currently creating constitute an exciting new opportunity for the world to give a new impetus to the global drive towards a more sustainable future. Effective implementation of those goals in every country of the world is now the major challenge ahead, together with arrangements for monitoring and reviewing progress.

The Rio+20 Outcome Document re-emphasised the importance of wide stakeholder engagement as it launched the SDG process, and the need for this as the world moves towards the implementation stage is becoming ever clearer. Mapping out a framework for effective and constructive stakeholder engagement in this task is therefore of central importance.

The European Union and its many different stakeholder groupings have long been at the forefront of development of thinking and action on sustainable development and in the fruitful engagement of stakeholders in the process; and their example has also been widely influential in other parts of the world. The way in which implementation of the SDGs is handled in the European Union and the engagement of stakeholders in the process will therefore be highly significant both within Europe itself and also because of its potential as a possible example for others.

This European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) and its Sustainable Development Observatory (SDO) occupy a pivotal position in acting as a bridge between the European institutions and policy makers and European civil society and other stakeholders. They have already been very active with other European stakeholders in preparing for and participating at the Rio plus 20 Summit on Sustainable Development in 2012 and in its follow-up and the creation of the Sustainable Development Goals. It is entirely appropriate that they should now be considering how to secure optimal stakeholder engagement with the implementation of the SDGs in the EU and in the processes still to be established for their monitoring and review.

In order to assist this consideration the EESC and SDO have commissioned this study by Stakeholder Forum to review models of stakeholder engagement on sustainable development issues at various levels over the past 20 years. It has reviewed stakeholder engagement at the UN itself, in three (and a half) European countries (Finland, Germany and the UK with Wales) and past experience at the European level.

The study has noted many different and interesting examples and practice as to the advancement of sustainable development generally at the different levels, and of how stakeholder engagement in different ways has helped the process forward. It has also drawn on earlier studies and agreements about optimal ways of engaging stakeholders effectively in large international processes.

The following general conclusions emerge strongly from the experience at all levels

- Progress on sustainable development at all levels is strongly correlated with effective and widespread engagement with stakeholders of all kinds. Sustainable development cannot be achieved as a series of technical adjustments cooked up behind closed doors – it has to be a

worldwide move of society towards eradication of poverty and transformed patterns of behaviour, production and consumption. It has to involve stakeholders of all kinds and at all levels as active participants.

- Stakeholders need to organise themselves and build their own capacities to play their part effectively in this engagement and to maintain their commitment and energy. Sustainable development is a long haul for everyone concerned, governments and stakeholders alike, and there need to be well-established but flexible ground rules to enable fruitful engagement.
- There is a crucial role for organisations or groupings such as the Major Groups at the UN, the EESC/SDO in Brussels and National Councils for Sustainable Development (or similar structures under other names) at national level that can bring many different stakeholder interests together and play a convening, co-ordinating or intermediating role amongst the many different types of stakeholder in a multi-stakeholder process. Such organisations or groupings can play a vital role in acting as a bridge facilitating and focusing communication and constructive engagement between governments and the plethora of stakeholders of all kinds that are concerned with sustainability issues, helping to build consensus where this is possible, or clarifying differences of approach where this is necessary.
- Such organisations or groupings themselves need to be careful to adopt good process themselves in their role as facilitators. They need to be open and inclusive, to avoid unduly privileging the views of any core group of members, or to claim to fully represent the views of others when they have no specific mandate so to do. They need to be alert to draw in emerging new stakeholder partners to make their contributions, to make sure that no stakeholder groupings feel excluded or marginalised and that a proper balance between different stakeholder interests is maintained in communications with governments and others. At EU level the EESC/SDO would itself be well-placed to play a leading part in this evolution by consolidating and extending the linkages and alliances it has been gradually forming over recent years with other stakeholders concerned with sustainable development. It might also seek to encourage similar developments at national level in European member states.
- Sustainable development needs to be pursued at many levels, global, regional, national and local. The emerging UN agreement also lays stress on the interactions between all these levels and proposes complex iterative monitoring and review cycles to ensure that the perspectives and experience of each level can be used to inform and improve performance at other levels over time. Stakeholders will need to be able to mirror that complexity. Occupying a strong and nodal position the EESC/SDO could play an important part in building stronger links and partnerships facing upwards to the major stakeholder groups operating at the UN and downwards to National Councils for Sustainable Development or other similar stakeholder facilitating bodies at national level.
- Sustainable development involves many different sectors of the economy and many different Government Departments. It works best when it is led strongly and co-ordinated from the top of government with a strong engagement of economics, finance and business departments as well as environmental and social departments. Similarly stakeholder engagement on sustainable development works best when relevant stakeholders and intermediating bodies are able to gain a position of regular and trusted contact with all these relevant departments and

not just with environment departments. There could be lessons here for the EESC/SDO to consider further, both for its own internal structures and for the articulation of its relations with the Commission and other Institutions.

- Stakeholders at all levels need to develop more expertise and skill at handling the complex interactions between different parts of the agenda, how economic, social and environmental requirements can best be co-optimised, how complex data and indicators should be understood etc. It could be helpful for the EESC/SDO itself to develop more in-house expertise in these areas or to make arrangements to buy in expert advice when needed so as to be able to supplement its normally somewhat generalist opinions with more detailed analyses of particularly knotty issues. It might also consider whether it could do more to assist with similar capacity-building amongst wider groups of stakeholders concerned with sustainable development in Europe.

In the light of these general conclusions from past experience the study goes on to explore in more detail the specific question of how the EESC/SDO might help to optimise stakeholder engagement with the implementation, monitoring and review of the SDGs in the EU.

Our core recommendation is that the EESC/SDO might seek to establish a wider alliance or European Sustainability Forum of stakeholders concerned with sustainable development in all its aspects to engage with each other and with the Commission and other European institutions on a regular and continuing basis throughout the long haul of implementing, monitoring and review of the SDGs. It should be established on an open and inclusive basis, and enable everyone concerned to be constructively and creatively engaged with the other European Institutions in one of the central challenges for the world and for Europe in the years ahead.

Since the Commission and the Council have not yet published detailed plans about implementation of the SDGs in the EU any suggestions about how the EESC/SDO and other stakeholders might relate to the process can only be provisional at this stage. Drawing on past experience of implementing sustainable development agreements and the ideas about implementation that are emerging in the draft UN declaration about the SDGs we have however ventured to make some suggestions about how the Commission itself might appropriately address the implementation task within the EU, as a basis for exploring how the EESC/SDO and other stakeholders might then best engage with the process.

We envisage first that the Commission might follow the EESC's own repeated advice and come forward with a new integrated strategy to carry forward the legacy of both the previous European Sustainable Development Strategy and the current 2020 strategy and reframe them in a way that truly unites the shorter term priorities that tend to be dominated by economic issues with the longer term goals of sustainable development.

We envisage that a new integrated strategy on these lines must in principle deal with the implementation of all the sustainable development goals in recognition of the principle of universality as proclaimed in the draft of the UN declaration about the SDGs. At the same time we recognise that certain of the goals will require much more ambitious transformative action in developed parts of the

world such as the EU, and suggest a methodology (already developed and published separately by Stakeholder Forum) for consulting widely with stakeholders to identify these key sustainability challenges for the EU so as to make them the main elements of a new set of flagship programmes within the overall strategy. The new Sustainability Forum might play a key part in organising and articulating this consultation.

A robust and comprehensive new European Strategy will clearly need to be led from the centre of the Commission and by the Council, so that all the different actions can be properly co-ordinated and driven forward together. Stakeholder groupings, the EESC/SDO and any new Sustainability Forum will need to develop trusted connections with this structure as it emerges and not only focus on the work of DG Environment, important though that will no doubt continue to be. Similarly the EESC itself may need to develop further its own internal co-ordination so that stakeholder engagement with the new SDG implementation strategy involves all relevant parts of the Committee in a well-articulated and co-ordinated way.

The draft of the UN declaration attaches great importance to developing indicators at all levels as a key part of monitoring progress in the future. Eurostat supported by the EEA and other agencies will no doubt have the leading part to play in developing these indicators for the EU in an objective and professional way. Meanwhile it could be useful for the EESC/SDO to develop their capacity for responding to and highlighting the messages that will emerge from these statistical reports, and supplementing them with the kind of qualitative and insightful reporting of practical experience that many stakeholders have on sustainability issues and problems. This will help bring the data and indicators to life and point up policies that may need adjustment or more vigorous application as well as drawing attention to new issues as they arise.

Monitoring progress of the SDGs at the EU level will need to be well-integrated with monitoring at the member state level, and should support a continuing dialogue between the two levels about how progress can best be maintained. There are the beginnings of such a process in the Semester process for annual joint reviews between the Commission and member state of progress against the objectives of the 2020 strategy. But the sustainability dimension of this review process is not yet very strongly developed, and the process is not very transparent or open to stakeholder engagement.

The EESC/SDO or the new Sustainability Forum might seek to gain greater access to this process and seek opportunities to make input, and perhaps to link up with stakeholder groupings at national level to co-ordinate views on some key aspects. Establishing stronger links with individual national sustainable development councils (NSDCs) (or with their network of European Environment and Sustainable Development Advisory Councils (EEAC)) to concert stakeholder inputs on sustainability issues to the semester process might be one way to start developing this wider outreach.

Another possible approach would be to build on the Committee's recent successful experience of impact studies to arrange periodic stakeholder led reviews of the implementation of the SDGs in Member States.

Looking further ahead ideas emerging from our study that might be considered by the EESC/SDO or the new Sustainability Forum could include

- Reaching out to include stakeholders not directly involved in the Forum by developing a “European Society’s Commitment to Sustainable Development” (similar to the Finnish approach) to ensure meaningful engagement of all stakeholders in Europe.
- Building on the Committee’s past experience with awareness raising, education and communication work reach out to stakeholders throughout Europe to spread the message of the vision implicit in the SDGs and the part that actors of all kinds at all levels can play.

The modalities for stakeholder engagement and the potential role of the EESC and SDO could be considered separately at each stage of the cycle of planning, monitoring and review as that point in the cycle is reached. But the value to be added by stakeholder engagement could be greatly enhanced if the modalities for this engagement are built into the plans for the whole cycle at the outset so that stakeholders can themselves build up their capacity to engage productively at each stage of the cycle in a consistent and coherent way.

The EESC and SDO could help by committing themselves to supporting this long term stakeholder engagement at the outset, and seek to ensure that the wider European Stakeholder Forum proposed above should be conceived from the outset as a continuing alliance committed to following the SD cycle through all its stages.

It would assist the emergence of this new structure and process greatly if the Commission and the Council were together to endorse this method of promoting continuing stakeholder engagement with the SDG implementation cycle as a being a crucial part of implementing the new strategy in Europe and promise their continuing co-operation with it. The EESC and SDO and the Sustainability Forum could then plan ahead with more confidence to provide adequate support for this mandate through the whole cycle of SDG implementation, monitoring and review.

