April 2014

SDplanNet Briefing Note

National Councils for Sustainable Development: Lessons from the past and present

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1.0 Introduction

In the past 25 years, many countries have set up National Councils for Sustainable Development (NCSDs) or other bodies serving a similar purpose: to further sustainable development at the national level. The form and function of NCSDs differ considerably from one country to the next. Typically, governments have established NCSDs to engage a wide range of stakeholders in the process of creating national sustainable development strategies (NSDSs). They have often then been involved in the implementation and review of these strategies, as well as advising on new and emerging sustainability challenges. NCSDs can, for example, be subsidiaries of a government department, semi-public bodies (independent from government but fully state-funded), non-governmental bodies (civil society organizations/ networks), or have a combination of these governance characteristics. Some NCSDs have been totally new creations. At other times they have emerged through the reconfiguration of previously existing bodies, such as economic and social committee or councils (ESCs) that have been given a new mandate for sustainable development.

A first wave of NCSDs was created around the time of the first Rio Earth Summit in Rio in 1992 (United Nations Conference on Environment and Development) in the worldwide surge of enthusiasm for sustainable development that followed that summit. The Johannesburg Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002 reinvigorated this global movement and was associated with the creation of a further wave of national strategies and national sustainable development councils.

Around the beginning of the 21st century, sustainable development appeared to lose momentum at both the international and national levels, seeing many NCSDs shelved by their respective governments. Nevertheless, in the face of worsening environmental, social and economic circumstances, the 2012 UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) has seemingly started to put sustainable development back on the agenda. In particular, Rio+20 launched a process to establish a new set of universal Sustainable Development

Goals (SDGs), which are expected to be adopted at a global summit in September 2015 as a part of broader efforts to agree to a successor framework to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). These new goals are commonly referred to as the Post-2015 Development Agenda.

As this new agenda begins to emerge from the international discussions at the United Nations, it will become increasingly important to also discuss the means for its implementation and monitoring, as well as to increase political momentum for the sustainable development transition at the country level. NSDSs—in one form or another—will need to be revised or recreated to include new national targets and indicators as part of a new global goals framework. And bodies such as NCSDs are again likely to be needed to assist in the development and review of such strategies, often providing an important channel for communication and partnership building between stakeholders and national-level decision-makers.

In order to assist this process, Stakeholder Forum, as facilitators of the Global Network of National Councils for Sustainable Development and similar bodies (GN-NCSDs) drew on a recent survey they undertook to ascertain NCSD expectations for and recommendations on the SDGs to review NCSDs' work over the last 25 years. The review has focused particularly on countries and situations where NCSDs have been seen to function well in order to try to identify any common elements of good practice or success factors that might be of use to other countries that are establishing or reshaping these bodies in the context of delivering the SDGs of the Post-2015 Development Agenda.

As the form and function of NCSDs vary greatly from one country to the next, there can clearly be no universal blueprint or model for their creation and operation. Nevertheless the review has revealed a number of common factors or elements that appear to have contributed to the success of the most effective NCSDs—and also a few factors that have occasionally led to difficulties or less satisfactory outcomes. Through discussing best practices and common trends regarding the purpose, composition and functions of NCSDs, this paper hopes to provide existing NCSDs with a resource to help them learn from other circumstances, both past and current, to ultimately become more effective in facilitating the delivery of sustainable development at the national level (Antonio et al., 2012). It may also be useful for countries that are considering the creation or modification of NCSDs during the next few years.

The report is arranged around three main topics:

- Purpose and mandate
- Composition and membership
- Functions and activities

2.0 Mandates and Agendas

NCSDs have often been created when countries have decided to adopt NSDSs, and their mandates have frequently related to ways of engaging stakeholders with the creation, implementation and monitoring of such strategies (as shown in Table 1). This linkage can provide a broad basis for determining the overall mandate of a NCSD.

More detailed agendas usually arise from the priorities of the time. Sometimes governments find it useful to be able to refer particular issues to their NCSD for examination. In other cases, an NCSD may itself identify a particular sustainable development-related issue that needs attention. For instance, the German Council for Sustainable Development (RNE)[1]

[1] See: http://www.nachhaltigkeitsrat.de/en/home

has recently undertaken an initiative to develop a German Sustainability Code for business, a sustainability reporting instrument for any company to use. Other NCSDs set their national objectives based on geographical and/or natural resource-related specificities. One main objective of the Mauritian NCSD is the protection of oceans and advancing a "blue economy." Similarly, the Tunisian NCSD elaborated a national action program to fight against desertification.

