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A METHODOLOGY FOR ASSESSING NATIONAL SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES*

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ABSTRACT

At the Rio Earth Summit of 1992, governments undertook to develop and adopt national sustainable development strategies as a key component of implementing the goals of Agenda 21. Only partial progress was reported at the 2002 World Summit in Johannesburg, with uncertainty as to the effectiveness of those strategies that had been introduced. This paper describes a methodology for assessing a country's progress in implementing a national sustainable development strategy for (NSDS) and for identifying potential areas for improvement. Five key principles of sustainable development and strategic planning are identified, and a set of assessment criteria are proposed for each principle.

The results of applying the methodology in two Eastern European countries, Belarus and Slovakia, are reported. These case studies suggest that the proposed NSDS assessment methodology has considerable potential for strengthening sustainability planning at the national level.

The effectiveness of the NSDS assessment methodology in strengthening national processes for sustainable development and strategic planning will also require greater transparency and accountability in governance practices. This suggests that progress in improving the quality of NSDS processes is likely to be conditional on broader considerations of institutional building and governance reform.

Key words: sustainable development, strategic planning, national sustainable development strategies , transition countries.

1. Introduction

At the UN Conference on Environment and Development in 1992 (the Rio Earth Summit), it was agreed that each government should adopt a national sustainable development strategy aimed at the implementation of the Agenda 21 goals (UN, 1992: para.1.3). The UN World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in 2002 reiterated this requirement by urging states to “take immediate steps to make progress in the formulation and elaboration of national strategies for sustainable development and begin their implementation by 2005”. (UN, 2002: para. 162).

Agenda 21 envisaged that the necessary harmonisation and extension of existing policies and plans would occur through the adoption of an identifiable strategy for sustainable development (para.8.7). However, the overall objective was not to develop a new strategy document, but “to improve or restructure the decision-making process so that consideration of socio-economic and environmental issues is fully integrated and a broader range of public participation assured” (para. 8.3). Similarly, the OECD (2001) has defined a NSDS as “a coordinated set of participatory and continuously improving processes of analysis, debate, capacity-strengthening, planning and investment, which integrates the economic, social and environmental objectives of society, seeking trade-offs where this is not possible”. The UK Government’s Target Strategy Paper on Sustainable Development argues that “national strategies for sustainable development should be seen as processes, not new plans. They should seek to ensure that strategic planning takes account of sustainable development ideas” (DFID, 2000).

A strategy for sustainable development comprises, therefore, a set of processes which seek to integrate the economic, social and environmental objectives of society. It does not necessarily involve a development plan covering a fixed period of time, nor does it require a separate planning process. Instead, an effective NSDS will be distinguished by adherence to a set of sustainable development and strategic planning principles and by a coordinated set of measures to ensure their implementation.

Understanding of what constitutes an effective NSDS has improved substantially over the past decade and has led to various sets of principles of sustainable development and strategic planning being proposed. The OECD (2001) provides a set of twelve “Guiding principles for sustainable development strategies”. The UN (2001) offers a similar set of fifteen principles.¹

This paper further elaborates this thinking by presenting a methodology for assessing the adherence of NSDSs to the principles of sustainable development and strategic planning. The methodology is grounded in the lessons and experience of strategic development planning and policy in lower-income developing and transition countries.

The next section discusses the underlying core principles of sustainable development and strategic planning. Section 3 describes the assessment methodology. Section 4 reports the outcomes of applying the methodology in several transition countries of Eastern Europe. The final section summarises the main findings and provides a number of suggestions for further development and future application of the methodology.

2. Principles for Assessing NSDSs

A common feature of the various sets of NSDS principles that have been proposed is that they combine principles for sustainable development with principles for sound strategic planning and management. The purpose of this section of the paper is to identify a limited number of core principles which can be used for assessing NSDSs.