Chapter 1. Introduction

The United Nations is expected to adopt a set of universal Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at a Summit meeting of the General Assembly in September 2015. These are intended to set out the collective ambitions and aspirations of all countries of the world for their sustainable development or transformation¹ over the next 15 years.

The focus of attention will then move to the implementation and monitoring of those goals and targets. The primary responsibility for implementation will lie at national level but action at international and regional level will also be important. In the European Union the European institutions will have an important role because many of the powers and responsibilities that need to be involved are shared between the EU and national levels. It will also be important to bear in mind the potential role of the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) in advancing implementation across the broader European region.

It is generally accepted that sustainable development and the sustainability transformation cannot be achieved by national governments acting by themselves alone. There needs to be concerted action by the whole of society and many different stakeholders² within a country. The full engagement of societal actors of all kinds in the creation of sustainability plans and their implementation and monitoring is crucial to a successful outcome. Some civil society actors are active as watchdogs and campaigners against unsustainable practices and advocates of more sustainable policies, structures and institutions; others are more active as shapers of the more sustainable society of the future, whether as creators of sustainable businesses, or partners in other transitional activities. All are vital to creating the demand and the momentum for the sustainability transition. Making effective arrangements for full stakeholder engagement should be a key part of the SDG implementation programme in all countries and in the European Union (EU). (These should build on widely accepted models and values for stakeholder engagement such for example as the *8 Istanbul Principles for CSO*

¹ In the developing countries poverty eradication and related social objectives are often seen as the primary goals of sustainable development. In the developed countries there are of course also still challenges of poverty and poor social conditions to confront; but increasingly the pursuit of these objectives needs to be coupled with a drive to transform the economies in those countries to a more sustainable mode of operation that imposes less burdens on the planet and its natural systems, and less inequitable exploitation of limited global natural resources. In this report – depending on the context - we therefore use sustainability transformation as a description of the particular challenges which the SDGs represent to the developed world while continuing to use sustainable development as the general description of the global objective for developed and developing countries alike.

² There is a long running debate about the definitions of the terms ‘non-state or non-governmental actors’, ‘civil society’ and ‘stakeholders’. Some think of the civil society of a country as embracing every form of collective grouping outside the national government including local, city and regional government, businesses large and small, farmers and landowners, trade unions, educational institutions organisations representing women, youth, disabled people and others with special interests or needs, as well as NOS of all kinds active in the environmental, social and development fields. Others think of civil society as applying more narrowly and primarily to the NGOs and related groups, while excluding local and regional government and business. In this report we use the term “stakeholders” to refer generically to all collective groupings other than national governments, most of whom need to be engaged in the sustainability transition in one way or another. Sometimes to emphasise this point we speak of “stakeholders of all kinds”. When it is necessary to make some reference to the term “civil society”, e.g. because it has been used by others whom we are quoting, we may speak of “civil society and other stakeholders”. Our use of the term “stakeholder” is therefore similar in scope and intention to that of the UN’s “9 Major Groups”. It is also similar to the interests broadly covered by the EESC itself except that we include local, city and subnational or regional governments within the term “stakeholder” whereas in the European context their concerns are more the concern of the Committee of the Regions than the EESC.

*Development Effectiveness*³, and Stakeholder Forum's own report on improving stakeholder engagement at the UN by following certain standards⁴.)

Over the past 40 years civil society actors and stakeholders of all kinds have played a key part at the UN itself in making major intellectual and political input to successive agreements on sustainable development, and in contributing to monitoring and review processes. Successive UN agreements have also recognised the vital contribution that stakeholders play in promoting the implementation of sustainable development at national level and have recommended a variety of measures that national governments could or should take to engage civil society and other stakeholders in their national plans for implementation, monitoring and review.

Stakeholders of every type need to be involved in this multi-stakeholder process. National, regional and local government all have parts to play. Businesses large and small are responsible for many of the changes in products and services which the sustainability transition will need. Trade Unions can help spread sustainability knowledge and skills amongst the workforce. Farmers and land owners can speed the introduction of more sustainable agriculture and land management. The scientific and educational worlds have crucial parts to play in deepening and spreading understanding of all aspects of sustainability. NGOs of all kinds focus attention on critical sustainability issues and move action forward. Sustainability touches all sectors and all actors.

The Rio+20 Outcome Document re-emphasised the importance of wide stakeholder engagement as it launched the SDG process. The implementation of the SDGs around the world together with arrangements for monitoring and reviewing progress towards their achievement will present a new challenge and a new opportunity for giving a new impetus to the global drive towards a more sustainable future. Engaging stakeholders of all kinds thoroughly into the process will be crucial to its success.

The SDGs that are currently being negotiated have a strong line of descent from a number of earlier global formulations of objectives in the sustainable development field including Agenda 21, the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation (JPOI), and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Some of the methods of implementation adopted by countries for those earlier agreements and for engaging stakeholders with the process will no doubt therefore have continued relevance.

At the same time the adoption of the SDGs will not simply be a repetition of earlier agreements on sustainable development. The goals and targets to be adopted are more specific than earlier agreements. Progress will need to be measured against more specific indicators, and the targets to be achieved will include more specific timetables. A more systematic and systematic monitoring and review process is envisaged in the current negotiations.

³ http://cso-effectiveness.org/IMG/pdf/final_istanbul_cso_development_effectiveness_principles

⁴ The Stakeholder Empowerment Project. 2009.
<http://stakeholderforum.org/fileadmin/files/The%20Stakeholder%20Empowerment%20Project.pdf>

Furthermore the SDGs (unlike the MDGs but more like Agenda 21 and the JPOI) are intended to be “universal” in the sense that all the goals apply to all countries, and need to be implemented by all countries if they are to have the full global impact intended. They represent significant challenges to the domestic agendas of developed countries as well as to the developing countries and the development community. If faithfully implemented in all countries they are intended to create the safe and just operating space that will enable all of humanity to prosper in the present generation whilst keeping the impact of the sum total of human activity within environmental limits or planetary boundaries so that future generations may also prosper.

The SDGs also represent a much broader range of subjects in a much more cross-cutting and integrated way than the MDGs. Therefore, a wider range of societal actors will need to be involved in the implementation process.

The more detailed SDGs and targets will require integrated delivery plans and also more specific measures to deliver them. Progress will need to be monitored more comprehensively, regularly and diligently. The implementation machinery required will need to be robust, forceful and accountable. There will need to be active engagement with a wide range of stakeholders; and stakeholders will themselves need to strengthen their capacity to interact effectively with the process.

The monitoring process will need to track key indicators as objective measures of progress, and it is crucial that these be developed in an independent and objective way by professional statistical services at global, regional and national level. But it should also highlight more direct experiences of the process so as to identify, celebrate and encourage the replication of successes as well as to expose failures or shortfalls and identify remedies. Stakeholders have a key part to play in the interpretation of objective indicator data, and in the assembling of direct hands-on experience of sustainability measures in practice and in bringing to life the evidence revealed by the indicators and statistics.

Previous global agreements on sustainable development (Rio 1992, Johannesburg 2002 etc.) have provided for regular reporting by national governments of their general progress towards sustainable development, and the specific objectives included in the agreements. The declaration to be adopted in September 2015 to launch the SDGs is also expected to prescribe regular national reporting of progress towards the goals and targets using globally agreed indicators that will record and stimulate progress⁵.

The different levels of governance in the world will need to support one another in the implementation process. Past experience suggests that sustainable development implementation works best when action and review at the different levels interact in a mutually supportive way. National Governments benefit from the discipline of reporting internationally and undertaking comparative studies or peer reviews at regional or international level. International discussions and agreements are enriched and better grounded when they take full account of experience at national level.

⁵ CF Zero draft of the Outcome Document, Part III – Pages 29-30, June 2015

Reporting at all levels also benefits from the full involvement of stakeholders in a transparent process. They can help ensure that reports focus on the key aspects of genuine concern and that full attention is given to remedying shortfalls of implementation as well as to celebrating and seeking to replicate successes.

Just as governments can benefit from and reinforce their national drive towards sustainability by joining in international and regional process of monitoring, reporting and reviewing so stakeholders of all kinds benefit from creating their own multi-level systems so that the inputs they make at the different levels can themselves be mutually supportive. Some stakeholders are active at local or national level, some at regional and international level. There is a particularly important role for those (comparatively few) stakeholders that are capable of operating effectively at all three levels and across different subject areas and thus supporting positive interactions between work at the different levels and integration of the different subject areas covered by the sustainability debate.

The Zero Draft of the Outcome Document makes interesting proposals for establishing a multi-level process for monitoring, reporting and reviewing progress towards the goals. If agreement can be reached on this framework countries will no doubt want to shape their own implementation processes in such a way as to fit in effectively with this international framework. The relationship between the different levels and the timetables for strategy making, action planning, monitoring, reporting and review at the different levels will need to be well articulated in a supportive and helpful cycle.

In view of the crucial importance of effective stakeholder engagement at all levels for successful implementation it will be very important that arrangements for securing this should also be built into the implementation architecture and its timetables and procedures from the outset.

The EU was one of the leaders in the implementation of Agenda 21 and the JPOI, and in engaging stakeholders of all kinds with the process. It now faces the challenge – and the opportunity – of taking up a similarly leading position on the implementation of the SDGs, and extending its own engagement with stakeholders to achieve this. The EESC and the SDO is well-placed to play a leading role in extending this engagement process in the EU.

Chapter 2. Objectives and grounds for the study - *Integrating Stakeholder Engagement into all stages of the Cycle of Sustainability Planning, Action, Monitoring and Review in the European Union*

This study is focused on the European Union (EU) and how civil society and stakeholder engagement could be most effectively built into the EU's implementation of the SDGs; and in particular to identify ways in which the EESC might most usefully support this engagement.

Sustainable development and the transition to more sustainable economies and societies is a long term process involving many different subject areas, many different players and many different types of activity. A regular multi-level and multi-annual cycle of strategy-making, implementation, monitoring, review, reconsideration and recommitment can help to maintain long-term progress even if there are inevitable short term divergences.

International progress on sustainable development in the world over the past 25 years has in general followed a cyclical process, the stages of which could be described broadly as follows:

1. Setting goals
 - a. Research, analysis, information gathering and assessment
 - b. International negotiations to set international goals and targets
2. Implementation
 - a. Creating national strategies and plans for delivering the goals
 - b. Key sector implementation programmes, with specific policies and measures, programmes and projects.
3. Monitoring progress and review
 - a. Monitoring indicators
 - b. Reporting and review at national level
4. International reporting and Review, followed by a new iteration of the cycle

As the objective-setting stage for the SDGs is approaching finalisation in September 2015, attention will now move again to the implementation stage of the cycle, together with arrangements to be established for monitoring and review. This report will examine those stages of the cycle in the European context, together with the opportunities for stakeholder engagement at each stage, and the institutional arrangements that can help to make such engagement most effective.

