

National sustainable development strategies – the global picture¹

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.”² 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.

¹ 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.

² 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”³. This commitment is based on earlier commitments made at the Special Session of the UN General Assembly on the review of Agenda 21 in 1997⁴ and in Agenda 21.⁵

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

One hundred and six Member States of the United Nations have reported to the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) or to the DSD that they were implementing an NSDS in 2009. This corresponds to 55 per cent of all countries, and 83 percent of all countries for which information is available. In addition, two non-Member States (Cook Islands and Niue) and one also reported implementing an NSDS.⁶

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

³ JPOI, Chapter XI, para 162 (b)

⁴ Programme of Action for the Further Implementation of Agenda 21, paragraph 24.

⁵ 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.

⁶ 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 2009 (for example, if the strategy had an end date before 2009 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 2008, there has been an increase by 24 countries, equivalent to 29 per cent, in the number of countries that are implementing an NSDS. The increase is caused not only by countries that started implementation of their first NSDS in the past two years, but also by countries that did not report implementation of their NSDS in the past.

In addition, 13 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 nine 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 64 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 2009. Overall, coverage of reporting has increased from 105 to 128 countries, equivalent to 22 per cent. However, reporting remains to be far from universal.

Despite the existence of guidelines prepared by DSD as well as by OECD and UNEP, 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 is the region for which reliable information on the status of NSDS implementation is most complete: 88 per cent have reported their status, and 77 per cent were implementing an NSDS in 2009. Information availability for other regions varies between 55 % in Africa, 62 % in the Americas and 64 % in both Asia and Oceania. In terms of implementation, Oceania is the region with the second highest share of countries implementing an NSDS, with 64 %, followed by Asia with 57 %, the Americas with 46 % and Africa with 40 %.

Compared to the situation in 2007, heterogeneity across regions has diminished, as the implementation rate has increased the most in Africa (by 12 percentage points), Asia (by 17 percentage points) and the Americas (by 20 percentage points). However, within region variations remains high, in particular in Asia. All five Central Asian countries reported that they are implementing an NSDS, whereas this holds only for seven out of 17 countries in Western Asia.

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, but nevertheless include linkages to the economic and social dimensions of sustainable development.