Principles of Sustainable Development

The Rio Declaration, together with Agenda 21 can be taken as the starting point for defining those characteristics of the sustainable development process which distinguish it from other forms of development. This interpretation of sustainable development emphasises two key principles:

- (A) integration of economic, social and environmental priorities; and
- (B) wide participation of stakeholders in the development process.

The first of these principles (“*integration*”) means that sustainable development entails balancing the economic, social and environmental objectives of society in decision-making. This involves consideration of the positive and negative economic, social and environmental consequences of policy changes, the identification of ‘trade-off’ outcomes where benefits in one or more spheres are accompanied by losses in other(s), and the implementation of appropriate mitigation measures to minimise the negative impacts. In particular, the attention to the “social” pillar of sustainable development means that appropriate weight must be given to the needs of the poor and other disadvantaged or marginalized groups, in integrated policy and decision making.

The second principle (“*participation and consensus*”) is equally strongly emphasised in Agenda 21, which states (Chapter 23) that ‘one of the fundamental pre-requisites of sustainable development is broad public participation in decision-making’. The involvement of non-government stakeholders in strategic planning strengthens the planning process by building broad legitimacy for the process. Participation is also an objective in its own right, meeting the fundamental equity principle of sustainable development expounded by the Rio Declaration’s Principle 2: ‘the right to development must be fulfilled so as to equitably meet developmental and environmental needs of present and future generations’.

Principles of Strategic Planning

The ideas and practice of strategic planning have evolved over time. It has become generally recognised that the planning process rarely follows the ‘rational’ model of a sequential cycle of formulation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. Instead, planning occurs as a continuous and iterative process, where important decisions are frequently taken during the implementation stage, and monitoring and evaluation occur in advance of final outputs and outcomes. Thus, while current understanding of strategic planning retains the idea of planning as being about setting goals and identifying the means of achieving them, it has moved away from a fixed plan and solutions, to an adaptive process, involving the management of change as it affects conditions, constraints and resources. Second, it involves a shift from the view that the state alone is responsible for development, to one where various stakeholders are involved in the planning processes of dialogue and accountability. Third,

strategic planning involves a comprehensive and holistic approach which seeks to integrate the full range of available resources, and to build on existing policies and initiatives.

The importance of the implementation phase in the planning cycle has also been increasingly emphasised. Thus, the current understanding of effective strategic planning stresses its strong linkages with good strategic management.²

The contemporary concepts of strategic planning can be summarized in three general principles:

- (C) country ownership and commitment;
- (D) comprehensive and coordinated policy process;
- (E) targeting, resourcing and monitoring.

The principle of *country ownership and commitment* implies that the planning processes and targets should be based on a country's own perception of what constitutes its national strategy for sustainable development (McGee and Norton, 2000). Even when the development of strategy is nationally led, it may not become embedded in actual planning processes if there is insufficient commitment to it at those levels of government which are the most influential in defining those processes.

The principle of *comprehensive and coordinated policy process* means, first of all, that an effective strategy must be based on reliable information and draw on valid analyses of the likely outcomes of chosen strategy options. This will address a common failure in current strategic planning, noted by Booth and Lucas (2001), to specify how identified activities are expected to result in the specified target outcomes. Secondly, as noted above, NSDSs should not be seen as separate planning processes, but rather represent the adaptation of existing processes, where this is necessary to comply with sustainable development principles. Thirdly, an effective strategic planning process should allocate specific means and responsibilities to the most appropriate bodies at the national, regional or local levels.

The principle of *targeting, resourcing and monitoring* is concerned with the measurement and monitoring of development outcomes (Stern, 2002; White, 2002).³

The five core principles discussed above are proposed for the NSDS assessment methodology, and are shown in the first column of Table 1. For comparative purposes, the OECD and UN principles are shown in the second and third columns of Table 1.