Some European countries have already started to develop their own ideas on national implementation delivery, but others have apparently not yet begun to address this formally. Furthermore, for the EU as a whole the implementation process has not yet been fully elaborated. Initial proposals from the European Commission (EC) have focused mainly on the EU's role in supporting sustainable development in the developing countries, and what the SDGs will imply for the evolution of that role.

The EC is now expected to come forward with a further communication about all aspects of implementation of the SDGs in the EU in the autumn of 2015. This report cannot therefore be written in the light of already existing Commission proposals. Instead it has been commissioned in part as an input to the EU's further consideration of that subject.

Whatever approach is adopted at European level will need to be well- integrated with the emerging UN cycles of monitoring and review of the SDGs and with national implementation cycles, so that the international, European and national cycles support and reinforce one another effectively.

The EESC and the Sustainable Development Observatory (SDO) could play an important part both in the initial shaping and framing of the new sustainability cycle in Europe and in supporting stakeholder engagement and capacity building at all stages of the cycle.

Chapter 3. Scope of the report and methodology

As a contribution to the preparation of the implementation process in Europe this study examines experience with implementation of earlier agreements on sustainable development with particular reference to the ways in which civil society actors and stakeholders of all kinds have been involved most productively.

It then examines emerging thinking at various levels about SDG implementation and the post-2015 agenda, again primarily from the same stakeholder engagement perspective.

It goes on to focus in more detail on what will be needed for effective stakeholder engagement at EU level. It looks at stakeholder engagement related to each stage of the implementation, monitoring and review cycle and how the EESC might support stakeholder engagement through the whole cycle most effectively.

The study first examines ways in which stakeholders have been involved in sustainable development discussions at the UN level over the past 25 years both in major conferences, in the annual meetings of the Commission for Sustainable Development and in the important working periods between major meetings. It also takes account of current debates about the ways in which the UN should itself be involved in the monitoring and review of progress on the SDGs and how the engagement of civil society at international, regional and national level could assist this process.

Drawing on national reports it then examines experience on progressing sustainable development and engaging stakeholders in three European member states – Germany, Finland, and the UK (with additional reference to recent sustainability initiatives in Wales), and the lessons for the EU that can be drawn from this.

Finally, drawing on Commission communications, EESC reports, and a small survey of stakeholders based in Brussels it examines past experience of implementing sustainable development at the EU level, and ways in which stakeholders have been engaged both via the EESC and through other channels.

From this review the report identifies a number of characteristic features or methods by which international sustainable development agreements have been most successfully implemented and stakeholders most successfully engaged. It identifies two major themes emerging at all levels.

First, effective stakeholder engagement has been a strong success factor in the advancement of the sustainability transition at all levels in building society-wide commitment to the sustainability transformation and in maintaining the momentum behind these transformative processes. Conversely where there has been less effective stakeholder engagement the pace of the sustainability transition has tended to slow down.

Secondly, stakeholder engagement in a long term process such as the transition to more sustainable patterns of development works best if it is itself organised as a continuous process throughout the kind of sustainability cycle described at Chapter 2 and supported by standing institutional arrangements rather than being conducted through unrelated one off engagement exercises at different points of the cycle. Standing arrangements enable the capacities of the different parties to be strengthened over time and for trusting relationships of support and co-operation in the common pursuit of the sustainability transition to be built up.

Drawing on this analysis the report goes on to identify a number of possible options for engaging stakeholders in the most effective way in the implementation of the SDGs in Europe and in monitoring progress and reviewing the effectiveness of the various implementing measures.

The report pays special attention to the role that the EESC and its SDO have played hitherto in facilitating and articulating the contribution of stakeholders to earlier EU sustainable development work and in the development of European views on the SDGs. It concludes by considering how the EESC and the SDO could support an effective participation of civil society and other stakeholders in the implementation and monitoring of the Post-2015 agenda and the SDGs in the EU.

Chapter 4. Current models of civil society and stakeholder participation on SD policies, the SDGs and the post-2015 agenda

1. Stakeholder Engagement with UN processes on sustainable development

Stakeholders of many different kinds have been closely involved with the development of thinking and action on sustainable development at the United Nations for over 40 years. They have identified and publicised the pressing need to establish more sustainable economies and more sustainable patterns of development, analysed the many strands of the transformational challenge which this represents for both developed and developing countries, campaigned for particular policies and measures, played many roles as actors and partners in the implementation of agreements and measures; and they have been tireless monitors of progress and critics of failures to deliver agreements.

Most Governments have welcomed this stakeholder contribution at the United Nations. They have recognised the strength and depth of the analyses that have been offered, the creativity of the policy proposals, the value of partnership for action on key issues, and the importance of keen scrutiny by outside observers to maintain the transparency and integrity of the process.

In order to facilitate this constructive engagement the preparations for the first Earth Summit at Rio in 1992 threw open the doors of the negotiations to a much wider set of organisations than was traditional in the UN and gave them much greater access and rights of formal and informal participation. The positive example of creative engagement with stakeholders given by the United Nations in this way itself played an important part in encouraging governments around the world to make their own processes more open to constructive stakeholder engagement, and thus to advance the progress of sustainable development.

Agenda 21, adopted at the Earth Summit, formally recognised nine sectors of society or “Major Groups” as the main channels through which broad participation would be facilitated in UN activities related to sustainable development:

- Women
- Children and Youth
- Indigenous Peoples
- Non-Governmental Organizations
- Local Authorities
- Workers and Trade Unions
- Business and Industry
- Scientific and Technological Community
- Farmers

Two decades after the Earth Summit, the importance of effectively engaging these nine sectors of society was reaffirmed by the Rio+20 Conference. Its outcome document "The Future We Want"

highlights the role that Major Groups can play in pursuing sustainable societies for future generations. In addition, governments invited other stakeholders, including local communities, volunteer groups and foundations, migrants and families, as well as older persons and persons with disabilities, to participate in UN processes related to sustainable development, through close collaboration with the Major Groups. The coordination of their input to intergovernmental processes on sustainable development has been led by UNDESA/Division for Sustainable Development (DSD), and a coordinating body of facilitators known as the Organizing Partners, comprised of accredited organizations that are invited to be facilitators between the Major Group constituencies and DSD. Organizing Partners are tasked with coordinating inputs and streamlining communications from their particular constituencies.

The Earth Summit also established a new body – the Commission for Sustainable Development (CSD) to be the regular review body for the Summit decisions, and over the years the rights of stakeholders to participate in the work of the Commission were gradually extended and given formal recognition in decisions of the Commission and the General Assembly.

Among the rights secured by the Major Groups on behalf of stakeholders are the rights:

- To attend all official meetings of the forum including those organised by the Regional Commissions;
- To have access to all official information and documents;
- To submit documents and present written and oral contributions;
- To make recommendations;
- To organize side events and round tables, in cooperation with Member States and the Secretariat of the United Nations;
- To self-organise.

Almost as important as these formal rights has been the evolution of a UN culture of easy access between Government representatives and representatives of the Major Groups and other stakeholders in informal settings in and around the United Nations meeting places in New York and elsewhere. This has fostered mutual respect, dialogue and co-operative working to develop policy ideas and practical implementation partnerships.

A further important feature of the CSD was that from its early years it agreed a forward programme of work to cover in successive years all the major subjects within the sustainable development concept, thus enabling stakeholders as well as the governments to plan ahead to assemble evidence, reports and other material to make substantial and well-researched contributions at the appropriate time in the cycle. In 2002 the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg improved these arrangements by establishing a two year cycle of review for each topic with the first year confined to reviewing all the evidence that could be assembled on the subjects for that year, and confining negotiation on possible ways forward to the second year. This enabled more creative new insights and material to be introduced in the first review year and lessened the risk of continuous negotiation merely repeating the same arguments from year to year with little change in the conclusions.

The CSD has now been abolished, but its function as a monitor of progress on sustainable development and the SDGs has been taken on by the new High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) established by the UN General Assembly resolution 67/290 in July 2013. The founding resolutions for that body carry forward the acquired rights of the major groups. HLPF is expected to be the 'home of the SDGs' and as such major groups and other stakeholders will continue to participate in the implementation of the SDGs and their monitoring and review. But the precise modalities for this have still to be finalised, and even though the resolution establishing the HLPF affords major groups and other stakeholders wider participatory privileges than any other UN resolution, there is currently some concern that the rights and opportunities for stakeholders engagement at both formal and informal level may end up being more restricted than the CSD used to provide.

Another major point of concern is that the HLPF has only been given a maximum of 8 days to deal with its wide agenda. CSD had two weeks of preparation and two weeks of negotiations, this will make it difficult for everybody to carry out the challenge from Rio+20 and fully engage in creating a future based on sustainable development. Adequate stakeholder engagement is particularly vulnerable under a restricted timetable.

Stakeholders organisations in New York and around the world and a growing number of governments are alive to these concerns and are active in trying to ensure that the formal and informal rights and opportunities for them to make creative contributions to the formation of the SDGs and their monitoring and review remain at least as significant as those that existed under the CSD and are further developed in line with the HLPF resolution.

The EESC - and particularly the SDO - has itself made good use of the opportunities for access to UN conferences and meetings on sustainable development issues over the years. It might wish to associate itself with efforts by stakeholders of all kinds to maintain a proper space for stakeholder engagement at the UN and to urge the EU to be active in this cause.

2. Implementing the Post 2015 Development Agenda and the SDGs at national level –The UN's role

Assuming that the SDGs are adopted at the UN's Summit meeting in New York in September 2015 the primary focus will then shift to implementation at national and regional level. The UN deliberations are likely to have two important influences on that process of national (and EU) implementation. They are likely:

1. to take an overview of the various modes of advancing sustainable development at national level that have been employed over the past 20 years, and possibly recommend some of the leading methods and
2. to establish a framework for national reports on progress to be made back to the HLPF, including in particular reports on progress against the indicators that are to be established for each of the goals and targets.

