The Sustainable Development Strategy: illusion or reality? Inquiry.

Memorandum by the Centre for Research in Education and the Environment, University of Bath.

This memorandum responds to the questions asked in the recent EAC press release.

Does the Definition of 'Sustainable Development' matter?

The existence of a range of definitions of 'sustainable development' is not only probably inevitable, but also desirable. However, it needs to be emphasised that to be credible, any definition must have, at its heart, the understanding that the natural environment places constraints upon our freedom of action in both social and economic spheres.

For the Government to say that the Brundtland definition, "puts undue emphasis on environmental concerns' is to miss this point entirely. That it *has* been missed is clear from the further remark that, "there are equally sound definitions that favour a fundamentally economic definition". This commits the error of supposing the economy to be somehow independent of the environment. Definitions which focus on environmental constraints *are* fundamentally economic. A particularly well-developed account of this relationship from the perspective of economics makes use of the concept of 'natural capital'. We attach a policy briefing note (Foster *et al*. 2004), produced by ourselves in collaboration with colleagues at the University of Lancaster through a recent ESRC-funded research project, which may perhaps be found useful in respect of these points.

Has the Strategy acted as a driver …?

We are sure that in many ways it has. For example, it has played a significant part in prompting innovative thinking and action by the Purchasing and Supply Agency of the National Health Service in relation to sustainable development, which has the potential to result in real, often measurable gains. There have been benefits in terms of strengthening and clarifying the position of those in, for example, local government who have responsibility for sustainable development. There have been some limited impacts on the school curriculum as well as on universities' abilities to link curriculum innovation to environmental management (i.e., to a 'greening' of the estates).

There are, however, a lot of strategies about – a joke circulating in local government circles depends for its punch line on Martin Luther-King's famous speech beginning with the words "I Have a Strategy…" – and it is not always very clear to practitioners (or, perhaps, to anyone else) how, for example, 'community planning', or 'social inclusion' relate to sustainable development.

In our view, this results directly from the failure to firmly root sustainable development policy discourse in an understanding of environmental constraints. The 'four objectives' of the existing strategy are entirely worthy but, as they are expressed, lead far too easily to a presumption that all four *actually can* be achieved, in all cases, "at the same time". Even the HEPS initiative (2004) and the Learning and Skills Council (2004) do not seem grasp this fundamental point.

To expand this point with reference to an argument advanced earlier: continuing economic growth is clearly very important as necessary social goals depend on it, both here and across the world. There will certainly be instances in which it quite properly has a higher priority for government that environmental conservation. However, it is *only* congruent with sustainable development if does not deplete critical natural capital. It is very congruent, of course, if it can increase (useable) natural capital – something which is, in certain circumstances, possible. Hence, there are certain to be instances in which particular opportunities for economic growth should be rejected on sustainable development grounds. Failure of policy-makers to acknowledge this possibility, and to have a clearly developed view of the circumstances under which it might occur, amounts to nothing less than complete disengagement from the idea of sustainable development and an abnegation of responsibility: we simply end up with sustainable development as something we do if there is no immediate economic benefit in doing something else.

Similarly, social progress, however defined, is important and may be expected, at times, to have a higher priority than environmental conservation. After all, at the extreme, there is no point in worrying about the environment for future generations if today's children are starving or living degraded lives. However, sustainable development may well entail social costs in the short-to-medium term, and this needs to be confronted. A very good example is CAP reform, which would certainly strike a huge blow for global sustainable development, but at an immediate economic and social cost to many rich-country farmers and associated communities. Additionally, the much-needed root and branch reform of the CAP may well have (for many) unwelcome impacts on the countryside.

So, we need to be clear (and government needs to help us be clear) about the choices we face, and the Strategy largely fails to confront this challenge. A result is that some of Government's partners (for example those involved in the implementation of the England National Biodiversity Strategy) would seem have lost faith in the concept. As someone recently remarked at a meeting of a DEFRA-hosted National Biodiversity Strategy committee, "No one thinks sustainable development's got anything to do with the environment". Although we don't fully accept this, we do think that sustainable development has increasingly tended to be seen as, and for many become, just a big wish-list of everything that would be nice – as well as a way of keeping vocal and well-positioned special interest groups on board.

How effectively do the indicators reflect the UK's 'sustainability gap'?

We quote here from our policy briefing note *Aiming for Sustainability – Can We Keep on Track?*, attached.