Table 1

Proposed Principles	OECD Principles of strategic planning for sustainable development*	UN Principles for effective national sustainable development strategy **
A. Integration of economic, social and environmental objectives	Comprehensive and integrated. People centred	Integration and balanced across sectors and territories
B. Participation and consensus	Consensus on long-term vision. Effective participation	Shared strategic and pragmatic vision. Link the short to the medium and long term. Ensure continuity of the strategy development process. Participatory and the “widest possible participation” ensured.
C. Country ownership and commitment	Country-led and nationally-owned. High-level government commitment and influential lead institutions.	Nationally owned and country driven process. Strong political commitment at the national and local levels. Spearheaded by a strong institution.
D. Comprehensive and coordinated policy process	Based on comprehensive and reliable analysis Building on existing processes and strategies Link national and local levels	Anchor the strategy process in sound technical analysis Built on existing processes and strategies Link national and local priorities and actions
E. Targeting, resourcing and monitoring	Targeted with clear budgetary priorities Incorporate monitoring, learning and improvements Develop and build on existing capacity	Set realistic but flexible targets Coherence between budget and strategy priorities Build mechanisms for monitoring follow up, evaluation and feedback

Sources: * - OECD (2001), ** - UN (2001)

3. Assessment Methodology

Assessment Criteria

The purpose of the assessment methodology is to measure the degree to which a national process of strategic planning for sustainable development adheres to the five core principles

identified above. The proposed approach therefore consists of a set of assessment criteria for each of the five principles, which taken together provide the basis for an assessment of the particular principle. For the criteria to serve this purpose, they should satisfy, as far as possible, the following requirements (Lee et al 1999):

- A limited number of criteria should be applied to each principle, to provide a process that is workable, timely and cost-effective.
- Each criterion should be well-defined, and framed in a way that allows a qualitative assessment of implementation to be made.
- Each criterion should deal with a distinct aspect of the principle, different from the aspects assessed by other criteria.
- Each criterion should be considered sufficiently important to merit influencing the overall assessment of the relevant principle.
- Each criterion should be useable by assessors who may not possess specialist expertise in strategic planning, but who are familiar with the current issues and policy debate on strategic planning for sustainable development in the national context.

Four key assessment criteria have been selected for each of the five principles. The selection of these criteria has been based on a comprehensive analysis of a range of information sources relating to strategic planning and sustainable development. The four key criteria for each principle are given in Table 2.

Table 2: Proposed Assessment Principles and Criteria

<p>A. Integration of economic, social and environmental objectives</p> <p><i>Criterion a1 - integration</i> Strategic planning in the country is based on a comprehensive and integrated analysis of economic, social and environmental issues, which clarifies links between the three spheres, resolves conflicts between them where practicable, and negotiates appropriate trade-offs where conflicts remain.</p> <p><i>Criterion a2 - social and poverty issues</i> Strategic planning in the country integrates poverty eradication, gender issues and the short- and long-term needs of disadvantaged and marginalised groups into economic policy.</p> <p><i>Criterion a3 - environmental and resource issues</i> Strategic planning in the country integrates the maintenance of sustainable levels of resource use and the control of pollution to maintain a healthy environment into economic policy.</p> <p><i>Criterion a4 - international commitments</i> Measures are in place to ensure compliance with international agreements which the country has entered into, on environmental and social issues.</p> <p>B. Participation and consensus</p> <p><i>Criterion b1 - involvement of stakeholders</i> The country’s processes of strategic planning, implementation, monitoring and review include the participation of stakeholders, including government, decentralised authorities, elected bodies, non-governmental and private sector institutions and marginalised groups.</p> <p><i>Criterion b2 - transparency and accountability</i> The management of the country’s strategic planning processes is transparent, with accountability for decisions made.</p>

Criterion b3 - communication and public awareness

Measures are taken to increase public awareness of sustainable development, to communicate relevant information, and to encourage the development of stakeholder involvement in the strategic planning process.

Criterion b4 - long term vision and consensus

The country's strategic planning processes are based on a long-term vision for the country's development, which is consistent with the country's capabilities, allows for short- and medium-term necessities, and has wide political and stakeholder support.

C. Country ownership and commitment

Criterion c1 - high level government commitment

The process of formulating and implementing the national strategy is led by government, with evidence of high level commitment.