On the first point many stakeholders, on the basis of their knowledge and experience of the ways in which sustainable development has been most effectively pursued over the past 20 years (and of where progress has fallen short), will be looking for encouragement and positive recommendation in the final UN declaration or from the UN Secretary General on such matters as the role and value of:

- Over-arching national (and regional) sustainable development strategies and their relationship to economic and other strategies;
- More specific flagship programmes at national (and regional) level to focus effort on key issues related to the theme within the SDGs framework as a means of advancing achievement of the goals;
- Clear governance architecture and guidance to detail how government should organise and integrate its own sustainable development work;
- Institutional arrangements to help engage other stakeholders systematically at all stages of the sustainability cycle such as national sustainable development councils, sustainability/future generations ombudsmen, national economic and social councils (and the EESC and SDO itself), etc.;
- Engagement and partnership with local, national and regional governments;
- Engagement with key sectors such as business, social partners, NGOs, the worlds of science and education etc.;
- Sustainability indicators and monitoring (at both national and regional level) and the parts to be played by objective statistical bodies; together with full engagement with the scientific and research communities to ensure that all available knowledge is brought to bear on the analysis of issues and trends;
- Parliamentary processes for regular review of progress in the sustainability transition and towards the SDGs.;
- Peer group review carried out in open, transparent and participatory processes;
- Synchronisation of the timetables for review and monitoring processes at international, regional and national levels so as to ensure interactions and positive feedback between them.

There are some encouraging references to some of these ideas in the Zero Draft. The Zero Draft for the HLPF declaration urges “all member states to develop ambitious national responses to the SDGs and targets as soon as possible”, “building on existing reporting and planning instruments, such as national sustainable development strategies”. It goes on to suggest that “National Parliaments can play an important role in review processes as well as other national institutions such as National Sustainable Development Councils and local authorities.”

If possible it would be desirable for the final declaration to be extended on these issues so as to include more of the engagement agenda identified by stakeholders and to see the favoured methods more strongly endorsed or recommended. And even if that proves difficult to negotiate at this late stage of the UN deliberations it would be desirable that some of these ideas be taken forward vigorously within the EU both at national and at EU level.

All of these initiatives will work best when they are fully embedded as agencies or drivers of change in society. They need to be enriched by full stakeholder engagement and participation, coupled with effective capacity building programmes for both governments and stakeholders. Stakeholder engagement with reporting processes should not simply be a matter of commenting on official drafts, but should extend as far as stakeholders producing their own reports and evaluations of progress as a free-standing input to the reporting and review processes.

As a leading representative of organised stakeholders in the EU, the EESC might usefully lend its support to these widely held stakeholder positions in the final stages of negotiating the UN declaration. At the same time the EESC and the SDO might advocate the fully adoption of these processes (or better) in Europe at both Member State and EU level as key enablers for the implementation and achievement of the SDGs.

Strong and continuing stakeholder participation will be an important part of keeping public and political attention focused on the goals, targets and indicators, and on addressing any problems or delays that may emerge in delivering some of the goals and targets. It is vital therefore to ensure that sufficient time and opportunity is built in to enable there to be a strong stakeholders input both at national and at international level at every stage of the implementation, monitoring and review cycle.

The EESC and SDO may wish to urge that sufficient time for thorough and well-articulated stakeholder participation be built into the implementation architecture and timetables from the outset, both at international level and within the EU and its member states.

3. Civil Society engagement with three national sustainable development processes in Europe

The study has examined the progress of sustainable development over the past 20 years in three European countries (Finland, Germany, and the UK including Wales) with particular reference to the part played by stakeholders, and the ways in which stakeholder engagement has enriched the process and contributed to better progress. (Summaries of these reports in English can be made available on request from Stakeholder Forum.)

From the analysis of these case studies and other initiatives to advance sustainable development at various levels a number of provisional conclusions emerge about success factors for the creation of sustainable development strategies, the implementation of sustainable development and monitoring and review:

- Over the years there has been some recurring tension between short term economic growth and recovery objectives and longer term sustainable development objectives. Better progress has been made at times when these tensions have been reduced and a more integrated approach has been adopted with economic strategies clearly directed towards achievement of longer term sustainability goals as well as shorter term economic ones. Greening the economy was a good general conceptual description of the integration needed but did not receive

universal approval at Rio + 20 and appears to have lost some political momentum in subsequent years;

- Similarly better progress has been made when all the Ministers and Departments of Government have worked together in an integrated way to advance sustainable development in pursuit of a single integrated sustainability strategy with strong leadership from the centre of government rather than leaving lead responsibility with a single ministry (typically the Environment Ministry) tasked with leading the entire agenda by itself and often in partial competition with other Ministries with different priorities;
- Better progress has been made at times when there has been widespread public interest and support for sustainable development objectives, reflected in a wide measure of cross-party political support;
- Better progress is made when efforts are made by government to engage deeply and genuinely with stakeholders of all kinds about the sustainability problems facing the world and the strategies, plans and co-operative partnerships needed to handle them, thus resulting in complementary top-down and bottom-up approaches, which can harness the energy and creativity of civil society and other stakeholders to the transformations needed;
- In the examples studied, stakeholder engagement has worked best when it has been continuously maintained over extended periods, and where stakeholders have been deeply and closely involved at all stages from problem analysis through the co-production of strategies and plans through to partnerships for implementation and monitoring;
- Arrangements for engaging stakeholders need to be flexible to take account of changing patterns of stakeholders' organisation. But they can be strengthened by institutional arrangements to enable long-term engagement to flourish and deliver results. National Councils for Sustainable Development, Commissioners or Ombudsmen for Future Generations, Economic and Social Councils can all play a valuable part. Such bodies can develop expertise in the creation of strategies and the policies pursued within them and in the monitoring and review of progress. They can build crucial relationships of trust with all the parts of Government that are concerned and with the major stakeholder groups in society;
- Monitoring progress and a willingness to make adjustments to policies and other action when progress towards goals and targets is falling short play a crucial part in effective implementation of the sustainability transition. The establishment of a regular cycle of monitoring and review of strategies with full engagement of stakeholders in the process can help both governmental and stakeholders to renew their engagement and commitments, and to make appropriate adjustments to plans, strategies and action programmes in the light of changing circumstances;
- Monitoring requires regular indicator reports from reliable statistical and other bodies, coupled with well-informed independent commentary on the messages contained in the indicators and other evidence;
- Progress at national level in the EU has been assisted when it has been complemented by an active commitment at European level to the advancement of sustainable development with proactive policies being driven forward by the Commission, the Council and the Parliament. When European attention is diverted to other objectives seen as more immediately pressing it is harder for national governments to maintain their own commitment and momentum

towards sustainable development. The converse also appears to be true – loss of commitment to sustainable development as an active driver of change in a significant number of member states makes it harder to maintain momentum at European level.

In the three countries studied an important catalytic and integrating role has been played by National Councils or Commissions for Sustainable Development. There is no single model for the composition and mandate of such Councils, but typically they have provided fora in which leading representatives of stakeholder organisations with knowledge, experience and commitment to the cause of sustainable development have been able to come together with each other and with government representatives to help shape strategies and policy measures.

They have helped create wide-ranging integrated sustainability strategies with buy-in from key stakeholder groups. They have organised broad stakeholder participation in shaping key sustainability policies. They have helped to organise to outreach to all parts of society to stimulate interest and action for sustainability and to keep the subject alive and creative as a driver of change. They have helped to engage stakeholders with the processes of monitoring and review, lessons from key indicators and other stakeholder-generated experience and prompting policy review and modification.

In the Finnish case, the ministerially led Finnish National Commission for Sustainable Development (FNCS) has helped to give national leadership to the sustainability transition, to integrate the work of different departments and to engage many different stakeholders outside Government in collaborative effort to advance the cause together.

In Germany, the independently led German Council for Sustainable Development (RNE) has led several wide stakeholder engagement processes around important but difficult sustainability issues including the major energy transformation now in progress (the “Energiewende” and helped to build national consensus on the way forward. In its most recent report⁶ the German Council has made a comprehensive analysis of the implications of the SDGs for Germany and made a large number of significant recommendations about the way in which they could be implemented there.

In the UK, the former Sustainable Development Commission (SDC) acted as a “critical friend’ to the UK Government and was able to draw out significant lessons from sustainability indicators and use them to hold the government to account for shortfalls on targets and promote appropriate policy modification to deal with some of these issues. Since the abolition of the UKSDC in 2011 there appears to have been less commitment by the UK Government to advancing sustainable development on a broad front in a comprehensive way, and although a number of significant sectoral sustainability initiatives and policies have continued to make headway there is currently less sense of an overall strategic national commitment to the sustainability transformation.

⁶ Germany’s Sustainability Architecture and the SDGs. Rat für Nachhaltige Entwicklung. May 2015.

In Wales however the Welsh Government is continuing to give high priority to the promotion of sustainable development and the well-being of present and future generations as a guiding principle for the whole country and as a statutory duty for all public bodies. They have arranged an extensive national conversation on “The Wales We Want”, and to reinforce this society-wide commitment they are creating a new Commissioner for Future Generations who will stimulate and monitor progress.

The EESC, and particularly the SDO, have some similarities with NCSDs, and have played a useful part in the evolution of sustainability policy and practice at the EU level. But in some respects they have not been able so far to play such a pre-eminent part in advancing sustainable development at European level as these national councils have done in their respective countries, perhaps because they lack the same kind of specific mandate for promoting sustainable development and engaging stakeholders of all kinds in that transformation in a systematic way.

Some lessons from the NCSDs experience that might be useful in considering further development of the EESC’s role and that of the SDO within it include:

- The importance of maintaining relationships of trust and confidence with Governments at the same time as maintaining sufficient independence to be able to comment and criticise current policies where necessary. This is a difficult balancing act that requires mutual respect, openness to consider different points of view and transparency of process.
- The importance of maintaining a consistent and coherent sustainability orientation in all its work in a similar manner to the three national councils examined.
- The importance of working in active partnership with all parts of Government. Sustainable development goes well beyond the scope of Environment Departments and Development Assistance Departments. It needs to be led from the top of Government as an integrating framework for all policy-making, and in particular to be fully integrated with economic management. The three national councils studied have helped in promoting this wider concept of sustainable development partly by establishing creative relationships with many different Government Departments and with the centre of government.
- The importance of building close relationships of trust and partnership with key stakeholder groups of all kinds. The three national councils studied have been innovators in the process of engaging wide groups of stakeholders throughout their countries on sustainability issues through conferences, workshops, study groups, action-oriented programmes, cultural events, youth-oriented activity, and web-based engagement of various kinds.
- The importance of expertise. For example the interpretation of statistical sustainable development indicators and other evidence and their significance for policy review for example requires expert analysis. The three national councils studied have been active users of indicator messages and have developed in-house or external means for interpreting their messages effectively.
- The importance of working with other national councils in the EU both to share experience and encourage mutual learning between stakeholders and councils in different

countries, and to develop common positions on Europe-wide issues affecting sustainable development in individual member states. The EEAC and the European Sustainable Development Network have been valuable networks for this purpose.

One feature that emerges from this limited comparison of national sustainable development processes is the wide variety between different member states at any one time and over time. Some countries have embarked vigorously on sustainable development strategies and have subsequently flagged. Others have been slower but more consistent.

