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The complexities of European strategy design – The case of agriculture¹

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Abstract

In this paper we intend to analyse a number of agricultural documents to see if they mesh with the EU's sustainable development policy. The documents in question were prepared at different times and involved different organizations which reflected the interests of various social and economic stakeholders. After demonstrating the still existing conflict between the Lisbon and the Gothenburg Strategy, we will summarize the thematic strategies concerning EU agriculture. The relationship between agricultural policy and the two basic strategies may have implications for other sectoral strategies (e.g. energy, transport, tourism). If the EU is subsequently able to make headway regarding its strategies, it will also facilitate resolution of this problem at the national strategy level. We will review how the documents' content concurs or differs regarding the EU's sustainable development strategy. Finally we will analyse the factors causing the differences and the contradictions and suggest conditions leading to harmony.

Keywords

EU Sustainable Development Strategy, Lisbon Strategy, agriculture, thematic strategies

1. Introduction

During the last 6-8 years one has witnessed a strengthening in the EU's strategic approach.³ The increase in global competition and the pressure to clarify and enhance economic objectives have prompted a long-term evaluation of these same objectives. This has resulted in a number of initiatives, among them the year 2000 *Lisbon Strategy* (LiS), which was subsequently revised in 2005. Also because of ominous planetary ecological threats, it has become imperative to environmentally survey the economic and social processes over a long period of time. To counter these threats, the EU created the 2001 *Sustainable Development Strategy of the European Union* (SDS), later revised in 2005. Besides these two fundamental strategies, several other documents focusing on medium and long-term ideas were at the same time prepared. Here we emphasize the 6th Environmental Action Programme of the European Union and the so-called thematic-strategies, which are closely related to this programme. However these documents are not connected by some well-defined principle or clear logic but their relationship is "loose and many times rather vague" (Bulla – Pomázi, 2003:249).

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³ Several strategic documents have been prepared or initiated, e.g. European Biodiversity Strategy (COM, 1998); Forestry Strategy (CoEU, 1999); Common Implementation Strategy for the Water Framework Directive (CEC, 2001b); Strategy on health and safety at work (CEC, 2002b); European Security Strategy (CEC 2003a); EU Drugs Strategy (CoEU, 2004); Community Strategy Concerning Mercury (CEC, 2005i); An EU Strategy for Biofuels (CEC, 2006c). Some Green Papers and White Papers as a pre-strategic documents were prepared, e.g. Energy for the Future: Renewable Sources of Energy (CEC, 1997); Towards a European Strategy for Security of Energy Supply (CEC, 2000); European transport policy for 2010: time to decide (CEC, 2001e); European Space policy (CEC, 2003b); Towards a future Maritime Policy for the Union (CEC, 2006d).

Several EU documents emphasize that sustainable development is a concept encompassing the totality of social and economic life and necessarily impacts on all EU strategic ideas, policies, and activities, including agricultural and rural development policies. The principle of sustainable development also requires that social and economic objectives should coincide with environmental-ecological constraints.

However this requirement has many pitfalls. The basic problem lies in the ambiguity of the key concepts and definitions. While elaborating and revising its sustainable development strategy (including the Lisbon Strategy), the EU has avoided specifying what sustainable development is and has failed to define *strategy*. Both concepts were interpreted intuitively from a pragmatic point of view.

Over the last two or three decades it has become obvious that sustainable development is an extremely complex, and in many ways ambiguous concept. Implementing sustainable development is difficult, slow, and necessitates compromises. The concept itself has numerous, sometimes contradictory interpretations so it remains difficult to define the elements of the problem in an unambiguous way. Socio-political players do not always discern the theory's contradictions and uncertainties. In fact, they are often selective toward the theory's various representations, choosing those which suit their political and economic interests. In EU strategy documents (SDS, LiS, thematic strategies), the concept of sustainability is usually not defined or only briefly and superficially dealt with. Generally they quote the Brundtland Report definition and the vast majority of the strategies refer to "three pillars," meaning the need to balance economic, social and environmental objectives. Most of the time they neither address implementational difficulties nor potential priorities. They only emphasize that equal attention should be paid to economic, social, and environmental development. However "*the integration of the three relations into one policy is not equal with the three-pillar interpretation of sustainability*" (Kiss, 2005:7).

