

## **National sustainable development strategies – the global picture<sup>1</sup>**

This brief note provides some background information to the “Global NSDS Map” prepared by the Division for Sustainable Development (DSD) of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs.

### **I. Defining national sustainable development strategies**

A national sustainable development strategy (NSDS) can be defined as “a coordinated, participatory and iterative process of thoughts and actions to achieve economic, environmental and social objectives in a balanced and integrative manner.”<sup>2</sup> Five principles that distinguish an NSDS have been derived: (1) country ownership and commitment; (2) integrated economic, social and environmental policy across sectors, territories and generations; (3) broad participation and effective partnerships; (4) development of the necessary capacity and enabling environment; and (5) focus on outcomes and means of implementation.

There are no feasible or desirable ‘blueprints’ for an effective NSDS, as institutions, capacities and sustainable development priorities differ across countries. Therefore, every country has to determine by itself how to develop and implement strategies for achieving its sustainable development goals. It is important to stress that is not the name, but the process and principles content that qualifies a strategy as an NSDS.

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<sup>1</sup> This note has been prepared by the Division for Sustainable Development of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. The note has been issued without formal editing.

<sup>2</sup> UNDESA (2002) Guidance in Preparing a National Sustainable Development Strategy: Managing Sustainable Development in a new Millennium. DESA/DSD/PC2/BP13.

## **II. International and regional commitments to national sustainable development strategies**

At the World Summit on Sustainable Development, Members States committed themselves in the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation (JPOI) to “take immediate steps to make progress in the formulation and elaboration of national strategies for sustainable development and begin their implementation by 2005”<sup>3</sup>. This commitment is based on earlier commitments made at the Special Session of the UN General Assembly on the review of Agenda 21 in 1997<sup>4</sup> and in Agenda 21.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, there exist important regional commitments to implement NSDSs, for example in the European Union and in the Pacific Islands Forum. These commitments provide an important additional impetus for countries to advance their sustainable development goals through appropriate integrative and comprehensive strategies.

## **III. Progress towards international commitments on national sustainable development strategies**

Eighty-two States Members of the United Nations have reported to the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) or to the DSD that they were implementing an NSDS in 2007. This corresponds to 43 per cent of all countries, and 79 percent of all countries for which information is available. In addition, two non-Member States (Cook Islands and Niue) also reported implementing an NSDS.<sup>6</sup>

These numbers are based on reports to the CSD or to the DSD. Reporting to the CSD from 2003 onwards was taken into account, with newer reports given preference

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<sup>3</sup> JPOI, Chapter XI, para 162 (b)

<sup>4</sup> Programme of Action for the Further Implementation of Agenda 21, paragraph 24.

<sup>5</sup> Agenda 21, Programme of Action for Sustainable Development, adopted at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 1992, para 8.7.

<sup>6</sup> In case of Belgium, the Federal sustainable development strategy is regarded as NSDS for the purpose of this note and the global map, while taking note that coordination among the federal government, the three community governments and the three regional governments is undertaken within a two-phase work programme on a national sustainable development strategy.

over older ones. However, reports that cast doubt on the validity of earlier information for 2007 (for example, if the strategy had an end date before 2007 and no clear information on an obvious follow-up strategy was available or if reports included references to an expected start date of implementation, but no updated information regarding actual start of implementation were available), the reports were not used unless they could be confirmed through other official sources. Official statements made in the CSD or in the General Assembly were also used as information. Reports to the DSD were used only if they were made in a verifiable and reportable manner, for example through presentations at official meetings organized by DSD or through emails from government officials responsible for NSDS coordination or reporting.

Compared with the last reporting in 2006, there has been an increase by 13 countries, equivalent to 19 per cent, in the number of countries that are implementing an NSDS. It should be noted, though, that the figures are not fully comparable. The change is influenced not only by countries that started the implementation of their first NSDS in the last two years, but also by the increased coverage of voluntary reporting and by the exclusion of non-verifiable or non-conclusive information submitted to DSD.

In addition, 16 countries reported that they are developing an NSDS, with many countries having a final draft completed and awaiting formal approval before implementation can start. There are also six countries that have reported that they do not have an NSDS under implementation or development. In most cases, these countries reported that they are considering the development of an NSDS. For the remaining 87 countries, no verifiable information was available. This includes countries that have neither provided any report to the CSD or DSD as well countries where the reports were inclusive with respect to the situation in 2007.

