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REVIEW AND ASSESSMENT OF NATIONAL STRATEGIES FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN THE MEDITERRANEAN REGION

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2009 REVIEW

SUMMARY



Kuriat Island, Tunisia. Source: Louis Marie PREAU

Mediterranean Action Programme - Barcelona Convention

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PREFACE

The Contracting Parties of the Barcelona Convention (UNEP/MAP) established in 1996 the Mediterranean Commission for Sustainable Development (MCSD) and in 2005 adopted the Mediterranean Strategy for Sustainable Development. In this context the majority of Contracting Parties have developed National Strategies for Sustainable Development. This summary presents a review of these strategies undertaken in 2009.

In its 2000 Strategic Review of Sustainable Development¹ in the Region, the Mediterranean Commission on Sustainable Development (MCSD) highlighted the urgent need for serious policy reforms and the promotion of an effective culture of change towards another type of less production-related growth and development, a type which is more respectful of the Mediterranean ecosystem and its natural resources².

The above Review identified the limited influence that the *"sustainable development fashion"* had exerted on the policies of many partners in the Mediterranean, apart from its environmental protection component: sectoral visions and priorities still predominate, and environmental policies have little impact on development policies economic efficiency continues to be the driving force behind policy for most Mediterranean countries.

One could add that the current international situation of globalization and competitiveness, coupled with the ongoing extreme global economic crisis, exert further pressure for the stronger pursued of this aim.

With different names, and in both the South and the North of the region, many integrated frameworks related to sustainable development have been adopted, and the situation is rapidly evolving. Almost all countries have by now prepared or are preparing their own national strategies for sustainable development (NSSDs), in addition to National Agendas 21 and other cross-sectoral strategic frameworks, which have also set out principles and priorities encompassing sustainable development concerns and issues.

In most cases, international and regional institutions, organizations, processes and initiatives have played a major role in raising awareness and inducing the preparation of national strategies, or at least precipitating the decision to do so. These include, mainly, the Earth Summit, the World Summit, UNCSD, UNDP, OECD, EU and the UNEP/MAP.

The MAP Secretariat, utilizing its own limited funds as seed money as well as additional voluntary financial support from Italy, Monaco, Spain and the UNDP Small Grants Programme, assists Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Egypt, Lebanon, Montenegro, Morocco, the Syrian Arab Republic and Tunisia in preparing their National Sustainable Development Strategies (NSSDs).

Drawing lessons from the preparatory process for the Mediterranean Strategy for Sustainable Development (MSSD), a similar approach was suggested to countries when preparing NSSDs. This process encompasses four phases, which are more or less overlapping: i) political -consultation, partners, ownership and support; ii) technical -stocktaking and preparation of reports; iii) stakeholder participation -working sessions, workshops, association of stakeholders, including civil society; and iv) financial support - mobilization of resources for the preparatory phase, appraisal of needs and identification of sources for implementation.

In 2005, the MAP Secretariat prepared a Regional Review and Assessment Report on sustainable development initiatives in the Mediterranean, meant to take stock of the status of activities in relation to sustainable development in the Region. The present 2009 edited, updated and expanded version aims to allow for a new appreciation of the state of play with respect to the development of NSSDs, their strengths and shortcomings.³

¹ The Mediterranean Commission on Sustainable Development, Strategic Review for Sustainable Development in the Mediterranean Region, UNEP/MAP, Athens, 2001.

² The following excerpt from the introduction to the new French NSSD Strategy 2009- 2012² illustrates the very broad, contemporary interpretation of the sustainable development perspective and sets a framework for the assessment of such Strategies: "The needs of the present generation should be met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs. This objective of sustainable development proposed by the United Nations in 1987, is enshrined in the Charter of the Environment, the French Constitution and the objectives of the European Union (Amsterdam Treaty). It seeks to reconcile a dynamic economy, a high level of education, protection of health, social and territorial cohesion and environmental protection in a world of peace and safety, respecting cultural diversity."

