

20 YEARS BRUNDTLAND REPORT – CONSEQUENCES FOR ENVIRONMENTAL ORGANISATIONS

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I would like to start with thanking the Council for organizing this event and for inviting me for a contribution.

It is justified to organize an event to celebrate what indeed has been an essential publication in a time when the environmental movement was gaining some ground but where it was already clear that more dramatic things needed to be done to reverse the trend away from accelerated depletion of our natural resources and ecosystems. The Brundtland report put “sustainable development” on the map, and even though since then hundreds of books have been written, conferences organized, negotiation processes followed about what sustainable development is or should be, the definition of the Brundtland committee is still the simplest, easiest to communicate and in the end also most precise.

The report triggered a unique global debate, with as high points the Earth Summit in 1992, its Rio Principles and its Agenda 21. Since then, the struggle for sustainable development has become more and more complex. Governments and stakeholders, such as the private sector, have adopted the language, but followed different interpretations, resulting in a situation that we as environmental organizations have to continuously remind them that the idea is to provide people quality of life without undermining the natural resource base. Industry federations here in Brussels now like to explain sustainable development as a reason for environmentalists to compromise on their demands in order not to harm the competitiveness of the European industry.

My organization, the European Environmental Bureau, exists since 1974. This Bureau is in fact a federation of environmental citizens organisations with as aims to inform and involve its membership in relevant EU decisionmaking. While we originally focused on typical environment and nature conservation issues, we did understand early that sustainable development was the concept we needed as we have to go beyond protecting nature with specific site related measures, or protecting people’s health with end-of-pipe regulation. We understood that we needed to think in terms of production and consumption patterns, mobilizing on the one hand the innovative potentials in the industrial sectors and on the other hand consumers choice, partly to direct the producers towards innovation, partly for the sake of reduced individual impact on the environment of consumption behaviour.

Therefore, with other environmental organizations, we campaigned for sustainable development to become the overarching objective for the European Union, anchored in the EU Treaties. The first attempt, towards the Maastricht Treaty in December 1991, led

to a unhelpful “sustainable growth” paragraph, but in 2007 we managed with our lobbywork to have the Amsterdam Treaty include better language, saying that the EU strives for: “*a harmonious, balanced and sustainable development of economic activities*” as well as “*a high level of protection and improvement of the quality of the environment*”. What is more, the Amsterdam Treaty underlines clearly the environmental dimension of sustainable development with the introduction of its Article 6: “*Environmental protection requirements must be integrated into the definition and implementation of the Community policies and activities referred to in Article 3, in particular with a view to promoting sustainable development*”. That was an important achievement. These objectives are not lost in the new Reform Treaty that will be endorsed by the European Council later this week.

While Treaties are important, practise is in the end what counts. We discussed the need for concrete steps and worked with Commissioners, including the Commission Presidents Santer and Prodi, and Member States, in particular successive Presidencies. This led to the Cardiff process in 1998, aiming to integrate environmental objectives into sectoral policies such as on agriculture, transport, energy. And it led to the launch of the EU Sustainable Development Strategy in 2001.

Both initiatives have however not made the difference we wanted. The Cardiff process was not demanding enough to by itself make a difference. And the Sustainable Development Strategy was overshadowed by the Lisbon Process, focusing on competitiveness and growth. The European Commission never really made sustainable development a priority, and came under more and more pressure to make environmental policies entirely dependent on the competitiveness agenda. And the competitiveness agenda changed character quickly in the last few years. It started in 2000 with the aim to beat the USA as the most competitive economy in the world. Now the emphasis is much more on responding to the fast growing export economies of China and India. That shift also means that the pressure for reducing so-called burdens on EU based industries, including taxes, environmental regulations and restrictions, has gotten stronger. One can nowadays hear serious contributions in discussions saying that the EU should not introduce policies that have not been accepted by China or India yet.

The EU Sustainable Development strategy was updated in 2006, on the basis of a very uninspired, reluctant draft by the Commission. The EEB worked closely with the Austrian Presidency to improve it, in particular also with regards to its readability and logic. We did not get many substantial improvements in it, given that both the Commission and many EU Member States see the Strategy as a summary of existing environmental and social policies and not as a challenge to shape these policies further.

Since one year, climate change has gotten higher on the EU agenda than ever. Al Gore contributed with his message to the wider public, Nicolas Stern impressed the EU leadership. This is good in a way, because Stern in particular has shown stronger than ever before the dramatic economic and social risks the negligence of climate change can bring. Nevertheless, and I can confirm from my experience in the EU High Level advisory Group on Competitiveness, Energy and Environment, that major companies and

their federations still do not want the EU to move ahead in this field unless other major economies join.

Their resistance is unfortunate, and even more unfortunate is that politicians and governments listen to it. We should not mix competitiveness of countries with competitiveness of individual companies. Certain companies might lose out from ambitious and environmental policies. But the country as such will win. Clean water, clean and fertile soils, a healthy population, are all important resources for a strong economy. The sectors that will grow with a determined ecological industrial innovation policy, such as the German EU Presidency has been promoting in the first half of this year, are unfortunately not very much present in the current struggle for attention. A major contribution to sustainable development would be that politicians and governments stop lending their ears to conservative industry federations and get inspired by the newcomers the ones that can help make the shift to sustainable consumption and production patterns.