TABLE 1: EXAMPLES OF NCSDS SUPPORTED BY NSDSS

NCSD	NSDS	NCSDS ROLE IN RELATION TO NSDS
Bangladesh Sustainable Development Monitoring Council	National Sustainable Development Strategy 2010–21 (NSDS)	NCSD ensures effective implementation and monitors NSDS progress.
Estonian National Commission on Sustainable Development	Estonian Sustainable Development Act and the Sustainable Development Strategy (SE21)	NCSD monitors progress towards SE21.
Hungarian National Council for Sustainable Development (NFFT)	National Framework Strategy on Sustainable Development of Hungary	NFFT is mandated by parliament to analyze NSDS implementation.
Mauritian Maurice II Durable Commission (MID)	Maurice Ile Durable Policy, Strategy and Action Plan (MID SAP)	MID was created by government to ensure compliance, monitoring and follow-up of the MID SAP.
Tunisian National Commission for Sustainable Development (CNDD)	National Sustainable Development Strategy (SNDD)	CNDD developed the SNDD, analyzes and monitors its implementation, along with other national sustainable development policies.*
Philippine Council for Sustainable Development (PCSD)	Philippine Agenda 21 (PA21) and Philippine Development Plan (PDP)	PCSD advises government on NSDS, scrutinizes government implementation and facilitates stakeholder engagement

** Indicators of Sustainable Development - National Agency for the Protection of the Environment*

A core function of most NCSDs is to **operate as an advisory body** to government, examining sustainable development issues and advising in public and private reports on the evolution and success of sustainable development strategy and policy. This has clearly been one of the most productive areas of NCSD activity, particularly when they have been able to help move policy and action forward decisively in a priority area.

At other times, NCSDs have had more **difficulty in getting their recommendations accepted or considered** seriously enough. In some countries, efforts have been made to give NCSDs a stronger influence by requiring that their recommendations receive a response from government within a stated period, by requiring that they be consulted on certain issues, or by having their reports reviewed by parliamentary committees or similar structures within the legislature. Lessons could also be learned from the regional level, as the European Union, by long-standing agreement reports or opinions adopted by the ESC and its Sustainable Development Observatory, always receives a response from the European Commission.

A number of NCSDs have also found a variety of ways to **promote their messages** going beyond the classic function of publishing a report and recommendations. They have used many modern media channels to spread their messages and have operated informally and privately with governments and other organizations, as well as advocating their solutions publicly. The now former U.K. Sustainable Development Commission (SDC), for example, developed an online network for consulting a wide range of individuals on sustainable development issues. In Mauritius, the NCSD's comprehensive MID website[2] enables stakeholders to keep track of ongoing programs and legislation development, and even request funding for sustainable development projects.

[2] http://www.gov.mu/portal/sites/mid/MIDRole.htm

Some NCSDs seem to focus primarily on their analytical and advisory roles, such as those in Benin, Belgium, Estonia and Mozambique. But some NCSDs have also played other roles in **promoting sustainable development understanding and actions among other sectors of society**. Many sustainable development strategies cover a very wide range of topics, and their implementation requires action from many different departments and actors in other sectors of society. For instance, national sustainable development strategy evaluation in Germany is a regular, international and integrative process. In 2009 and 2013, the federal government ordered peer reviews to evaluate Germany's sustainable development policies. Both peer reviews involved national and international actors from various sectors and were supported by the German NCSD. The French NCSD also invited a range of stakeholders representing groups, including civil society and the private sector, to participate in a peer review process during the establishment of its NSDS.

Communicating effectively with the business sector is one key role of NCSDs. Another is finding ways of developing two-way communication with regional and local levels of government, which frequently play crucial roles in advancing sustainable development. In this regard, the Filipino NCSD's website serves as a hub for subnational sustainable development bodies. NCSDs that are able to play a wider role of this kind can be very valuable in helping to build a wider societal understanding and support for the sustainability transition that is needed. Of course, wider outreach efforts of this kind need to be adequately resourced and appropriate communication capabilities brought into play.

3.0 Composition and Membership

Broadly speaking, the composition and membership of NCSDs and similar bodies can be categorized into three groups:

- Government representative memberships
- Mixed memberships (consisting of government and non-governmental members that represent other sectors and interests)
- Memberships drawn entirely from outside government

Each model can work well and will usually be a direct reflection of the political system and/or culture of the country in which they exist, but each has characteristic problems that need to be addressed carefully.