³ The text relies heavily on a very extensive review of the state of the art in all Mediterranean countries and the European Union. Relevant Country Profiles that have been prepared and are available in Volume II.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

By assembling information, papers and reports on different frameworks and processes, and compiling and analysing it, this Review highlights the present state of things; points out to promising practices and problems; and presents some orientations, principles and measures for the formulation or improvement of strategic initiatives for sustainable development.

It is very clear that it is still early to expect dramatic results and changes. The last few years have more or less been transitional, with countries preparing new strategies; revising older ones; transforming relevant initiatives; putting in place coherent systems; and trying to cope with renewed efforts to monitor regional and international commitments.

Strategic frameworks

All countries in the Region have, one way or another, begun addressing the sustainable development challenge. The following categorization is illustrative of the situation:

■ **National Strategies for Sustainable Development or Agendas 21:** Croatia, Cyprus, France, Greece, Malta, Montenegro, Spain, Tunisia and Turkey; Slovenia also considers its Development Strategy as being in place of a NSSD. The same holds true for Israel's Ministries sectoral SD strategies.

■ **National Environmental Strategy for Sustainable Development; National Strategy or Plan for Environment and Sustainable Development:** Algeria, Italy, Morocco.

■ **National Environment Action Strategies or/and Plans (NEAPS):** Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Cyprus, Egypt, Lebanon, Slovenia, Syria, Turkey.

France is currently finalizing its new NSSD⁴; those for Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Egypt, Lebanon, Syria and Tunisia are at various stages of preparation; Italy is preparing a new one to replace its Environmental Strategy for Sustainable Development. Cyprus is also revising its 2007 Strategy. The revised Greek Strategy is in the process of being formally adopted.

Whether in the South or in the North, there is a profusion of integrated frameworks relevant to sustainable development. This does not automatically translate into strategies being in conformity with overall sustainable development objectives. In fact, although almost all strategies are structured around the three pillars of sustainable development, most often than not the environmental issues overshadow the other two. Nevertheless, the most recent NSSDs are more balanced in their content. In general, the environment- social or economic-social interfaces have to be addressed more consistently and thoroughly.

Major regional processes that have reached maturity over the last few years are having a catalytic influence on activities and initiatives in the Region as far as commitments and the preparation of strategies are concerned: they will no doubt do much in the medium- term. These processes are the Mediterranean Strategy for Sustainable Development; the Millennium Development Goals delivery process; and the European Union's Sustainable Development Strategy, and its Policies for Enlargement, Western Balkans and Neighbourhood.

Political will and commitment

The Strategy development process followed is, in general, backed by a strong political commitment from Ministries at high government level, sometimes the Head of State. Although this ensures, to a degree, cross-government support, sustained efforts are needed for this commitment to be effectively shared by various sectors and levels of government.

Governments maintain a sense of urgency because, in particular, of international and regional commitments and processes. However, it is premature to say that such commitments will be enduring.

Establishing a clear legal, preferably Constitutional, mandate for a sustainable development strategy would improve considerably the potentials for the achievement of the overall goals, since it would secure endorsement at the highest level and make the process largely immune from political changes and preferences.

⁴ The final Strategy was adopted in July 2010 with its time horizon altered to cover the period 2010-2013.

Integration and coherence

Non-environmental branches of Government are progressively integrating the notion of sustainable development and its three traditional pillars in their policies. Continuous attention and efforts are needed in this area, in order to ensure that there is, both a shared vision of what needs to be done in the future as well as agreement on courses of action.

As is often the case when government mandates and horizons are short to mid-term, the time dimension appears to be very difficult to factor into a policy process. Despite the inherently longer-term nature of sustainable development, the bulk of the Strategies have been provided with short to mid-term time horizons (mostly 5 years, in some cases 10). To this respect, on the planning and programming levels the establishment of strong linkages between immediate and mid-term undertakings and their monitoring and evaluation remains a challenge.

In many countries of the Region, decentralization is a key dimension of government policies. Institutions and non-government stakeholders at the local level have shown their commitment to sustainable development through various initiatives. Support to, and coordination of these initiatives and their mainstreaming into national efforts will contribute to better forge wide-spread national commitment and link national and local priorities and actions in a two-way interactive process.