Criterion c2 - broad-based political support

The country's strategic planning process has broad-based political support.

Criterion c3 - responsibilities for implementation

Responsibility for implementing strategies is clearly assigned, to bodies with the appropriate authority.

Criterion c4 - co-ordination with donors

The country's strategic planning process is co-ordinated with donor programmes.

D. Comprehensive and coordinated policy process

Criterion d1 - build on existing processes

The national strategy for sustainable development is based on existing strategic planning processes in the country, with co-ordination between them, and mechanisms to identify and resolve potential conflicts.

Criterion d2 - analysis and information

Strategic planning in the country is based on a comprehensive analysis of the present situation and of forecasted trends and risks, using reliable information on changing environmental, social and economic conditions.

Criterion d3 - realistic goals

The national strategy is based on a realistic analysis of national resources and capacities in the economic, social and environmental spheres, taking account of external pressures in the three spheres.

Criterion d4 - decentralisation

The country's strategic planning processes embrace both national and decentralised levels, with two-way iteration between these levels.

E. Targeting, resourcing and monitoring.

Criterion e1 - budgetary provision

The sustainable development strategy is integrated into the budget process, such that plans have the financial resources to achieve their objectives.

Criterion e2 - capacity for implementation

The sustainable development strategy includes realistic mechanisms to develop the capacity required to implement it.

Criterion e3 - targets and indicators

Targets have been defined for key strategic economic, social and environmental objectives, with indicators through which they can be monitored.

Criterion e4 - monitoring and feedback

Systems are in place for monitoring the implementation of strategies and the achievement of their defined objectives, for recording the results, and for reviewing their effectiveness as strategies for sustainable development, with effective mechanisms for feedback and revision within the planning process.

Applying the Assessment Criteria

The purpose of the assessment criteria detailed in Table 2 is to provide the basis for making a qualitative assessment of the quality of the NSDS.⁴ The outcome of the application of the criteria should provide policymakers, and other interested parties, with a clear indication of the effectiveness of the planning process, allowing areas where improvement is needed to be identified.

With this objective in mind, a qualitative scoring scheme is proposed, with the following alternative scores used to indicate the extent to which each criterion has been met:⁵

- A = all of the requirements of the criterion are fully met
- B = all the requirements of the criterion are satisfactorily met, although some further improvements are desirable.
- C = some requirements of the criterion have been satisfactorily or fully met, but others have not yet been satisfactorily met.
- D = few of the requirements of the criterion have, as yet, been satisfactorily met.

In order to assign a score, the assessor may make use of supplementary guidance questions for each criterion (Kirkpatrick et al 2001). The assessment report should provide a brief supporting text which summarises the reasoning and evidence upon which the assessment score for each criterion is based. In addition to giving the scores for each criterion, the assessment's conclusions should be recorded, to provide an overall, qualitative assessment for each principle, based on the scores assigned to each criterion. Importantly, these conclusions should draw attention to the main areas where existing processes might be strengthened to improve the effectiveness of the principle's implementation as a key component of the strategic planning for sustainable development process. The results recorded can be used to draw general conclusions as to the effectiveness of the national strategy for sustainable development, and to identify the main areas where improvements should be sought.

The scores given for each criterion need to be based on a thorough understanding of the country's strategic planning processes, as a strategy for sustainable development. The organisation of the assessment has to take into account the different forms which national strategies will take, and the degree of depth in which a country may wish to undertake its investigations. Some countries may have developed an overarching document which is specifically referred to as a sustainable development strategy, while others will have prepared a top level strategy document under a related initiative (such as a National Conservation Strategy or a Poverty Reduction Strategy). Some will have no such document. The aim of the assessment will be to investigate the country's actual strategic planning processes. A judgement has to be made on how thoroughly those complex processes covering a wide variety of government departments and other stakeholders need to be investigated, understood and evaluated. An in-depth study is likely to take many months, and involve extensive consultation. An example of such an in-depth investigation is the mid-term review of Pakistan's National Conservation Strategy (Hanson et al 2001), which took 18 months to complete, and included nine preliminary studies of individual aspects of the strategy. At the opposite extreme, an independent review of Uganda's development policies and programmes (Dearden 1998) was undertaken in a two-week visit by two people, working with a local adviser, with about one week's advance preparation. Our own experience in conducting assessments of national environmental assessment systems, though more limited in scope, suggests that a reasonably thorough understanding of planning system performance can be attained in a short period of time (METAP 2001). However, the process of consultation on