3.1 Government Representative Memberships

NCSDs with only government/ministerial members (such as those in Chile and Sri Lanka) clearly have a great deal of authority and legitimacy to back up their work. They can be a very useful means of securing an integrated government approach to sustainable development, particularly if they are led or given strong support by the Head of State and include ministers or senior representatives from departments across the sustainable development spectrum. On the other hand, a group composed only of minsters may find it harder to develop a longer-term vision and to present policies and practices that the sustainability transition requires. It is important for such ministerial NCSDs to ensure that they have access to objective, evidenced-based information and analysis about current sustainable development issues and trends, along with the impacts of continuing or altering current policies.

TABLE 2: STRENGTHS AND CHALLENGES ASSOCIATED WITH GOVERNMENT REPRESENTATIVE MEMBERSHIP NCSDs

STRENGTHS	CHALLENGES
• Greater influence over policy, even potentially having legislative powers • Stronger leadership • Greater resources to implement strategies • Higher public profile	• Potentially less independent and objective • Higher risk of being influenced by political interests • Not necessarily conducive to long-term thinking • Can result in lower levels of ambition

3.2 Mixed Memberships

The vast majority of NCSDs have mixed memberships, usually consisting of members of government along with stakeholders from a range of other sectors such as business, academia and organized labour. The primary advantage of mixed memberships is that they draw upon a wide range of perspectives and expertise, leading to more well-informed analysis and recommendations. The more stakeholder members a NCSD has, the greater the possibilities for engaging and consulting broad networks of stakeholders.

In cases such as these, it is important to ensure that the outside representatives do not feel inhibited by this diversity and are able to speak and participate freely. They must feel free to scrutinize the whole range of relevant government policies and challenge them where appropriate. In some cases, government voices have been known to dominate those of other non-government members. Conversely, an outside body needs to be given easy access to individuals in government and to information so that they can make an informed and significant contribution.

Mixed memberships can, however, make it harder for NCSDs to reach consensus, especially as the positions of government members are often less ambitious than their non-government counterparts. This of course is not to say that consensus is essential for an NCSD to operate effectively (quite the opposite in fact); nevertheless, it can make the production of clear and coherent recommendations a potentially tricky and slow process. There is also sometimes a tendency for individual members to push their own agendas over the common good, which can also potentially lead to siloed thinking and a focus on individual issues at the expense of the larger strategic picture.

TABLE 3: STRENGTHS AND CHALLENGES ASSOCIATED WITH MIXED MEMBERSHIP NCSDS

STRENGTHS	CHALLENGES
• Likely to be more representative • Can facilitate greater participation • Greater ability to draw on a wide range of opinions and expertise • Likely to lead in more progressive recommendations	• Avoiding dominance of government voices over those of stakeholders • Avoiding deadlock and producing coherent messages in a timely manner • Avoiding siloed thinking and keeping track of the larger picture

3.3 Non-Governmental/Stakeholder Representative Memberships

NCSDs that primarily consist of members from outside government that represent a range of different sectors and interests generally have little problem scrutinizing government policy and speaking out about perceived unsustainable policies and practices. Conversely, they may struggle to be as influential as NCSDs that have government members. As NCSDs with this composition have historically consisted of primarily environmental actors, it is important that their interests, experience and expertise go beyond the dimension of sustainable development and include authoritative voices on economic and social issues.

They also need to be of a status and standing to be able to engage effectively with ministers and senior officials in a range of departments, whether related to economics and finance, industry and social affairs, planning, or the more conventional environment institutions. This will likely also include, on occasion, liaising with Heads of State and their offices to ensure their input into overall strategic issues.

TABLE 4: STRENGTHS AND CHALLENGES ASSOCIATED WITH OUTSIDE GOVERNMENT MEMBERSHIP NCSDS

STRENGTHS	CHALLENGES
• Their independence enables thorough scrutiny of government policy and speaking out about perceived unsustainable policies and practices • Likely to be very representative and have strong connections to substantial stakeholder networks at the subnational level • Can potentially call upon large public support base to provide legitimacy and help advocate for recommendations	• Influence over decision-makers and policy • Having representatives of a high enough status and standing • Ensuring interests and expertise that go beyond environmental issues • Securing long-term funding

3.4 Common Trends

For the latter two types of NCSD, good representatives of business interests on NCSDs appear to be particularly important to ensure that the views and capabilities of that sector are fully engaged. Adequate representation of other key sectors such as trade unions, local government, non-government organizations and other major groups is also very important to ensure that a broad range of perspectives are considered and expertise brought to the table. This is also integral to increasing stakeholder ownership of NSDSs, something consistently identified as being key for successful implementation.

Similarly, understanding the need for the sustainability transition depends on a deep scientific understanding of global processes and the threats that are facing the planet, and also on a deep economic understanding of the kind of sustainability transition that needs to take place in the global and national economies over the next generation. NCSDs need strong capabilities among their members and staff in the fields of science, environment and economics.