All countries now display a set of methods, instruments and legislation that bring together different aspects of sustainable development. Regulatory instruments continue to be the overriding tools in all countries. Despite the broad interest exhibited towards economic instruments and some very interesting breakthroughs, their effective utilization within a relevant integrated and comprehensive policy still requires a lot of effort.

Stakeholder involvement

Mechanisms are in place in all countries to foster multi stakeholder participation in Strategy formulation and follow up activities. National councils, commissions and steering committees are the most common consultation mechanisms. The mandate and composition of such bodies are broadly similar, although the level of the engagement of the different stakeholders varies substantially across countries.

This Review did not identify any national mechanisms in place for the evaluation of, and feedback on consultation events or mechanisms. The influence of these mechanisms on the decision-making process needs to be assessed by independent bodies.

In most countries, modern information and communication techniques are being used to foster dissemination. National media and NGOs are also playing a significant role in spreading the sustainable development concept. Although such activities have contributed to raise awareness, it is yet too early to assess their effectiveness in changing behaviour and influencing governance.

The same level of information does not exist for all countries. Indeed it varies considerably. Information in websites and reports does not reflect a constantly evolving situation, but tends to offer a selective snapshot of the situation at a specific period of time.

Almost all strategic frameworks include or make reference to, the elaboration of a range of indicators that would allow monitoring the progress made. The situation varies considerably between countries, but it is gradually being improved, with common indicators being developed, approved and monitored.

As far as monitoring and review are concerned, all frameworks incorporate appropriate provisions. The most prevalent types of reviews are those carried out by a public agency, based on information on progress supplied by other agencies, a situation that does not always guarantee objectivity.

Management systems

Although there are a variety of country situations, most often a single government institution, usually a Ministry of Environment, coordinates the process. Progressively, the management set-ups are being transformed to cope with the demands, such as with the merging of Ministries; the assignment of high level overseeing responsibilities to special units or committees; the establishment of special teams at sector Ministries; regional structures; etc.

All public agencies assigned the responsibility to coordinate the formulation and implementation of sustainable development strategies are facing the dual challenges of providing leadership and impetus whilst hampered by limited resources, and of incorporating into the decision-making process new actors and interest groups with interests that do not always coincide.

The governance sections in Strategies need to be considerably strengthened, with clear provisions on who does what and when, and effective conflict resolution arrangements; feedback mechanisms; reviews- including peer reviews; etc.

New Review

The next Regional (stocktaking) Review is suggested to be carried out in 2011 and to be made available during the period of the Rio+20 meetings in June 2012.

BROAD ASSESSMENT

Influence of Strategies

In a broad sense, in all countries public strategic policy formulation and implementation processes go on without having established, at least so far, that they are substantially guided by a NSSD. Reporting is made of new laws, sector and lower-level strategies, as well as of new procedures and measures either incorporated in NSSDs or being adopted or implemented. It cannot be inferred, however - neither has such an attempt been noticed - that these developments are a direct outcome of Strategy preparation and not the result of commitments and decisions taken under other processes.

For example, in assessing the EU SDS it was pointed out that it is not at all clear whether the process provided an opportunity to focus on a range of sustainable development issues and their interrelationships. To the contrary, the impression given was that many national sustainable development policy initiatives would have as well been taken without an EU SDS.

Influence of UNEP-MAP

Similarly, in reviewing the changes since the 2005 NSSD Review, no evidence was found that the MSSD has begun having any worthwhile influence on national policies and that it has driven the many measures taken in specific sectors, although it is perhaps too early to expect such an influence.

MAP's initiative to assist in the preparation of NSSDs is worthwhile and has been embraced by a number of countries. The Strategy preparation process is well considered and includes a strong national capacity building component. Its stages, orientations and focus are in line with contemporary thinking on the matter. The Framework preparatory process is well articulated, but in the documents submitted so far there is no clear evidence regarding the extent to which the process has actually been followed.