It might be helpful if the SDG implementation programme to be adopted in the EU were to include some common agreement or guidelines as to how member states should implement, monitor and review progress as well as establishing a programme for European action initiated by the Commission. The EESC/SDO (and the wider partnership proposed below) might wish to consider developing a position on the key elements that might be included in such an agreement of guidance.

4. Stakeholder and Civil Society Engagement with Sustainable Development at the European Level. 2000-2015

This section outlines the EU's own major initiatives to co-ordinate action on sustainable development in the EU over the past 15 years and the steps the EU has taken to promote stakeholder engagement with these processes. At the time of the first Rio Summit in 1992 and again at the time of the Johannesburg Summit in 2002 the EU and its member states were among the global leaders in the advancement of sustainable development. In 1997 as part of this commitment the EU revised its founding treaties to add sustainable development as one of the overarching objectives of EU policies. (Treaty of Amsterdam, 1997)

At the Gothenburg Summit in June 2001, in order to carry forward these over-arching objective EU leaders launched the first comprehensive EU sustainable development strategy based on a proposal from the European Commission. It formed a main part of the EU's contribution to global sustainability in time for the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002.

The Gothenburg declaration formed the core of the EU's policies towards sustainable development. But these also encompassed other programmes and commitments, such as the commitments made at the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg and the Millennium Development Goals agreed in 2000, as well as global pledges to increase official development aid and to take account of the needs of developing countries in international trade.

The 2001 strategy presented six key challenges to sustainable development, namely: climate change, public health, poverty, an ageing society, natural resource management, and transport and land use management. It also called for a new approach to policy-making that ensures the EU's economic, social and environmental policies mutually reinforce each other. The central instrument developed for this purpose was the obligation for the Commission to submit each new major policy proposal to an Impact Assessment.

The strategy also called for a wider engagement of civil society and other stakeholders and a wider “*individual and collective responsibility*” (COM, 2001, p. 8). It particularly emphasised the role of citizens and businesses in bringing about change.

Following the Johannesburg Summit there was an active period of implementation and consolidation of European activity on sustainable development, and in February 2005 the Commission published a review of the strategy and suggestions for its future orientation (COM, 2005).

This was followed by a year of intense engagement with stakeholders and governments on the strategy. This included a Public Consultation, a Public Hearing and Stakeholder Forum organised by the EESC, as well as a number of events and conferences (Spangenberg, 2010). Approaches to stakeholder engagement were diverse, for example the Commission made use of its relatively new “Your Voice in Europe” online portal for its public consultations. The EESC adopted an *Open Space Technology* approach to its conferences, allowing stakeholders to freely shape discussions and agendas.

This stakeholder engagement highlighted some limitations of the first SDS and its review. Many argued that it lacked coordination with other EU policies, particularly the parallel running Lisbon Agenda and that it did not have an adequate external dimension.

Renewal of the SDS 2006

Recognising the force of some of these criticisms the Commission and the Council made further revisions to the strategy and on June 9, 2006 the European Council formally adopted the revised Strategy. Building on the first SDS the renewed version identified seven key challenges to supporting sustainable development; climate change and clean energy; sustainable transport; sustainable consumption and production; conservation and management of natural resources; public health; social inclusion, demography and migration; and global poverty and sustainable development. It recognised the need to move towards a better integrated approach to policy-making. It reaffirmed the need for global solidarity and recognised the importance of strengthening work with partners outside the EU, including those rapidly developing countries which will have a significant impact on global sustainable development.

The 2006 SDS also included a number of policy guiding principles, which emphasised the importance of engaging stakeholders, including the need to develop adequate consultation processes, enhance participation of citizens and improve dialogue and cooperation with business and social partners. Another interesting development promoted by the SDS was the introduction of a peer review process for NSDSs (COM, 2006). The process gave another opportunity for stakeholder engagement, increasing transparency and the share of best practices. It also allowed third countries an opportunity to engage with the EU SDS dialogue.

A 2007 progress report on the 2nd SDS suggested that whilst the progress towards the sustainable development objectives themselves had been modest the modes of stakeholder engagement showed

good signs of member state, civil society and business “*working together towards achieving sustainable development objectives*” (COM, 2007, p. 14).

The European Council in [December](#) 2007 welcomed the Commission Progress Report and insisted on the need to give priority to implementation measures: “*Sustainable development is a fundamental objective of the European Union. The European Council welcomes the Commission's first progress report on the renewed EU Sustainable Development Strategy (SDS). It agrees that the objectives and priorities under the seven key challenges contained in that strategy remain fully valid and that the main focus should therefore be on effective implementation at all levels. The renewed EU Strategy and national strategies for sustainable development also need to be linked up more closely. The governance structure and tools of the SDS, in particular in relation to monitoring of progress and best practice sharing, must be fully used and strengthened.*”

The second review of the SDS in 2009 was more critical of progress in the strategy. The Commission claimed that the EU had mainstreamed sustainable development into a broad range of its policies, and in particular taken the lead in the fight against climate change and the promotion of a low-carbon economy. At the same time, it noted that unsustainable trends persisted in many areas and that efforts needed to be intensified. It particularly noted poor progress within the key challenges of sustainable transport, management of natural resources, and biodiversity (COM, 2009).

It proposed that Governance, including implementation, monitoring and follow-up mechanisms should be reinforced through clearer links to the future EU 2020 strategy and other cross-cutting strategies.

The 2020 Strategy

The Commission has indeed subsequently tried to mainstream sustainable development thinking into various parts of the [Europe 2020 Strategy](#) with its slogan of smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. Key areas for mainstreaming were identified in the European Fund for Strategic Investment (EFSI), in climate policy and the move towards energy union, and the work on the circular economy and resource efficiency. The Commission communication “Rio+20: towards the green economy and better governance” from 2011 also included a section on sustainable development. The communication referred to the Europe 2020 strategy as an effective tool for delivering sustainable development in the EU.

Thereafter the Commission focused its main co-ordinating and progress- chasing efforts on the 2020 Strategy which succeeded the Lisbon Strategy. At the same time however, and partly under the pressure of the on-going financial and economic crisis, the political momentum behind the European SDS gradually diminished, and in practice it has currently ceased to be a major driver of new initiatives and change in Europe. (Similarly at national level in Europe national sustainable development strategies appear to have declined in significance or fallen into abeyance in a number of European countries during the period of economic turbulence, though a few notable exceptions such as Finland and Germany have conspicuously kept the sustainability flame alive.)

The 2020 strategy included 7 flagship implementation programmes, but only one of these on resource efficiency had significant sustainable development dimensions. In practice in spite of including sustainability as one of its three straplines the 2020 Strategy has not proved capable of providing a comprehensive umbrella for the advancement of sustainable development in the EU and has failed to operate as a major driving force in the sustainability transition.

Whilst the Europe 2020 strategy was explicit about the importance of engagement of stakeholders, and included a public consultation at the outset, the strategy itself has often been criticised by stakeholders as representing primarily a top-down response to the economic crisis from the Barroso Commission (COM, 2010; COM, 2009), with inadequate attention to longer term sustainability goals. Civil society groups and other stakeholders have for some years become critical of the lack of coherence between the SDS and the Lisbon Strategy (COM, 2009, p. 13), and the apparent subordination of the long term goals of sustainable development to the shorter term economic concerns of the Lisbon Strategy. The EESC have also been critical of the failure to make progress towards the SDS many of its targets and the Commission's failures to consult the EESC and other civil society organisations adequately (EESC, 2009).

In 2014 all the sections of the EESC made significant inputs to the EESC's own initiative opinion intended as an input to the midterm review of the 2020 strategy and the SDO made particular efforts to ensure that the Committee made a strong plea for the sustainability dimension to be reinforced in the strategy. That review has now been postponed to 2016. The attention of the EESC/SDO and other stakeholders remains however well- focused on the opportunity that this presents for using the strategy review process and the possible creation of a new 2030 strategy to create a more integrated framework for implementing the SDGs in the EU and thus finally securing a satisfactory integration of the two strategies.

Indicators

The European statistical institution Eurostat together with the European Environment Agency has played an important role in report and monitoring European progress towards sustainable development goals. Eurostat has a sustainability task force which report on measuring progress, well-being and sustainable development. They also highlight the importance of stakeholder engagement when designing indicators, as well as during monitoring and evaluation.

Eurostat in 2007 published a first monitoring report based on an extended set of sustainable development indicators. This report was one of the inputs for the first progress report on the Sustainable Development Strategy. Eurostat has subsequently published sustainability indicators every two years, with the last report in 2013 (Eurostat, 2013), and continues to refine and improve the set working closely with national statistics offices in the EU. The current Sustainable Development Indicators (SDIs) include over 100 indicators, with 12 headline indicators.

The latest 2013 monitoring report reveals a mixed picture of the progress of the EU on sustainable development in the years from 2000 until 2012⁷. Developments have to a large extent been influenced by the global financial and economic crisis after 2007. Apart from the trends towards rising risks of poverty and social exclusion in the wake of the economic crisis several other unfavourable or negative trends are highlighted including public health, the transition to sustainable transport modes, the declining fishing stocks, the decrease of semi-natural and arable land and the decline in financial development assistance after the crisis. Addressing these issues will clearly be an important part of the SDG challenge for the EU. None of them is adequately covered by the present EU 2020 Strategy so a broader approach will be needed to guide the implementation of the SDGs properly in the EU.

The final report in this series will be published in 2015, and Eurostat then expects to move to publishing regulator indicators to monitor progress on the SDGs.

The Semester Process

The introduction of the European Semester as part of the open method of coordination apparatus in place to monitor progress towards the Europe 2020 strategy gave new opportunities for stakeholder engagement and provided in particular for “collecting, sharing and implementing good practices” (COM, 2010, p. 6). However the European Semester also came under criticism for being Commission focused and lacking transparency (Hallerberg, Marzinotto, & Wolff, 2011); and although the semester process has in recent years been enlarged to include provision for some national reporting on sustainability measures and for discussion of these with the Commission and with other member states it is so far hard to discern any strong pressure for further advance on sustainability issues being transmitted by these means.

Strengths and weaknesses of the European sustainability processes overall

In summary whilst in the first years of this century there were significant efforts to create and maintain a strong creative EU dynamic for sustainable development and a strong level dialogue with stakeholders on general sustainable development issues to reinforce it this engagement has dwindled in more recent years under the pressure of shorter term financial and economic concerns.

One crucial issue that emerges from this experience is the need to secure the effective integration of economic and sustainable development policy making at European level. Attempts have been made from time to time to argue that the Lisbon and 2020 strategies represented the short term measures needed to work towards the longer term goals of the SD strategy. But during the years of the financial and economic crisis the short term economic considerations have dominated all else and it has been difficult to retain impetus behind the longer term sustainability objectives.

⁷. http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ITY_OFFPUB/KS-03-13-331/EN/KS-03-13-331-EN.PDF.