The **chairmanship** of the council is particularly important. Some NCSDs have been chaired or co-chaired by the prime minister or another senior minister. Experience suggests that although this obviously confers high status and legitimacy to the deliberations of the council, it may also inhibit the essential function of a council in challenging the status quo in order to work towards a more sustainable long-term vision for society in the future. An independent chairman or co-chairman from outside government often seems to deliver the best results. Such a chair or co-chair needs to be

someone with a public profile of high standing and reputation who can be trusted both by government and other interests. The involvement of senior business leaders with sustainability interests and concerns has worked well in a number of cases such as Croatia, Estonia, Germany and Mauritius. Senior scientists, economists or other intellectuals with good practical experience and networks have also managed the role well in the likes of the United Kingdom and France.

Establishing the right balance between easy access to government information and to individuals while retaining sufficient independence is a critical success factor for NCSDs. In order to be relevant and useful, a council needs to have good and open relationships at many levels of government and to be able to join creatively and in a trusted way with the evolution of policies to advance sustainability. On the other hand, councils must retain sufficient independence to be able to challenge policies or programs that seem to be tending in unsustainable directions, both privately and, where necessary, publicly.

Building mutual trust and understanding around this role of being a "critical friend" is a crucial success factor. It is not an easy balance to maintain and there are examples of problems arising in both directions—for example, councils that have become too close to government, and have therefore lost public credibility and usefulness as an agent of change; and councils that have become too oppositional and have therefore lost access to and influence with government, sometimes to an extent that they have been disbanded or had their funding ended. Getting and keeping this balance right needs constant attention.

4.0 Functions and Activities

The role of NCSDs and the specific activities that they undertake varies from one case to the next; however, a number of broad functions can be identified:

- Strategy creation and advice
- Policy and implementation
- Monitoring and scrutiny
- Stakeholder engagement and capacity building
- International outreach

4.1 Strategy Creation and Advice

For the vast majority of NCSDs, the primary function is to provide government with advice on sustainable development issues. More often than not, this includes providing recommendations and/or reviewing NSDSs. In some cases, this includes a role in setting national sustainable development targets. NCSDs in Armenia, Croatia, Hungary, Mauritius, Panama and the Philippines, for example, are actually responsible for the drafting of NSDSs and designing specific policies for their implementation.

Whether simply advising or being actively involved in the drafting process, the inclusion of NCSDs in strategy creation can facilitate greater levels of objectivity and help to offset the individual priorities of the government departments that are involved. The extent to which NCSDs are able to fulfil this role obviously varies depending on their composition and membership, as discussed in Section 2.

More importantly, perhaps, is the extra level of insight and expertise that NCSDs can bring to strategy development and review processes. Being able to draw on a wide pool of stakeholder knowledge and expertise makes NCSDs well equipped to provide recommendations for strategies that address the three dimensions of sustainable development in a more coherent way and maximizes mutual benefits while minimizing trade-offs between sectors.

In addition, greater independence and the participatory approach tend to result in NSDSs, and their subsequent policies, enjoying a greater level of public support.

4.2 Policy and Implementation

A number of NCSDs are also involved in the creation of sustainable development policies and programs, often specifically designed to implement NSDSs. In general, this occurs in an advisory capacity, providing comments and feedback on government legislation; however, some NCSDs have a role in the actual drafting of policy. The advantages of this involvement are very much the same as those listed in the strategy section above.

In practical terms, this can involve working with a particular sector, such as business, agriculture, education or health, to explore the implications of social, environmental and economic issues for these groups and develop sector-specific models for advancing sustainable development. Furthermore, the fact that many NCSDs engage stakeholders from the private sector in efforts around strategy and policy development means that they can be made more "business friendly." Providing this does not compromise the sustainability credentials of its recommendations in this regard, NCSDs can therefore help with gaining the support of this sector and even leverage greater resources for implementation.

Although somewhat unusual, a small number of NCSDs (Mauritius, Panama, etc.) have been known to play a role in the implementation of sustainable development policies; however, this only appears to be the case in smaller countries and where NCSD is very closely linked to government.

4.3 Monitoring and Scrutiny

Sustainable development covers a very broad range of issues, and it is sometimes difficult to determine when progress is being made, as developments in one area do not necessarily correspond with those in others. Many countries have now pulled together sets of sustainable development indicators to keep track of progress and to help set targets for the future. Some NCSDs (such as Mauritius, Philippines and the former U.K. body) have played an important part in assisting the further development of sustainable development indicator sets and in highlighting the messages that emerge from monitoring progress. Such assessments can then feed into the regular NSDS review processes, and, in particular, into debates about what should be done to deal with situations where targets are being missed.