Promoting sustainable development for us means to insist that the EU stays within its ecological space, which requires a drastic reduction of the use of fossil fuels and a range of raw materials and natural resources. But we know we cannot achieve that without thinking about the social and economic consequences. In the end, sustainable development is about people, it is also about quality of life and social inclusion. And if one wants to move beyond protecting sites and end-of-pipe solutions, one needs to get the economic operators on ones side.

For the EEB this means that we have sought cooperation with trade-unions, social and consumer organizations, as well as will specific industries.

With the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) we have a working relationship since 1995. We started with a joint project to promote discussions in 5 countries between trade unions and environmental organizations about green jobs, in other words, about concrete ways to bring the fight for environment and for employment together. In some of these countries it was the first time these two stakeholders spoke and worked together. And since 2001 we work with the ETUC to influence the Lisbon process by linking it with sustainable development, involving a third partner called the Platform of European Social NGOs. A result of this cooperation is that we jointly advocate environmental fiscal reform (about what I will say a bit more still). Another very important result was that in what is maybe the biggest environmental battle we have seen in the EU in the last few years, on REACH, a new chemicals policy, the ETUC distanced itself from the business organizations and underlined the need of REACH for sustainable development.

In 2004 we launched, with ETUC and the Social Platform, a joint “*Manifesto for Sustainable Investment: Investing for a Sustainable Future*”.¹ This manifesto consists of general demands for change in economic policies, as well as specific proposals for public interventions in the housing and transport sectors. We pleaded using economic instruments to drive the market in the right direction (environmental tax and subsidy

¹ http://www.eeb.org/activities/sustainable_development/Manifesto-for-Sustainable-Investment.pdf. Also in French

reform) as well as specific government interventions to promote social, environmental and economic objectives at the same time. We also presented cases where initiatives from our members have led to successful initiatives, in particular in the housing sector. Unfortunately, the Lisbon Strategy, which was slightly revised in 2005, does not pay specific attention to this, although it is incorporating more and more climate change and energy security in general.

EEB also works with companies to promote legislation that forces changes in product design and waste management. A successful example was in 2001-2002 when the EEB, together with seven global companies broke the resistance in the Commission, Council against implementing “individual producer responsibility” in the Directive on Waste from Electric and Electronic Equipment. The federations of producers of such equipment (ranging from TVs, video, mobile phones, washing machines, refrigerators etc) had strongly lobbied against this individual producer responsibility, despite the fact that some of their largest members were in favour. They were in favour because they had already invested in design of their products that would create less problems in the recycling phase, and they wanted to be rewarded for that. We won and therewith we have introduced an inherent mechanism for companies to think about the life-cycle of their product, since they are responsible for the last phase of it. Individual Producer Responsibility is a tool not to be underestimated for sustainable development. On this basis we are working further with progressive companies on the implementation of this Directive. Nowadays focusing on internalization of costs through interventions in the market.

Consumers can also play a major role in promoting sustainable development. They can give signals to producers and retailers that they want them to change their ways of working. A good example is REACH, the new chemicals legislation. The business sector in general lobbied against it, as it always does when it thinks EU-legislation will force them to change. But retailers started to dissent from this, companies like Marks and Spencer, Otto Versand, and several do-it-yourself chains, and even Unilever, started to support REACH. Because they, selling products that contain chemicals, also want a reliable scrutiny system which is also transparent, so that they can tell their consumers with certainty that the products they sell do not cause harm. The EEB therefore is always trying to get the European umbrella of consumers on board, and currently we work with them together in the framework of the European Eco-label.

The public authorities in the European union form together a very powerful group of consumers. 16% of purchases in our economies are public purchases. Greening public procurement can therefore give very strong signals to the market and give new products and service the opportunity to scale up dramatically. Therefore we promote such public procurement as integral part of sustainable development, supporting the work of local authority organizations such as ICLEI, the organizations bringing together cities with an interest in local energy and environment policies.

As EEB we realize we do not have the full answers to how sustainable development should be achieved. We are not working directly on the North-South relations, as our

membership is exclusively European. We do not work on trade as well, given our limited capacities and, again, absence of a southern constituency in our membership. But we are strongly convinced that the EU has a high responsibility for achieving sustainable development globally, for its historical and current consumption and exploitation of the planet, as home to many multinationals, as potential leader in sustainable technology deployment, etc. This responsibility needs both a domestic and a global response. As EEB we concentrate on the domestic response, which means to bring back the EU within its ecological space, or carrying capacity, not exploiting resources and environmental space that should belong to the poor in the world.

Important elements for the EEB are:

- acknowledge the important role of ambitious environmental legislation, setting clear standards for economic actors, creating level-playing fields, incentives for permanent ecological industrial innovation.
- Make the markets work for the environment. The fact that environmental impacts are not reflected in the costs for materials, products and services drives producer and consumer choice in the wrong direction. It makes introduction of new, environmentally friendly technology and products difficult. So we need reform of taxation and subsidies policies, so that we approximate the situation that such costs are indeed internalized.
- We need politicians that listen to the industries of the future, and that are honest and brave enough to tell citizens that the Planet is not limitless, that the European countries are overusing their environmental space, that it is irresponsible to ignore that.
- We need sustainable development policies that are based on environmental requirements but that focus on a fair distribution of the burdens and the opportunities. In the end, sustainable development is about people, and without people's support it is not going to happen.