

Opinion on the need for development of a consultation strategy and recommendations for consultation on the preliminary draft Second Federal Plan for Sustainable Development

- **Own initiative**
- **drafted by the Awareness and Communication Working Group in cooperation with the Sustainable Strategies Working Group**
- **approved by the General Meeting on May 20, 2003** (see Annex 1)
- **original language: French**

A. Summary:

- [1] With this own-initiative opinion, the Council aims to contribute to enhancing the quality of public consultations and developing a consultation strategy, in particular to secure wider and more complete public participation. It also hopes to curb the growing number of consultations, overlapping and the lack of participation. The FCSD (Federal Council for Sustainable Development) suggests, in this context, the development of a code of practice setting out rules for consultations (objectives, target groups, procedure) and an annual calendar of different consultations to be coordinated by the federal Parliament and made public.
- [2] The Council considers it important to guarantee real public involvement in policy development.
- [3] The Council then sets out a number of recommendations for the consultation on the Second Federal Plan.

B. Introduction / Description of the problem

- [4] More and more policy makers, from local up to international level, consult social organisations and citizens on an ever growing number of subjects. Coordination within and between the different political levels is non-existent, however. This situation of consulting citizens on numerous occasions risks being wearying in the long term. The overabundance of initiatives can also create confusion and lead to a loss of credibility. Policy makers, moreover, do not always have adequate means to respond to the growing demand for information on follow-up to opinions and consultations.
- [5] Belgium has a tradition of consultation, especially in the socio-economic sector. According to the Second Federal Report on Sustainable Development, Belgium offers considerable opportunities, thanks to this tradition, for participation in political life. It could well be precisely because of this culture of consultation that Belgium is one of the first countries faced with the possible limits of consultations and the need to discuss a strategy that can guarantee their quality. What works must be kept, but at the same time, new thinking is needed on the organisation of and approach to future consultations.
- [6] This is all the more important given that our country recently ratified the Aarhus Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in

Environmental Matters. This obliges the public powers to give adequate consideration, in environmental decisions, to the findings of public consultations.

- [7] In this opinion, the Council first sets out a number of suggestions for the development of a consultation strategy. It proposes that the authorities and civil society organisations agree on the drafting of a code of practice. It then makes a number of recommendations for the consultation on the preliminary draft Second Federal Plan for Sustainable Development.
- [8] The Council attaches importance to developing a consistent framework for consultations in terms of time, space and content, at the different levels of power.
- [9] On March 25, 2003, the Federal Council for Sustainable Development and the Federal Science Policy Office, in collaboration with the Interdepartmental Commission on Sustainable Development (CIDD-ICDO) and the Sustainable Development Public Planning Service (SPP), sponsored the symposium on *'Participation and Sustainable Development Policy: Making Public Consultations More Effective'*. This opinion is based in particular on the conclusions of that symposium.
- [10] The specialised literature makes a distinction between different levels of consultation, from simple consultation to participation.

Consultation: means that the target groups are consulted by the public powers and can answer questions drawn up by the public powers. The public powers are not obliged to take account of the different points of view expressed. (*extract from "Sustainable Development Strategies. A Resource Book", UNDP-OECD, 2002*)

Participation: means that the target groups participate in every stage of policy development and of determination of available means. The aim is to take into account as many points of view as possible. (*extract from "Sustainable Development Strategies. A Resource Book", UNDP-OECD, 2002*)

The Council will focus in this opinion on the issue of consultation.