> *The Strategy declares that: "the Government's aim is for all the headline indicators to move in the right direction over time ... When the trend is unacceptable, the Government will adjust policies accordingly and will look to others to join it in taking action".*
> *This kind of serious commitment is very welcome.*
> *But there is nevertheless a major problem with the whole approach. It is that if the headline indicators are broadly negative, we can tell that the overall position is* not *sustainable. Unfortunately this does not mean that when they are all positive the position necessarily is sustainable. Indeed, it is even possible that positive indicator results will operate perversely to move us* off *a sustainable pathway.*

This is a fundamental problem which needs both acknowledging and addressing. A further question here is whether policy can in fact operate to correct variance from targets in quite the linear way the Strategy supposes. We have argued in earlier evidence to the EAC's *Learning the Sustainability Lesson* enquiry that a broad movement towards sustainable development requires a process of social learning to occur.

How can the concept of sustainable consumption be integrated within the Strategy?

A ready answer is available to this question where there are immediate economic (and/or social) benefits in moving to more sustainable consumption practices. Examples include water and energy saving by households and public/corporate bodies, efficient corporate procurement practices, and exploitation of opportunities for energy efficiency and the re-use and recycling of resources. In these cases quite major gains may be achieved through education and public awareness initiatives (often linked to other measures, such as taxes, subsidies and regulation) provided only that these are appropriately designed, targeted and communicated. Unfortunately, this has often not been the case in practice despite its being the easy bit of the puzzle.

It seems clear, however, that the exploitation of such 'win-win' opportunities will be a necessary but not sufficient condition for the achievement of sustainable development. If a major change in the social preferences that underpin patterns of consumption is ultimately needed, this seems likely to require more complex policy-supportive interventions through education and lifelong learning. For a full discussion of these issues see Scott and Gough (2003), chapters 4 and 11.

Government intervention on the production side is more likely to be successful where short-to-medium-term economic benefits are available from more sustainable behaviours. For example, if the achievement of economies of scale in the production of green energy can be facilitated by Government, then the price can be lowered to consumers. However, if it is necessary (as it may be) to move towards lifestyles in which total energy consumption (having allowed for efficiency savings) is significantly reduced, this will involve fundamental changes to the structure of preferences in the marketplace, which would seem to require sophisticated educational and other interventions, both to bring about the changes themselves, and to mitigate the costs and consequences for producers – especially as success in policy terms will not necessarily result in benefit to the public, institutions, or business. Consumption and production patterns are part of the way we live. They are an important part of sustainable development, which is ultimately *about* the way we live. It is not just about how we manage technical aspects of living the way we do.

Finally, all of this needs to be seen in a context of global trade. In principle, free trade must tend to promote sustainable development because it promotes the efficient use of resources. A danger that arises from the 'four objectives' approach of the existing strategy is that social progress and economic benefit at the local level may be allowed to obscure wider net social, economic, *and* environmental gains available through trade. So, for example, to the extent that DEFRA has put CAP reform at the centre of its thinking on sustainable development it has, in our view, been absolutely correct.

Organisational Structures and Costs

As noted above, some useful steps towards sustainable development are possible which should pay for themselves. More difficult changes would incur costs. It would be useful if Government could establish clear priority areas where it considers it worthwhile (or politically proper) to mitigate costs, and thus aid change.

There is a case for:

- rationalising the number of strategies with which public-sector organisations, in particular, must comply;
- clarifying the relationship between these strategies;
- being honest about trades-off between desirable goals where these are unavoidable; and,
- making a clear distinction between those goals which represent easy wins and those which seem certain to result in costs to particular individuals, groups and/or organisations.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we wish to argue that there is a need for a more sophisticated (but by no means impractical) approach on the part of Government to policy-making in relation to sustainable development. In part we have already touched on this, suggesting that education and public awareness initiatives need to be designed, targeted and communicated to take account of the properties of both the intended audience and the case to be presented. In addition, we would ask you to note that sustainable development is a concept which excites both altruistic and self-interested responses from individuals and organisations. For example, a single individual may be committed to the conservation of wildlife, and willing to make personal sacrifices to this end, but nevertheless depend for a living on a polluting industry. There is a growing body of empirically-based work which suggests that policy needs to be carefully designed so as to be 'robust'– in the sense that it does not depend for its success on particular assumptions about how and why individuals and organisations are motivated. Much of this work is summarised in a recent book by Julian Le Grand (2003), in which he argues for, and provides examples of, policy instruments which simultaneously respect and appeal to both altruistic and materially self-interested motivations.

Thank you for reading this note.

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