the findings, and reaching agreement between the different stakeholders involved in approving the assessment report, will take longer. Examples on the diversity of applications of the proposed methodology are provided in the case studies below.

The proposed assessment methodology may be incorporated into a country's own strategic planning process, to provide for the review of the effectiveness of the entire planning process as a strategy for sustainable development. It also provides support for any other systems that may be in place in the country to monitor the implementation of strategic plans for the achievement of economic, social and environmental objectives. It is intended that countries may use the methodology proposed here, to undertake an initial assessment of their progress towards implementing effective strategies for sustainable development, and repeat the assessment periodically as part of the overall strategic planning process.

4. Applying the Methodology: Case Studies for Belarus and Slovakia

This section reports on the application of the NSDS assessment methodology in several European transitional economies. In the last two decades, countries of Central and Eastern Europe have faced both radical reforms aimed at establishing democratic, free-market societies integrated with the world economy, and pressure to ensure sustainable development as required by their international commitments. Most of the former socialist countries have long traditions of sectoral and spatial planning. While recognising that the concept of long-term planning should be maintained, Cherp and Vrbensky (2002) emphasise the need to reform planning institutions, in accordance with the principles of market economy and sustainable development. In particular, they argue that, compared to 'socialist planning', 'sustainability planning' should be more integrated, participatory and decentralised.

The NSDS assessment methodology described in the previous section would appear to provide an appropriate tool for evaluating the progress of such reforms in transitional economies. The next two sub-sections describe the results of applying the methodology to the NSDS process in Belarus and Slovakia.

National Strategy for Sustainable Socio-Economic Development of Belarus

In Belarus, where the centralized planning institutions have been reformed only to a limited extent, National Strategies of Sustainable Socio-Economic Development (NSSD) have been prepared largely following a traditional "socialist" planning approach. The NSSDs are endorsed at the highest level of the government and are supposed to serve as a legal and planning framework for developing other sectoral and territorial plans and programmes. The first NSSD was published in 1997 (Belarus 1997), and covered the period up to 2005. In 2001, the Government, supported by the UNDP, initiated the process of preparing a new NSSD which will cover the period up to 2020. NSSD-2020 has been developed in several stages. First, a group of national experts prepared an Analytical Report closely examining successes and failures of NSSD-1997 (Belarus (2004)). Secondly, the Guidelines for developing NSSD-2020 were elaborated. The strategy itself has been drafted by several dozen national experts and is supposed to be endorsed by the Government in 2004.

The process of preparing the NSSD-2020 in Belarus has involved a major participation and capacity building exercise. A number of NGOs participated in the so-called Public Co-ordination Council working in parallel with the NSSD Drafting Group. An electronic list-

serve and a Web site were established through which drafts of NSSD chapters and other documents, opinions and information were circulated to a relatively wide circle of stakeholders.

The NSDS assessment criteria were used to review the Analytical Report and related documents and processes in 2002 (Cherp 2002). The main findings and recommendations of this review were that:

- More attention should be paid to the cross-cutting rather than to section-by-section analysis;
- There should be a clear guidance on the *process of developing* the NSSD-2020 rather than merely on its *content*. In particular, the process of NSSD-2020 should:
 - Be more integrated with closer linkages between different sectoral plans;
 - Involve a much wider variety of stakeholders, especially from private businesses, NGOs, international organizations and local authorities;
 - Provide for decentralization of sustainability planning to the regional and local levels; Incorporate capacity-building elements.
- More attention should be given to learning lessons of promoting sustainable development in other countries in transition, especially related to participatory planning, decentralization, and pilot projects.