As reporting to the CSD is voluntary, the actual number of countries implementing an NSDS is almost certain to be larger than 84. At the same time, the actual number is likely to be smaller than 151 (which equals the number of all countries multiplied with the fraction States Members of the United Nations that reported to

implement an NSDS), as countries without an NSDS certainly have lower incentives to include the NSDS questionnaire in their reporting to the CSD.

Despite the existence of guidelines prepared by DSD as well as by OECD, the decision for a country on whether it considers its candidate strategy to be an NSDS is in many cases not easy. Consequently, countries with similar strategies and similar conditions may report differently. For example, one country may report its current comprehensive development strategy as NSDS, even if it acknowledges that certain elements regarding multi-stakeholder participation or integration of certain sectoral strategies require further strengthening in future iterations of the strategy. Another country in a similar situation, though, may decide report such strategy as an NSDS under development until further work in these areas has been finalized.

#### **IV. The picture across regions**

The global map demonstrates substantial variations across regions with regard to information availability and status of implementing the JPOI commitment. Europe and Oceania<sup>7</sup> are the regions for which information is most readily available, with 86 per cent of countries in both regions having provided information for 2007 to CSD or DSD. Consequently, these regions also lead in the percentage of Member States of the United Nations implementing an NSDS: 71 per cent of the 42 European States and 64 per cent of the 14 States in Oceania are implementing an NSDS. In Asia, 40 per cent of the States have reported to implement an NSDS, and information is available for half of the States. Within Asia, information availability and relative figures of States implementing an NSDS are high in Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Asia, but low in Western and Southern Asia. Information availability is slightly lower in Africa (42 per cent). However, with 11 per cent this region also inhibits a relatively large share of countries reporting an NSDS under development, whereas the share of countries reporting an

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<sup>7</sup> For the purpose of this section, regions are defined according United Nations geographical divisions. See Standard Country or Area Codes for Statistical Use, Revision 4 (United Nations publications, Sales No. 17.98.XVII.9).

NSDS under implementation is relatively low with 28 per cent. The Americas are the region with the lowest share of countries implementing an NSDS (26 per cent). This may also be a result of the low number of reports submitted to CSD or DSD, as for 69 per cent of Member States of the United Nations no information was available.

## **V. Types of national sustainable development strategies**

As countries differ in their institutional, developmental and biophysical conditions, NSDSs differ both in coverage and structure. However, four broad types of NSDS can be distinguished. First, many countries initiated completely new strategy processes to develop their NSDS. This type of “Generic NSDS” can be mostly found in countries that previously had no comprehensive socio-economic strategies in place or that found their existing strategy processes as being ill-prepared to the incorporation of sustainable development principles.

Second, many low-income countries have integrated sustainable development considerations in their poverty reduction strategies (PRS). Whereas early PRS typically focused on economic growth and social infrastructure investment, some countries found that PRS processes were well suited to environmental considerations and to integrate policy across areas, while avoiding pitfalls of duplicative strategies. The JPOI explicitly notes that NSDSs may be formulated as PRS. However, there are also countries such as Malawi or Senegal that have or are developing both an NSDS and a separate PRS. In such cases, the NSDS typically covers longer term consideration, whereas the PRS concentrates on short to medium term policies.

Third, countries with existing processes for comprehensive development strategies often choose to further develop these strategies in order to incorporate sustainable development principles. In fact, countries stressed already in Agenda 21 that an NSDS should be based on existing strategies and plans. Moreover, duplication of strategy processes with similar purposes is in most cases a source of confusion and leads to waste of resources. In order to strengthen the consideration of long-term issues, the

NSDS in countries such as Zambia contains two separate documents, a long-term vision document (typically covering a 20 or 30 year horizon) and a four or five year development plan which implement the vision.

Fourth, some countries choose strategies that concentrate on the environmental and natural resource dimension of sustainable development. It should be noted that some countries, such as Italy or Singapore, that are currently following such approach are now in the process of revising or re-developing their strategies, thereby being able to comprehensively addressing all dimensions of sustainable development in an integrated strategy.