On the other hand, worries are caused by the fact that, so far, only Egypt, Montenegro and Syria have moved ahead considerably. Morocco did not complete the exercise. Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Lebanon have not signed the MoUs yet, for reasons that are related with internal matters. Tunisia has initiated the process but due to delays the first MoU was closed and a new one was drafted.

Some of the problems identified, such as limited resources and bureaucratic processes, have to be addressed.

Frameworks

NEAPs have been frequently equated with sustainable development strategies, particularly the second generation NEAPs, which have placed greater emphasis on social and economic issues.

Although by 2005 only few countries had adopted texts that could be considered as a pure NSSD, the panorama has since evolved considerably and it is still evolving, as more and more countries have prepared or are preparing or revising their own NSSDs.

Content and dimensions of Strategies

The MAP- assisted strategies are viewed as documents providing a framework for systematic thought across sectors, institutionalised consultation, negotiations and consensus building on priority societal issues, and informed decision-making.

Almost all strategies are structured around the three pillars of sustainable development. Even so, issues with environmental focus or connotation easily overshadow the other two pillars, usually being more precise or specific than them. NEAPs in particular, remain largely environment-oriented. Whereas first generation NEAPs were purely environmental, most environmentally- focused strategies evolved after UNCSD do consider, at least partly, economic growth and poverty alleviation.

The most recent NSSDs (e.g. Cyprus, Malta, Montenegro, new French) are more balanced in their content (regarding

environmental, economic and social aspects) than the “older” ones which focused mostly on environmental aspects, e.g. Greece, Italy.

The various dimensions and issues are as a norm dealt with independently, as independent sections of the same text. Usually, objectives are separate. No efforts have been identified to establish inter linkages and trade-offs. Most Strategies give the impression that they have put together sub-texts prepared independently of each other, with no interrelationships and synergies between them.

The degree of detail in the Strategies varies substantially, depending on the sector. In general, the more traditional the sector (e.g. nature protection, public health) the more structured and better articulated are the problems, challenges, objectives and measures planned.

Political commitment and country ownership

The Strategy development process is in general backed by a related political commitment from the respective government, usually in the form of a statement in a Strategy’s preamble. The sustainability of such commitments cannot yet be assessed. Despite the fact that an NSSD is not normally legally endorsed, it would be reasonable to assume that, because in particular of international and regional commitments, this priority is being maintained by consecutive governments during the inevitably long-term perspective of sustainable development.

One issue of concern is whether various sectors and levels of government also share the same commitment and sense of ownership, although it would be correct to point out that all texts at least allude to, or assume cross-government and local level support.

The MAP- assisted NSSD Framework emphasizes the support of mainly national expertise and responsibility, since the appropriate Ministries undertook to secure high level political support; coordinate and manage the human and financial resources involved; and establish a secretariat and a multi-stakeholder steering entity. At least in theory, country ownership is thus encouraged.

Integration, coherence and synergies

It is rare the Strategy that has tried to integrate the, by definition, long-term objectives of sustainable development with the medium- to short-term ones of economic development policies. One reason is that sustainable development strategy processes are not connected with government planning and budgeting.

As a result of the responsibility for sustainable development being usually assigned to Environment ministries – usually weak partners in government-, securing proper integration in other policies is not always achieved.

Non-environmental government sectors are gradually integrating the notion and phraseology of sustainable development and its three pillars in their policies and programmes. However, this does not necessarily translate into actual sustainable development approaches or into strategies and programmes that are in line with the sustainable development objectives. Neither are sustainable development priorities reflected in sectoral budget priorities, nor are they fully internalized in monitoring mechanisms grounded on national sustainable development indicators recently formulated. Nevertheless, it appears that it is easier to consider the interactions between the environment and the economy than between all three of the pillars.

Coherence of sectoral policies is easier to achieve when interconnections are more straightforward and easy to point out, such as in the areas of energy and climate change, where strategic goals converge.