As a way to address some of these recommendations, especially regarding integration and public participation, the Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) of the NSSD was organized in early 2003 by the “Ecodom” NGO. The SEA was also guided by the NSSD assessment methodology as well as by a more traditional “objectives-led” SEA approach. The report (Ecodom NGO (2003)) noted rather poor formulation of the NSSDs’ goals, lack of integration of different sections, absence of prioritization and identification of trade-offs, as well as almost exclusive focus on governmental institutions as the “agents” of sustainable development.

The results of these assessments were discussed during several workshops with the experts drafting the NSSD-2020. Certain improvements have been made in the NSSD-2020 as compared to the NSSD-1997. In particular, more emphasis was given to discussing and reporting strategic vision and objectives, developing indicators and proposing monitoring arrangements to track progress in achieving those objectives. However, the structure of NSSD-2020 is little different from that of NSSD-1997, which clearly suggests that the approaches to sustainability planning are undergoing little change. The final review of the latest draft of NSSD-2020 against the NSDS assessment criteria can be summarized as follows:

- **Principle D:** Many sections of the NSSD-2020 are analytically and technically sound and comprehensively address the main elements of sustainable development.
- **Principles C, B, E:** It is often unclear *who* will implement the proposed policies and how these will be resourced. The drafters presume that the state, especially the central government, will be the key agent in formulating and implementing sustainability policies. The role of the business circles, academia and civil society is barely mentioned, thus, casting doubt on the breadth of support for the NSSD in society.
- **Principle A:** The most significant analytical drawback continues to be the lack of connection between different sections of the strategy. Direct conflicts and trade-offs between various proposed policies are rarely, if ever, identified. It is also difficult to establish priorities between different proposed measures often competing for the same

scarce human and financial resources. Furthermore, sector- or theme-specific sections are poorly integrated with strategic “visioning” parts of the strategy.

It seems that most of these deficiencies are the result of the ‘experts-driven’ process of preparing the NSSD, where individual experts from specialised research or planning institutions draft relevant parts of the strategy. Such a process has few in-built mechanisms to establish priorities, reach consensus on trade-offs, and identify the agents of sustainable development.

Sustainable Development Strategy of the Slovak Republic

The Sustainable Development Strategy (SDS) of the Slovak Republic was developed by a ‘bottom-up’ process. It involved more than 200 experts coordinated by a 29 member steering committee, and was based on wide-reaching public consultations. The elaboration of the Slovak SDS included publishing the *Vision of the Sustainable Development for the Slovak Republic* in March 1999. The 1810-page analytical part of the strategy was discussed at the 1st National Conference on Sustainable Development in December 1999 followed by the seminar *From Analyses to Syntheses* in April 2000. The outcomes of the expert group deliberations, and workshops provided inputs for the first draft of the strategy. In 2000, an SEA of this draft was conducted. The 2nd draft of the Strategy took into account the findings of the SEA and the outcomes of several public hearings and other comments by interested stakeholders.

Following consultations with various government agencies, the Strategy was reviewed and endorsed by the Government and the Parliament and became a legally binding document (Slovak Republic (2001). The Government Committee for Sustainable Development is currently in charge of the implementation and monitoring process (Filcak, 2003; also see <http://www.tur.sk/>).

The Slovak SDS was evaluated using the NSDDS assessment methodology, by reviewing the key SDS documents and interviewing four key actors involved in preparing the Strategy (Filcak, 2003). The results are summarised in Table 3.

Table 3: Assessment of the Slovak Sustainable Development Strategy principles

Principles	Criteria and Scores				Remarks
	1	2	3	4	
A. Integration and Sustainability	C	C	C	B	Sectoralized planning with little integration. The environment is still treated as a “sector” within the responsibility of the Ministry of the Environment. The SDS was mainly prepared by “environmentalists” and hence failed to significantly influence economic planning in the country
B. Participation and Consensus	B	C	C	C	Treated formally. Lack of publicity and awareness raising hinder effective public participation and stakeholder involvement. Difficulties with involving higher rank officials and experts.