While not all countries are able to monitor progress towards sustainable development, in general it would seem that NCSDs that operate in countries that do have agreed indicators are more able to question government policies or inaction without accusations of political bias.

4.4 Stakeholder Engagement and Capacity Building

Successful NSDSs need to involve all parts of society. They cannot be created and driven forward by governments alone. NCSDs have often been able to play a vital role in engaging with stakeholders of all kinds to help draw on the suggestions and ideas and build society-wide partnerships for the implementation of strategies.

NCSD stakeholder engagement can be broadly split into types: 1) activities that seek inputs from stakeholders to inform NCSD thinking, research and recommendations; 2) activities convened by NCSDs that aim to increase stakeholder understanding of sustainable development issues, strategies and policies. Both these roles require adequate resources and expertise to be effective.

Regarding their role in the development and scrutiny of NSDSs in particular, NCSDs that have taken a participatory approach have been more likely to foster a strong sense of national ownership of the strategy, something that is key to successful implementation.

Some NCSDs have also been able to play a leading role in promoting the kind of changes that are needed in education and training programs to advance sustainable development. Examples have typically included specific capacity-building activities for representatives of government and stakeholders; however, campaigns to improve the general public's understanding of and action on sustainable development have also been undertaken by some NCSDs.

4.5 International Outreach

Most NCSDs have a mandate that is primarily directed to the advancement of sustainable development in their own country. But several NCSDs (Belgium, Chile, Germany, Hungary, Philippines, etc.) have found that they can learn from the work of their peers in other countries in mutually helpful exchanges, and may also be able to work together usefully on some regional or global issues. Many NCSDs have therefore been active players in regional groupings such as the European network of Environmental and Sustainable Development Advisory Councils (EEAC) and SDplanNet in the Asia-Pacific region. Others have been part of global networks such as the Earth Council, which formed after Rio 1992 and helped establish and facilitate the exchange of information between more than 80 NCSDs in developing countries working to further the goals of the first Earth Summit. Whereas the majority of these early NCSDs are no longer operational and the Earth Council (Alliance) has a slightly different role, Rio+20 saw the emergence of the Global Network of NCSDs, which now works with over 40 active bodies across all regions.

5.0 Conclusion: Prospects for NCSDs

As the world continues its efforts to create a new set of global SDGs to be launched as the centrepiece of the Post-2015 Development Agenda, there will clearly be a need to revise and reinvigorate NSDSs and the machinery that NCSDs have provided for supporting and engaging stakeholders in the creation and implementation of these strategies.

The present global pattern is not optimal. A few NCSDs have existed for many years and appear to have become an accepted element of national governance for sustainable development. But in many other countries, governance for sustainable development has either not taken deep root or has been allowed to dwindle.

It is worth considering why some NCSDs have had shorter lives and been discontinued or have their functions taken over by other bodies. Sometimes this has happened because a NCSD is perceived as having completed its main task, such as the creation of a strategy, and is not as needed in the follow-up. Sometimes NCSDs have been abolished for political reasons, usually following a change of government, because they have been considered too closely associated with the previous government. In some countries, there may have been fading interest in or attention to sustainable development issues by the government or by society at large. Sometimes NCSDs have become victims of economic circumstances. All of these are essentially short-term reasons.

The continued existence of a particular NCSD should not, of course, be regarded as an end in itself. But the global imperative for the world to make the sustainability transition does not go away; nor does the need to ensure that there are strong mechanisms that enable dialogue between government and stakeholders of all kinds to assist and guide the process. NCSDs have proved to be one effective means of building these partnerships over the past 25 years. They can and should be part of the solutions needed over the next 25. Where NCSDs exist, they should be nourished. Where they do not yet exist, careful consideration should be given to establishing them. Where they have been discontinued for essentially short-term reasons, consideration should be given to re-establishing them, possibly in a new format.

Further Reading

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Published by Sharing Tools in Planning for Sustainable Development.

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About SDplanNet

SDplanNet is a sustainable development planning network created to help government professionals at the national and sub-national levels share good practices and build capacity in the preparation and implementation of strategies for sustainable development or development plans that incorporate sustainable development principles.

SDplanNet is administered by the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD), the Institute for Global Environmental Strategies (IGES), the Africa Technology Policy Studies Network and is sponsored in its current phase by Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH on behalf of German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ).

The 2014 Regional Sustainable Development Transition Series
Preparing to Deliver the Post 2015 Development Agenda at the National and Sub-national Levels

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