Although extensively used by practically all countries, procedures for environmental impact assessment (EIA) of projects still need strengthening and appropriate implementation. This necessity is even stronger regarding the Strategic Environmental Assessment of programmes and plans. Practitioners and agencies are striving to broaden the scope of these tools⁵.

The EU Better Regulation Programme is reported to have contributed to ensuring coherence across policy areas by requiring the systematic assessment of economic, social and environmental impacts of all major policy initiatives. Nevertheless, this process has not yet filtered down to member states or other countries where impact assessments and regulatory simplification have not yet been extensively applied.

Economic instruments are becoming popular in theory, are reported by many countries and are gradually taking their rightful place in the range of sustainable development tools. However, it has not been established whether such measures are part of a broader, targeted policy or they are formulated on an *ad-hoc* manner with the sole purpose to increase public revenues. Neither are concrete policies for taxation reform pursued, aimed to shift the emphasis from labour to resources, although a couple of countries refer to this approach.

At the regional and local levels, stakeholders have shown their commitment to sustainable development, and local initiatives are gaining momentum and encouraged. Local authorities are involved in a variety of ways in the NSSD preparation. The breadth, depth and scope of participation varies significantly, depending, inter alia, on constitutional, historic and cultural circumstances. There were cases where sub-national authorities complained of being involved in the process of NSSD preparation at a late stage and of national ministries seeking endorsement from them rather than consultation. They also considered their impact on the decisions taken by national bodies as limited⁵.

Although LAs 21 are referred to in many NSSDs, the national levels mostly lack effective tools to steer them. In some countries, Local Agendas 21 do not clearly fit in into the national strategic framework, whereas their importance for sustainable development policy-making on the local level is decreasing. When local sustainable development initiatives exist in different places, they are not necessarily coordinated and do not converge systematically.

Stakeholder involvement and participation

The EU review process included a 2004 public consultation open for three months to stakeholders from all over the world, with online questionnaires. The opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee was also obtained. Extensive consultations with member states, other stakeholders and all major European Council formations were organized.

Participation is in-built into all sustainable development-related international obligations and all EU members have ratified the Aarhus Convention and have proceeded to incorporate public participation provisions in national legislation.

All countries involve stakeholders in the formulation and implementation of strategies. Committees or councils are most frequently used with broadly similar mandates and composition. One drawback is that, in many cases, the establishment and functioning of such bodies is based on *ad hoc* administrative decisions and is not embedded in legislation. Exceptions exist in countries that have acceded to the Aarhus Convention or where EIA procedures traditionally leave room to public consultation.

Although detail information on actual stakeholder involvement is not provided, the level of their involvement varies; the roles and responsibilities of different key participants are not always clearly defined; and the extent to which consultation effectively influenced the preparation of strategies cannot be deduced. The Review did not identify any national systems in place for the evaluation of and feedback on consultation events or mechanisms.

Since documents merely enumerate the categories of stakeholders, no criteria for their selection and representativeness appear to have been established. Neither have conflict-resolution arrangements been identified.

Information

In most countries, modern information and communication techniques are used for information dissemination and awareness-raising and national media are playing a significant role in spreading the sustainable development concept. The extent to which they have contributed to raise awareness, alter behaviour, influence governance and engage responsibility needs, however, to be established.

The availability of information ranges significantly between countries and the same level of information does not exist for all countries. The establishment of Observatories or the strengthening of other bodies for information collection, analysis and dissemination is gradually spreading, a process that is bringing in considerable improvements.

The information provided in country reports is rather selective, being mostly limited to extensive references on what strategies provide for. Normally, problems and weaknesses are not reported.

Many websites are poor in content, not regularly updated, and in a variety of formats and languages; even the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) reporting website is sparse in information for a number of countries. The Mediterranean Region countries that have lodged their national sustainable development report with the United Nations Commission for Sustainable Development by the end of 2007 were only Croatia, France, Israel, and Spain.

Indicators/ monitoring, reporting and review

As far as indicators are concerned, the general situation is that this sector is gradually becoming better. Common indicators are developed, approved and monitored. EUROSTAT and the Blue Plan are contributing substantially to this process.