Principles	Criteria and Scores				Remarks
	1	2	3	4	
C. Ownership and Commitment	B	C	C	B	There is significant government involvement and the SDS process has a high level of authority. However, the process is still primarily “owned” by the Ministry of Environment. Moreover, since the preparation of the SDS was supported by foreign aid, it was primarily accepted by technocratic elite and middle-level officials, while even the Minister of Environment felt not so committed to it.
D. Comprehensive and Coordinated Policy Process	C	C	C	B	Goals of the strategy are realistic yet hardly challenging, the document suffers from vague and general formulations. Linkage with other strategic processes is very weak. The document failed to provide “added value” to other policy processes.
E. Targeting, Resourcing and Monitoring	D	D	C	C	Budgetary provisions are lacking. Limited progress in monitoring and evaluation of the strategy.

Source: Filcak (2003) and personal communications with author.

A number of documents developed outside the scope of the SDS process but clearly relevant to sustainable development, were also reviewed. These included the *Vision of the Development of Slovakia until 2020* prepared for the Economic Committee of the Slovak Government, and the draft version of the *National Development Plan of the Slovak Republic* prepared in order to meet the requirements for acquisition of the European Union cohesion and structural funds. Both strategic documents were found to have been prepared with much less public participation than the SDS. The Vision used economic growth as the main guiding principle, did not refer to the SDS, and considered the environment in a separate chapter with no linkages to other chapters. The National Development Plan substantially referred to the SDS only in its environmental chapter, though sustainability and environmental concerns were considered throughout the document. This indicates that the principles of sustainable development in Slovakia are largely accepted by environmentalists and academics, who developed the NSDS, but are yet to made their way into the mainstream economic planning. It further appears that in Slovakia there is a stronger consensus, including broader public and governmental support and commitment, around general issues and principles of sustainable development than to its specific details (Filcak, 2003).

Other applications of the NSDS evaluation methodology

As mentioned above, the NSDS evaluation methodology may be useful even if applied to planning processes which are not formally called NSDSs. In 2002-2003, it was applied to ten cases of sustainability planning within the framework of Integrated Coastal Area Management (ICAM) in Croatia and Ukraine. Due to the different nature of the planning processes the results of this application cannot be directly compared to each other or to the results of evaluating NSDSs “proper” as in Slovakia and Belarus. However, they are still useful to provide an insight into common features of sustainable development planning in transition countries and the general applicability of the proposed NSDS evaluation methodology.

Skunca (2002) used the NSDS evaluation methodology to develop recommendations for improving planning for ICAM in Croatia. He applied the criteria to a range of physical

planning and island development documents and processes in Croatia at the national, regional and local levels.

Skunca concluded that though all types of objectives are referred to in planning documents, there is lack of integration, prioritization, identification of conflicts and possible trade-offs (principle A). Though participation is viewed as a necessary component of strategic planning, it is still largely considered as a burden and a liability rather than a resource, with many planning documents being not sufficiently transparent and accessible (principle B). Skunca has also noted that vertical integration between sustainability plans at different levels still present a significant challenge (principle D) and targets posed by strategies are often unrealistic (principle E).

Kutonova (2003) used the NSDS evaluation criteria to review planning documents and processes related to ICAM at the national, regional and local levels in Ukraine. The research aimed not only to identify the current strengths and weaknesses of ICAM and related sustainability planning in Ukraine, but also to explore the prospects for and the barriers to their future improvement in the specific context of Ukraine. In order to achieve the latter objective, Kutonova conducted a S.W.O.T. (strengths-weaknesses-opportunities-threats) analysis of ICAM practices in Ukraine against the NSDS evaluation criteria.