Rio +20 and the creation of the SDGs. The opportunity for a new push on the sustainability transformation

Following the Rio+ 20 Summit and the negotiation of the SDGs there are now however some new signs of revival of the sustainable development agenda. New or refreshed sustainable development strategies to implement the SDGs are being created or considered in several European countries and the EU is beginning to develop follow-up proposals at European level.

In October 2012 the Council of the EU called for a full implementation of the outcome of this conference through a revised European Sustainable Development Strategy, and in the same month the Commission launched a public consultation on Rio+20 follow up. The EESC supported feedback through a series of structured dialogues. Over 125 responses to the public consultation were received from individuals, public authorities, businesses and business associations, NGOs, trade unions and consumer protection groups.

A large number of replies highlighted issues related to the inclusive green economy, in particular pointing to the need for indicators beyond GDP, while others pointed out the need for a favourable trade environment, eliminating environmentally harmful subsidies and environmental taxes. The areas for possible SDGs mentioned by respondents included resource and energy efficiency, waste and chemicals, biodiversity, sustainable consumption and production, water and sanitation, protection of oceans and fisheries, sustainable transport, sustainable agriculture, gender equality, poverty eradication, climate change and adaptation, health and food security. Respondents also underlined the importance of clear and long-term targets on making use of exiting targets and agreements.

On the relationship between SDGs and MDGs, there was wide consensus that a single post-2015 development framework should be created that would cover both the domestic changes needed within the EU to advance the sustainability transformation and the international obligations of the EU to support sustainable development in developing countries (particularly the LDCs) and other parts of the world.

Given the intention of the Commission to revise the EU 2020 Strategy it has been well urged by the EESC that the two strategies are not revised separately, but as a package in order to set up a coherent strategic framework for the future of the EU in a changing global environment. In this process the revised EU 2020 targets could represent benchmarks for the mid-term perspective while elements of the EU SDS could be used to set up long-term objectives for European sustainable development in line with the global Post-2015 agenda.

Up to the present time most Commission and Council activity around the implementation of the SDGs and the post-2015 agenda has appeared to be focused primarily on the development and poverty eradication agenda for developing countries and how the developed world can assist that process. This was the dominant theme of the Commission communication of February 2013 (COM (2013) 92 Final) “A Decent Life for All”.

This communication set out through its external action and notably the implementation of the Agenda for Change, the EU could continue facilitating progress towards the MDGs and sustainable development in developing countries, with a specific focus on the least developed and the ones most in need. At the same time however a number of domestic actions were identified that need to be carried out in order to contribute to the implementation of Rio+20 commitments. The main current EU activities to implement Rio+20 are brought together in a useful Annex mapping a number of current EU policies and activities onto the main sustainability goals emerging from Rio and the SDG negotiations.

In December 2014 the Council however for its part continued to direct that

“the most essential element for a truly transformative post-2015 agenda is its effective implementation which mostly takes place at the country level. National ownership and leadership will be of key importance. National efforts need to be reinforced by cooperation and partnership on regional and global levels, including multi-stakeholder cooperation and partnerships.

Ongoing work to make the UN development system more "fit for purpose" at headquarters as well as at country level is important for achieving the agenda. The EU and its Member States recognise that advancing sustainable development also depends on our own domestic action and on developing our own set of implementation measures.

The Council invites the Commission to propose a concrete way forward on the global partnership, including the various elements addressed above, based on continued consultative work including with Member States.”

In its most recent communication (COM(2015) 44 final) on a Global Partnership for Poverty Eradication and Sustainable Development after 2015 the new Commission has so far continued to focus primarily on the development agenda and the role which developed countries including the EU can best play in implementing it.

It therefore remains unclear how the Commission and the other institutions will address the implementation of the SDGs within the European domestic agenda or how they will approach the expected review of the 2020 strategy. A further communication on this is however expected later in the year and is expected to include inter alia a full mapping of the SDGs and targets on to existing European policies and programmes. This should be very helpful in identifying where there may be gaps or shortfalls indicating that new measures may be needed to advance the sustainability transformation and secure European delivery of the goals and targets.

The shape of this new strategic approach and the scope for engagement with civil society and other stakeholders about the domestic implementation of the SDGs in Europe are thus still very much open questions – and it remains open to the EESC and SDO to continue to urge their own preferred approach.

The EESC and SDO might continue to urge the new Commission to create a single new integrated strategy that could recast the EU's economic objectives within the broader framework of working steadily towards implementation of the SDGs.

They might also urge that such an objective should include a robust and wide-ranging process for engaging stakeholders of all kinds in the creation of the strategy, and in its implementation, monitoring and review.

Chapter 5. The current role of the EESC and the SDO as a facilitator for civil society dialogue on sustainable development

1. The activities of the EESC and the SDO over the past 15 years

The EESC has been continuously active on sustainable development issues over the past 15 years. It has produced numerous opinions, sometimes commenting on successive Commission proposals and actions, and sometimes undertaking exploratory or own initiative opinions to open up new areas of the sustainability debate.

An important milestone following the SDS renewal was the creation of the *Sustainable Development Observatory* (SDO) within the EESC in 2006. The second iteration of the European Sustainable Development Strategy may be said to represent a high water mark of European efforts at stakeholder engagement with sustainable development at the strategic level, and the creation of the SDO was a highly creative initiative by the EESC to respond to this widespread expression of support for stakeholder engagement in sustainable development by creating its own dedicated instrument for this purpose. The role of the SDO was to provide a focal point for sustainable development within the EESC so as to enable the Committee to adopt a more integrated approach to sustainable development issues, and to maintain a broad overview on the general progress of sustainable development in the EU.

The creation of the SDO has significantly strengthened the ability of the Committee to pursue a strong and consistent line on sustainability issues since then. Even while high level political attention has been distracted away from sustainability issues by short term economic issues, the Observatory has been able to play a significant part in maintaining and supporting the EESC's continuing engagement with sustainable development issues.

Within the EESC the SDO has worked in partnership with other sections to ensure that sustainability considerations are fully taken into account throughout the Committee's work. In some cases the SDO and other sections have combined to work jointly on particular issues. In other cases draft opinions from other sections have been brought for review to the SDO to ensure that sustainability dimensions are properly taken into account.

A particularly important internal collaboration was established with the 2020 Strategy review committee. The SDO was able to make a substantial contribution to that review, thus emphasising again the need for the 2020 Strategy itself to have a stronger sustainability dimension when the next strategy is prepared.

The EESC has issued an opinion on the flagship initiative⁸, on the Roadmap to a Resource Efficient Europe⁹ and on the various other initiatives. The Committee has also used two own-initiative opinions, accompanied by two public hearings, to push for a transition to an inclusive green

⁸ EESC opinion on the Flagship Initiative A Resource-efficient Europe (NAT/498, Ribbe).

⁹ EESC opinion on the Roadmap to a Resource Efficient Europe (NAT/529, Egan).

economy¹⁰ and has published an exploratory opinion on the promotion of sustainable production and consumption in the EU¹¹.

The preparations for the international Rio + 20 Conference and its follow up over the last three years have provided new opportunities for the EESC and the SDO to develop their partnership with the Commission and to broaden their engagement with stakeholders of all kinds to revive and reanimate the sustainability challenge. In the lead up to Rio +20 EESC and SDO collaborated with the Commission and organised hearings and conferences in Brussels, and side events at the UN meetings themselves. Subsequently they have been equally involved with the follow-up and the preparation of the SDGs and the post-2015 agenda.

They frequently hold open meetings or organise larger conferences (sometimes in association with the Commission and with UNDESA) to draw together stakeholders of many kinds to explore new issues and other areas where new policies or policy modification is under consideration. Innovative tools such as online media and open space forums show that there are a range of engagement tools that can be used effectively for involving stakeholders in the SD agenda both at the general level and in strengthening the formulation and implementation of particular SD policies¹².

As these discussions have intensified the SDO has gradually built up an effective partnership with a network of civil society organisations active on sustainable development issues in Brussels.

Outside Brussels the SDO has begun to develop useful relationships with civil society in some member states through the Committee's recent innovation of impact studies in member states.

In another important development the SDO has begun to develop its capacity to draw on the work of Eurostat and the EEA on sustainability indicators so as to be able to make significant policy review recommendations arising from a well-informed analysis of the messages about the progress of sustainability implicit in the indicators.

The preparations for the Rio +20 Summit in 2012 and its follow-up through the creation of the SDGs have thus provided an important opportunity for all this work to be deepened and strengthened. The

¹⁰ EESC own-initiative opinion on "The green economy – promoting sustainable development in Europe" (NAT/590, Agudo); EESC own-initiative opinion on Market-based instruments towards a resource-efficient and low carbon economy in the EU (NAT/620, Siecker/Ribbe).

¹¹ EESC exploratory opinion on the Promotion of sustainable production and consumption in the EU (NAT/537, Le Nouail Marlière).

¹² In February 2014 for example at the request of the Commission and in broad partnership with civil society organisations and networks involved in the Post-2015 debate the EESC organised a Conference on "A new global partnership: European civil society positions on the post-2015 framework" to explore

- its underlying principles of integration and universality,
- priority themes it should address,
- its implications and the transformations that will have to take place in our societies.

Later that year in May and again in June working with the UN the EESC organised briefings and discussions in New York for civil society participants attending the negotiations on the SDGs. In November the EESC organised on the request of the European Commission a workshop where experts and representatives from civil society organisations and local authorities involved in the post-2015 process discussed in an open, interactive setting the main elements of an EU approach to the Global Partnership and the associated questions and challenges in order to provide stakeholders' input to a forthcoming Commission communication.

SDO played an active part in supporting stakeholder engagement with the EU's preparations for the Summit, and organised stakeholder events at the Summit itself. Subsequently they have been equally active in promoting EU stakeholder engagement with the creation of the SDGs, and now with the planning for their implementation, monitoring and review.

2. A Survey of Stakeholders and their responses

In order to examine these developments more deeply and to assess their success in engaging the stakeholder community in Brussels and beyond this study undertook a small survey of civil society groups in Brussels. We were invited to explore the views of this stakeholder community about the steps the EESC and SDO have taken in recent years to engage stakeholders on sustainability issues and to help identify what role the EESC and the SDO could most usefully play in engaging civil society and other stakeholders with the new challenge of SDG implementation, monitoring and review.

The responses consist of a collective survey response from a Task Force relevant to the SDGs, and two interviews with two representatives for industry and environmental NGOs respectively. All of the respondees drew on long professional and personal experiences from their work representing civil society groups in relation to the general sustainability agenda and the post-2015 agenda in particular. The following section provides a short analysis of the perspectives we gathered.