⁵ Philippe Alirol (2003), *Linkages and Coordination between Environmental Assessments and Social Assessments*. Draft report for the World Bank.

⁶ Gerald Berger & Michal Sedlacko, *Involvement of Sub-national Authorities in National Sustainable Development Strategy Processes*, ESDN Quarterly Report, March 2009.

Tables of indicators in Strategies are characterized by large variations in quality and relevance and they are usually partial or in insufficient detail. Also, they normally appear as Annexes or additional texts and their interrelationships with specific goals and objectives in a Strategy are very poorly established.

Monitoring and assessment is improving with the activities of MAP, the European Commission, the European Environment Agency, Eurostat, OECD and other initiatives. In 2006, the European Economic and Social Committee set up its own Sustainable Development Observatory (SDO)⁷.

Provisions in Strategies do not usually go into details regarding the review process. It is left to the agency responsible to coordinate the monitoring process to decide which method to use and which parameters to include or place emphasis upon.

The most prevalent types of reviews are those carried out by a public agency, based on information on progress supplied by other agencies. The final report is a compilation of the inputs with very limited attempts to interrelate reports, draw conclusions and make recommendations.

National reporting tends to focus on enumerating, sometimes extensively, the prevailing situation without coupling this to specific policy initiatives. Countries are reluctant to report on areas where progress is limited or where actions are non-existent.

As it is the practice, the European Commission commissioned consultants for the 2007 review of its SDS.

The EU SDS has advocated national voluntary peer reviews by other countries, and the European Commission has developed a relevant handbook⁸. So far, only France undertook such a peer review of its NSSD, in 2004-05.

Parliamentary, Budgetary, Public or Local reviews have not been identified.

Management systems/ institutional arrangements/ mechanisms

Although there are a variety of country situations, most often a single government institution coordinates the process, extensively utilizing formal or ad hoc arrangements such as working groups, sustainable development councils/commissions, and inter-ministerial committees.

In most countries, the preparation, coordination and monitoring of implementation of an NSSD has been assigned to the Ministry of the Environment although in some countries the broader responsibility has been elevated to the Prime Minister's Office.

Almost all countries have established National Councils/ Commissions for Sustainable Development, with extensive stakeholder participation, whose common responsibilities include horizontal integration, providing advice to national governments, drafting progress or indicator reports and overseeing NSSD implementation.

The 2006 EU SDS has been instrumental in initiating changes in governance structures. Inter alia, each member state has appointed a SDS coordinator, and the European Commission set up a SDS Coordinators group that also works with the European Sustainable Development Network (ESDN). Similar arrangements are gradually extended to other Mediterranean countries.

The lead Ministries usually provide the secretariat and technical support to the process. Whether they, in all cases, possess the required empowerment, influence, resources or skills to effectively carry out their responsibilities remains to be assessed. As a general observation, when the institution is a line agency with limited influence then its coordination capacity and technical leadership have to be built up. Moreover, key ministries, such as finance or economic planning and development are gradually being involved in the preparation of NSSDs.

As a rule, NSSD documents avoid addressing the complex governance aspects of sustainable development. Yet, according to the Blue Plan⁹, by 2025 if trends towards largely centralised more curative than preventive environmental policies were to continue, this would prove to be a hindrance to environmental governance in the face of sustainable development stakes. Blue Plan goes on to say that, despite the adoption back in 2005 of the MSSD, the officials in charge were not really able to implement its recommendations.

The same held true as regards to this Review. Despite their participation (and hence commitments) in the Mediterranean Commission on Sustainable Development, the response of countries in appropriately completing the relevant questionnaire could have been much better.

⁷ <http://www.eesc.europa.eu>

⁸ European Commission, Peer Review Improvement through Mutual Exchange on Sustainable Development: A guidebook for peer reviews of national sustainable development strategies, IEEP and SERI, February 2006.

⁹ *The Blue Plan's Sustainable Development Outlook for the Mediterranean*, Plan Bleu, Sophia Antipolis, July 2008