In particular, she noted insufficient attention to poverty, minority and gender issues (principle A), poor practice of public participation (principle B), and difficulty in achieving political commitment under the conditions of low priority of the environment and frequent government changes (principle C).

Based on this analysis, Kutonova outlined recommendations for strengthening ICAM in Ukraine which include, for example, creating inter-agency “coastal committees” which would oversee sustainability planning processes and promote “negotiations platforms” for achieving trade-offs between different sustainability objectives and fostering ownership and commitment and ensuring transparency of expenditures from state and donor environmental funds.

5. Conclusions

This paper has proposed a methodology for assessing the effectiveness of a country’s strategic planning processes for sustainable development. The approach that has been developed is intended to provide an analytical framework rather than a fixed blueprint or template, and is designed to be adaptable to different national needs, resource constraints and capacities. This process of adaptation and refinement will be facilitated by the lessons drawn from conducting case study applications of the methodology. Two such case studies and two other applications of the methodology have been reported in the paper.

The application of the NSDS assessment criteria to strategic planning processes in countries in transition demonstrate that the methodology has considerable potential for providing practical advice and recommendations on how to improve both the ongoing planning processes and the general systems for sustainability planning in these countries. In addition, the approach can contribute to raising awareness and building capacity in the areas of strategic planning and sustainable development.

In particular, the observed strengths of strategic planning in countries in transition included recognition of the social, environmental and economic pillars of sustainable development, high level of governmental ownership and strong analytical foundations for developing the strategies. The weaknesses included the lack of integration between different themes and sectors, as well as between the local, regional and national levels of planning, the absence of processes for finding trade-offs and establishing priorities, and ineffective public participation.

Challenges in strategic planning for sustainable development that have been revealed by the application of the methodology include potential tensions arising between different principles and criteria. For example, tensions may arise between the need for political commitment at the national level and the implementation of sustainable development principles as defined internationally, between government ownership and non-government stakeholder participation, and between the need for consensus and political support and wide participation. Reconciling such tensions is a key issue in making an effective NSDS a practical reality. Thus, the methodology should be able to assess the extent to which such tensions between different criteria are resolved by the planning process.

The assessment methodology is intended primarily for use by countries themselves, to assess the effectiveness of their national sustainable development strategies, in pursuit of their own sustainable development goals and the international commitments they have made. Its design encourages this, by focusing on identifying potential improvements to a country's strategic planning processes, and on assessing incremental change and progress towards implementing a fully effective national strategy for sustainable development. It is recognised, however, that for any public policy assessment process to be fully effective there needs to be transparency and accountability in governance practices (Kirkpatrick and Parker, 2004). Progress in improving the quality of NSDS processes is likely therefore, be conditioned by broader considerations of institutional capacity and governance reform.

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ENDNOTES

¹ The World Bank (2001) emphasises that the Comprehensive Development Framework (CDF) approach should be country-owned; promote strategic partnership and focus on results. Similarly, the World Bank –IMF (2001) stress that Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSP) should be country-owned, maintain a clear focus on poverty alleviation, establish clear priorities for public action with medium and long-term goals, select performance indicators, and make provision for monitoring progress.

² An internationally recognised benchmark for effective management is provided by the ISO 9001 standard for quality management systems (ISO 2000), which has been used in elaborating specific criteria for effective strategic planning processes. In particular, ISO 9001 emphasises allocation of responsibilities, targeting, resources and monitoring.

³ The principle of targeting, resourcing and monitoring is closely aligned to ISO 9001 Clause 5.4.1 which requires measurable objectives to be defined, and clause 5.4.2 which requires the means of achieving them to be established. Clause 8 requires that implementation of processes should be routinely audited, that achievement of objectives must be monitored, and that results must be recorded.

⁴ A set of more detailed supplementary guidance questions relating to each criterion has been provided in Kirkpatrick et al (2001).

⁵ Experience of quality assessment in environmental assessment strongly suggests that the use of a non-numerical ranking procedure is superior to the use of numbers, which encourage misleading and inappropriate averaging or summing of scores (Lee et al 1999).