Mechanisms

There was a general agreement amongst interviewees that physical meetings culminating in active participatory debate were the central tool in generating stakeholder engagement. Different stakeholder groups will always represent different interests, and the challenge is to get groups to move beyond their own interests and come to a collective level of agreement which can be built upon. Such debate is dependent on long term dynamic approaches; single one-off conferences or stakeholder events are often insufficient. Ideally continuing stakeholder engagement should be sought throughout each stage of the policy and implementation process.

Internet consultations are becoming increasingly part of stakeholder engagement models. These can provide powerful tools for mass political engagement, for instance allowing citizen engagement as well as organised civil society. However, they also are limited by a lack of accountability or transparency. Furthermore, technologically reliant tools like this can exclude marginalised groups. Hence, such tools should not replace more active modes of stakeholder engagement.

Organising discussions

The existence of groups, such as those within the EESC or the UN Major Groups, can be useful for organisation and coordination – allowing for coherent responses on specific issues. However such groupings should also be approached with caution. For instance, when single representatives from these groups act, the diversity of these groups is not always taken into account. Furthermore, those not

covered by the groupings can feel excluded from discussions altogether. The obvious disadvantage of any grouping system is that the larger the number of organisations involved, the more the consensus building function which the group has to provide tends to weaken and soften recommendations, and to exclude innovative ideas that have not yet built wide support. Hence, it is important that individual organisations retain opportunities to provide their inputs directly.

Some argued that the EESC is too focused on its own internal debates, and on the work of the EU. They would like to see the EESC and the SDO cultivate stronger linkages upwards with the Major Groups and other stakeholders represented at the United Nations and downwards with National Councils of Sustainable Development and other national stakeholder groups so as to be able to help maximise stakeholder influence on sustainability issues across the different levels. This will become even more important if the UN Secretary General's proposals for multi-level monitoring and review for the SDG implementation process are adopted.

The role of the EESC

Clearly one of the benefits of the EESC is that it offers a platform in which actors from different civil society groups can interact. However, the mechanisms through which “civil society” is defined and the membership of the EESC is appointed received some criticism as well as support. Some saw the method of appointment of EESC members through national government nomination as potentially compromising members' ability to represent stakeholder interests and views vigorously and independently. On the other hand the appointment of representatives by Governments can ensure a breadth and calibre of representatives, which would perhaps not be possible with an open doors policy. An important point here is for members to maintain good and open lines of communication with all relevant stakeholder groupings.

For industry groups, for example, there are many additional channels to the EESC for them to engage with policy makers; but the EESC provides a rare opportunity to be amongst other civil society groups and actively debate their perspectives. For less powerful, but nevertheless important, groups the EESC and SDO can sometimes provide new opportunities for their perspectives to enter the debate, particularly when they make efforts to bring in new voices and open doors to those who are willing to challenge the status quo and “business as usual” ideas and policies.

Civil society in Europe engaged with sustainable development issues includes many different organisations and networks, all of whom need to be given a chance to engage. Likewise, there is a need to incorporate national perspectives, and avoid an overly Brussels focused civil society dialogue. Any enlarged engagement process initiated by the EESC and SDO will have to be very careful about how to achieve a proper balance between the interests involved.

It should be appreciated that the EESC is not the only channel for stakeholder engagement in relation to sustainable development at the European level. Understanding the other channels which already exist and deciding how the EESC and the SDO could best act to complement them on sustainable development issues could be an important first step.

Summary

It is clear from the responses we gathered that the EESC and SDO's role in promoting stakeholder engagement with sustainable developed issues is valued by other stakeholders but from their perspective could still be improved. Allowing for free and inclusive engagement while providing opportunities for organised and effective responses to policy making requires a careful balance.

Stakeholders prefer long term continuing dialogue processes, rather than one-off engagements, predominantly using physical meetings with open debate and deliberation and no attempt to work towards pre-determined conclusions. While consensus building between stakeholders can be a useful role it should not be used as a means of diluting important divergent views from different stakeholders to a bland common denominator.

3. Moving Forward

By virtue of their experience and track record the EESC and the SDO are well-placed to play a significant part in the process of implementation, monitoring and review of the SDGs in the EU; and this should be a high priority task for them. They might be able to play that role even more successfully if they can reach out to other stakeholders and help to build a wider network of support on some of the key issues.

It appears that many other Brussels stakeholders would welcome further efforts by the EESC and SDO to extend and deepen their engagement with other stakeholders on the implementation of the SDGs in this way, provided that they continue to do this in an open, transparent and balanced way, building on the best of the practices they have already begun to develop in this area, and taking account of experience elsewhere in the world on effective stakeholder engagement and the various advisory standards and guidance that have been established on this¹³.

¹³

In considering this possibility further the Committee might also wish to consider the lessons of the somewhat similar work which the Committee has recently undertaken with the Commission and with stakeholders to establish a broadly-based energy dialogue or platform for engagement with stakeholders to inform the evolution of the EU's energy policies. Energy policy is one very important element of the general sustainability debate and the initiative for an energy dialogue might be regarded as to some degree a model or precursor for the kind of wider stakeholder engagement now needed to take SDG implementation forward successfully in the EU.

Chapter 6. Launching a new Sustainability Cycle in the European Union – and engaging civil society and other stakeholders in the process

In this chapter we explore in more detail how stakeholder engagement with SDG implementation in the EU might be structured. Such engagement will of course be highly dependent on the arrangements which the Commission and the other Institutions themselves establish for the implementation of the SDGs. Since firm proposals have not yet been made on this we have ventured to make some suggestions about an optimal implementation strategy from a stakeholder perspective, and to consider how stakeholders in general and the EESC and SDO in particular might best relate to such a structure.

The European Union occupies a pivotal position in the construction of the new architecture for implementation of sustainable development. As one of the chief architects and advocates of sustainable development over the years it has played a key part in shaping the way in which sustainability issues have been taken forward amongst its own Member States, and also has had a key role as an exemplar for other parts of the world.

In recent years the sustainability agenda has tended to be subordinated in the EU to what have been seen as more pressing short term economic and financial issues. Now, however, the SDGs present a new more urgent and structured formulation of the global sustainability challenge and there will be a new opportunity for the Commission and the other Institutions to renew and reinvigorate the EU's approach to sustainable development issues.

In the first section of this report the stages of the sustainability cycle were listed:

- Setting goals
 - Research, analysis, information gathering and assessment
 - International negotiations to set international goals and targets
- Implementation
 - Creating national strategies and plans for delivering the goals
 - Key sector implementation programmes, with specific policies and measures, programmes and projects
- Monitoring progress and review
 - Monitoring indicators
 - Reporting and review nationally
- International reporting and Review, followed by a new iteration of the cycle

For the new post-2015 cycle based on the SDGs the international negotiations at global level have effectively covered the first two stages of the cycle for all countries and will result in a set of universal goals and targets for all countries to be adopted by world leaders at the UN Summit in September.

The next step in the cycle for national governments, and – in Europe – for the EU itself will be the creation of strategies and plans for the implementation and achievement of the SDGs.

1. A new integrated strategy?

At the moment the EU fortunately has a moment of opportunity in relation to its own sustainable development processes. The second renewed EU sustainable development strategy of 2006 which was agreed by the Council and the Parliament as well as the Commission has been allowed to fall into some neglect, and is ripe for renewal or a new beginning. Similarly the 2020 Strategy which provided an over-arching framework for much of the previous Commission's work needs renewal or replacement. This could be a good time for the Commission and the other institutions and to create a new overarching strategic framework in 2016 that would base itself around European implementation of the universal SDGs, and provide for regular monitoring and review of progress. Many groups of stakeholders and the EESC itself are beginning to argue for this to happen, and for a new integrated post-2015 strategy focused on 2030 objectives to be established in 2016¹⁴.

In line with the principle of universality – which is a fundamental feature of the SDGs – all goals and targets are meant to apply to all countries. Each EU member state will need to draw up its own plans for implementation across the board. A major question for the EU and its member states then to consider together will be to determine which of the goals and targets may also need a strong European lead or co-ordination (e.g. those goals which have either transboundary challenges or transboundary solutions).

As one key task the EU will clearly have an important part to play in helping to co-ordinate Member States work on developing country issues as formulated in the SDGs, including further efforts to achieve the long-standing goal of contributing 0.7% of Gross National Income (GNI) to Overseas Development Aid (ODA), and mobilising other sources of finance for development (SDG 17), and implementing whatever conclusions emerge for the forthcoming Summit on Finance for Development (FfD) in Addis Ababa in July 2015. The Commission has already launched a number of Communications on this area of concern.

But supporting sustainable development in the developing countries is by no means the only challenge for developed countries and for the EU arising from the SDGs. Presumably an early step for the EU will need to be to conduct an assessment with member states and with stakeholders of all kinds as to which other SDG implementation tasks should be initiated and co-ordinated at EU level, and which should be led primarily at national level.

At present there are 17 proposed SDGs underpinned by 169 targets. It will be a complex task for those responsible for implementation to establish appropriate arrangements to pursue all of these goals.

Preliminary analysis by Stakeholder Forum in another study¹⁵ suggests that in developed countries particular attention will need to be paid to those goals where the global objectives will require the developed countries to make a radical transformation of their own economies and societies. This

¹⁴ http://www.eesc.europa.eu/resources/docs/eesc_rex-sdo-conclusions_post2015-final_en.pdf

¹⁵ Stakeholder Forum. *Universal Sustainable Development Goals. Understanding the Transformational Challenge for Developed Countries*. Stakeholder Forum, London, 2015.

includes goals such as Goal 8 (Sustainable Economies) and Goal 12 (Sustainable Consumption and Production) Goal 7 (Sustainable Energy) and Goal 13 (Climate Change), and on some of the environmentally-oriented goals that will require concerted action across Europe.). That separate study also offers a methodology for helping different groups to identify the degrees of transformational challenge and priority they themselves attach to the different goals and targets. Such an approach could usefully be applied to identifying the key areas for EU attention in the implementation task.

Stakeholders of all kinds will have much to contribute to the identification of these key tasks for the EU, and it might be appropriate to launch the EU's implementation programmes with a wide-ranging and open-ended consultation with stakeholders of all kinds to build as wide a consensus as possible on the priorities for implementation.

2. Flagship Programmes?

A comprehensive sustainable development strategy covers a very wide range of subjects and needs to involve action by many different Government Departments and many different stakeholders. It needs to be followed up by more detailed policies and programmes in key transformative areas. One of the strengths of the European 2020 strategy has been that the over-arching strategy has been complemented by 7 flagship programmes of action in key strategic areas, which have set out more specific actions and initiatives in relation to this manageable number of key priority areas.

The EESC has for example been generally supportive of the flagship programme on resources efficiency, and although it has made a number of criticisms as well this could be a good programme to carry forward into the new strategy perhaps linked to the new proposals that are currently being developed on the circular economy. In general flagship programmes linked to key SDG objectives could be a good feature to carry forward into the new European sustainable development strategy (EU SDS) following an extensive mapping exercise to appraise current EU policies relevant to the SDGs and identify where new initiatives and transformative action will be most needed to achieve the SDGs.

There would need to be full engagement with stakeholders of all kinds to confirm the selection of subjects and to work out collaborative approaches to filling in the details of the flagship programmes and the measures, programmes, partnerships and actions needed to support them.

Whatever set of the SDGs and related targets are identified for action at European level it seems clear that they will cover a wide field, and will need a wide-ranging and over-arching post-2015 strategy to integrate the approach, supported by action plans or programmes in some of the key areas. Many different Directorates General of the Commission will need to be involved, and there will need to be strong co-ordination from the centre of the Commission, ensuring in particular. A similar co-ordinated process will be needed in the Council and its formations, and in the Parliament.

3. Monitoring and Review

A programme to fully implement the SDGs in Europe will involve radical changes to the European economy and European society over the next 15 years. Inevitably the initial strategy will require adjustment over time to take account of changing circumstances, and different degrees of effectiveness of different policies and programmes. Monitoring progress, and reviewing policies and actions will be a crucial part of delivering the goals and targets.

The EU has had long experience with sustainable development indicators.

In recent years the regular publication of sustainability indicators has not however supported a very active process for review and adjustment of the strategy or its supporting policies. The indicators are used to a modest extent to inform the semester process for annual discussion between the Commission and member states on progress towards the objectives of the 2020 strategy. But since that strategy is focused much more on short term economic management issues than on longer term sustainability the semester process has not been able to act as a very significant progress chasing and review mechanism in relation to sustainability objectives.

The semester process also suffers from the defect that it mainly takes place behind closed doors between the Commission and individual member states. The process is not transparent and does not provide a significant opportunity for stakeholder engagement.

Currently negotiating attention is focused on the creation of sets of indicators that can be generated objectively by statistical services around the world and will show regularly how much progress is being achieved on the different targets. Experience shows however that bare indicators do not by themselves generate the kind of political attention and pressure that is needed to take corrective action where needed. Stakeholders need to have the means to highlight significant problems revealed by monitoring data and reports, and to build pressures for corrective action.

To make the monitoring of progress against the SDGs and the post-2015 agenda a more dynamic process, it should be a more transparent process involving full stakeholder engagement in the assessment of progress, and a clearer commitment to policy review and modification where this is needed to correct adverse trends or shortfalls in progress. This could be a fruitful area for the SDO and other civil society partners to make a significant contribution and add to the impact and salience of the messages that ought to emerge from the indicator reports.

4. Engaging Stakeholders in the Creation of a new European Strategy and subsequent stages of the Sustainability Cycle

Stakeholders are needed at all stages of the sustainability cycle - as contributors to the identification of goals and targets and co-creators of shared national strategies, as co-producers of the policies and measures needed to achieve the objectives, as co-implementers in the programmes, projects and actions needed to change unsustainable practices and behaviours, and as co-participants in monitoring and review processes as joint guardians and watchdogs of progress.

Engaging a wide range of stakeholders is crucial to building wide political support for a transformational sustainable development strategy. They need to be brought in at an early stage before the agenda has been fully determined, and their views have to be fully understood and reflected in the strategy that emerges. Insofar as the strategy involves voluntary commitments and actions by players other than government then of course those partners need to be fully engaged in co-production of the strategy which then needs to be jointly owned.

When a draft strategy has emerged it needs the support of stakeholders of all kinds as well as top level endorsement from political leaders if the strategy is to serve its purpose of mobilising all sectors of society in a common endeavour to move towards greater sustainability.

To build greater consensus with all parties the EESC/SDO might consider holding hearings with stakeholders on the draft strategy. They might also urge the Council and/or the Parliament to consider following the model of UN Summits and holding open meetings with a number of stakeholders' leaders to pledge their joint support to the new strategy.

Engaging stakeholders at every stage of the sustainability cycle in this way over a number of years can be greatly assisted by establishing stable patterns of engagement at the outset with clear understandings about the timetabling of the cycle, and the nature of the engagement to be sought at each stage. Stakeholder capacities to deliver their side of the engagement process could then be built up in good time and mutual relationships of confidence and trust can be developed. Institutional arrangements to support such regular and systematic engagement would be of benefit to all.

Chapter 7. Conclusions and recommendations. Roles of the EESC, the SDO and a new Sustainability Forum.

The creation of the SDGs presents the European Union with an opportunity and a challenge.

Taken up comprehensively and implemented vigorously the SDGs could reanimate the drive towards the achievement of a more sustainable Europe for the future. But there will need to be a major effort of political leadership and a new drive to integrate sustainability principles in all aspects of the work of the EU and its member states.

Our study has identified the building of broad and non-exclusive stakeholder engagement throughout all stages of the sustainability cycle as an important success factor in the implementation of these sustainable development objectives.

The EESC and the SDO have been pro-active with other stakeholders during the preparation of the SDGs. They too now face an opportunity and a challenge to engage proactively with all aspects of the implementation, monitoring and review process in a systematic, continuing way, and in collaboration with other stakeholders in Brussels, in member states and in the international arena.

They have the great advantage of a secure institutional base and stable resources which should enable them to play their part in a steady and consistent way over all the stages of the cycle in a reliable way. In view of the comments identified in this report it is important that they should seek to play their part in as open and inclusive a way as possible so as to maximise the range of stakeholders engaged with the process, and to ensure that no important parties feel left out or marginalised by the process.

A new Sustainability Forum

The central possibility identified in this study is to build on the informal stakeholder partnerships that the SDO has been establishing during the creation of the post-2015 agenda and to consolidate these into a standing partnership to carry the work forward into the stage of implementation, monitoring and review.

The SDO might consider inviting other Brussels-based stakeholders concerned with sustainable development issues to join with it in creating a standing Sustainable Development Forum. Such a Forum would in principle be open to stakeholders of all kinds concerned with sustainable development issues, and with all having equal rights to be heard and to contribute to the conclusions.

Going wider to include stakeholders not directly involved in the Forum the SDO with the Forum might consider undertaking a complementary exercise to develop a “European Society’s Commitment to Sustainable Development” (similar to the Finish approach) to ensure meaningful engagement of all stakeholder in Europe.

The SDO or the Forum might also reach out to national stakeholder engagement processes in member states so as to help build a wider base of support for the sustainability transition and implementation of the SDGs. Establishing links with individual National sustainable development councils or with their network the EEAC and the European Sustainable Development Network might be one way to start developing this wider outreach.

Another approach would be to build on the Committee's recent successful experience of impact studies to arrange periodic stakeholders led reviews of the implementation of the SDGs in Member States.

A further possibility might be to build on the Committee's past experience with awareness raising, education and communication work reach out to stakeholders throughout Europe to spread the message of the vision implicit in the SFGs and the part that actors of all kinds at all levels can play.

At international level the EESC and SDO with their stakeholder partners in the new Forum might seek to establish closer links with the Major Groups operating at the UN level and their organising partners so as to reinforce stakeholder input at both UN and EU levels. Similarly links with national multi-stakeholder processes on sustainable development could be further strengthened.

A new Strategy and Flagship Programmes?

The first task for the new Forum should be to seek to engage collaboratively with the Commission on the preparation of an integrated post-2015 strategy on the lines previously recommended by the EESC.

In parallel with this external work the EESC supported by the SDO and the Sustainability Forum might consider initiating an process inside the Committee for all relevant sections and other Committee structures to conduct their own assessments of the SDGs from their particular policy perspectives and in particular to help identify key priorities for implementation that might be recommended to the Commission and the other institutions as candidates for key flagship programmes within the overall strategy. The objective could be to identify challenges that will require transformative changes going well beyond business or policy as usual and that will make a significant impact on overall global problems and the pressures on the planetary boundaries.

Monitoring Indicators and Review

As currently conceived in the UN discussions the monitoring and review of the SDGs and targets are intended to be informed by a complex system of data collection to monitor key indicators, alongside other reporting mechanisms.

In the EU It would be highly desirable for the SDO (or the SD Forum) to develop further their links with Eurostat and the EEA on these issues, and their capacity for using such material so as to enable

the stakeholder community to form its own views on progress or shortfalls in the transition towards the goals and targets.

One possibility for consideration might be for the SDO or the SD Forum to form partnerships (e.g. with universities and research bodies) to address some of the coherence and conceptual issues which still act as barriers to the achievement of sustainable development generally and the SDGs specifically, and then offer specific policy solutions to be applied in the European context.

Monitoring progress of the SDGs at the EU level will need to be well-integrated with monitoring at the member state level, and should support a continuing dialogue between the two levels about how progress can best be maintained. There are the beginnings of such a process in the Semester process for annual joint reviews between the Commission and member state of progress against the objectives of the 2020 strategy. But the sustainability dimension of this review process is not yet very strongly developed, and the process is not very transparent or open to stakeholder engagement.

The EESC/SDO or the new Sustainability Forum might seek to gain greater access to this process and seek opportunities to make input, and perhaps to link up with stakeholder groupings at national level to co-ordinate views on some key aspects. Establishing stronger links with individual national sustainable development councils (NSDCs) (or with their network of European Environment and Sustainable Development Advisory Councils (EEAC)) to concert stakeholder inputs on sustainability issues to the semester process might be one way to start developing this wider outreach.

Another possible approach would be to build on the Committee's recent successful experience of impact studies to arrange periodic stakeholder led reviews of the implementation of the SDGs in Member States.

The cycle as a whole

The modalities for stakeholder engagement and the potential role of the EESC and SDO could be considered separately at each stage of the cycle as that point in the cycle is reached. But the value to be added by stakeholder engagement could be greatly enhanced if the modalities for this engagement are built into the plans for the whole cycle at the outset so that stakeholders can themselves build up their capacity to engage productively at each stage of the cycle in a consistent and coherent way.

The EESC and SDO could help by committing themselves to supporting this long term stakeholder engagement at the outset, and seek to ensure that the wider European Stakeholder Forum proposed above should be conceived from the outset as a continuing alliance committed to following the SD cycle through all its stages.

It would reinforce this approach if the Commission and the Council were together to endorse this method of promoting continuing stakeholder engagement with the SDG implementation cycle as a being a crucial part of the new strategy itself. This would give formal recognition and encouragement to the part that the EESC/SDO and the Sustainable Development Forum should play in this cycle, and

enable the EESC to plan ahead to provide adequate support for this mandate, and to reinforce its own internal procedures and structures for mainstreaming sustainable development throughout its work.

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European Economic and Social Committee

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1040 Bruxelles/Brussel
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Published by: "Visits and Publications" Unit
EESC-2015-56-EN
www.eesc.europa.eu



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QE-04-15-507-EN-N
ISBN 978-92-830-2827-7
doi:10.2864/527978

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