However, *the concept of sustainable development originated in global ecology*. Using this as a basic starting point, the problem can be simply defined without distorting its core meaning: mankind has interfered in the global bio-chemical cycles to such an extent that it threatens not only the natural balance developed over years but also the existence of life on earth. It is therefore imperative to change human consumption and production patterns. This means that environmental objectives have absolute priority, while economic and social considerations are subordinate to the Earth's capacity to absorb human activity. Economic and social considerations are also curtailed by the critical level of natural capital and other ecological constraints as defined by ecological economics. The strategies' aim is to transform society and its economy to make it possible to comply with ecological constraints. (Gáthy et al., 2006)

It will be shown that the EU SDS and the various thematic strategies only partially embrace this approach. Moreover, the LiS and European agricultural policy basically ignore this point of view, and this attitude impacts greatly on their approach. This partly explains why their objectives are too cautious and not far-reaching. Their objectives do not entail the restoration of global ecological balance, which has been spoilt by humanity, and they do not fall within natural, environmental constraints.

It is also surprising that none of the EU documents describes the criteria required for a strategy. In our opinion, the major – and mostly interrelated – characteristics of a strategy are the following: *a comprehensive and systematic view, fundamentally new objec-*

tives, a long-term approach, and interpretation as a learning process. (Gáthy et al., 2006, Gáthy – Kuti, 2006)

Many documents use the terms “policy” and “strategy” as synonyms, but often they fail to distinguish between a programme, a plan, and a strategy. A good example of this is that the EU integrated the seven so-called thematic strategies within the 6th Environmental Action Programme (EAP). This ambiguous approach may partly explain the confusion concerning the various time spans. The EU SDS does not specify the time span for which the strategy was prepared. Only at the end of the document is a period of 50 years mentioned (CoEU, 2006). The time spans examined for each specific topic hardly exceed the 6th. EAP’s duration, which is considered a medium-term plan. However, the thematic strategies linked to it often establish processes for decades to come. The LiS, which initially extended until 2010, sometimes includes decades long forecasts and examines the processes for this duration. Several ideas related to given fields, such as agriculture and rural development, combine with budgetary planning periods from 2007-2013. This amount of time is too short when one considers the previously mentioned period of 50 years for strategic planning.

There are thus two shortcomings. First of all, the concept of sustainable development is oversimplified and secondly the concept of “strategy” is vague. These two shortcomings are deleterious as they mean the EU SDS inadequately serves as a basis for the creation of other strategies.

2. Synergies between the EU SDS and the Lisbon Strategy – ambition or reality?

For our field of research investigating the relationship between the LiS and the SDS is crucial because this relationship could impact on sectoral policies’ content and approach and on related strategic documents. Regarding sectoral policies, the dilemma arises as to whether harmony can be created between the approaches for competitiveness and sustainability, and if yes how and to what extent. For this reason, it is useful to compare agricultural and rural development policy to the two basic strategies, as it may have implications for other sectoral strategies (e.g. energy, transport, tourism). We emphasize that the Lisbon Strategy includes inherent contradictions. Palánkai criticizes the Lisbon programme because it often sets mutually contradictory goals (Palánkai, 2006:1047). Also Halmai and Gács reveal the ambiguity regarding the relationship between the essential strategic elements. (Halmai, 2006:1057; Gács, 2005:212)

The ambiguity of the relationship between the LiS and the SDS and its consequences has already been emphasized. For example, according to the EEAC: “*The unclear relationship between Lisbon and the SD strategy produced contradictory and unproductive controversies that were more blockading than innovative*” (EEAC, 2006:3).

The contradictory relationship between LiS and SDS objectives also exists between the national economic and sustainability strategies, and it stems from the fundamental conflict between medium-term economic competitiveness and long-term ecological/environmental interests. One can only enhance competitiveness by keeping in mind market interests. This may also entail maintaining present consumption patterns, which are harmful to sustainability and often imply increasing material consumption, which runs contrary to sustainability. Sustainability requires ecological constraints, and radically changing consumption patterns by altering their structure and reducing material consumption.

EU documents do not emphasize this contradiction. Moreover, this fundamental contradiction is often sidestepped as if harmony between the two was taken for granted. For example, the important LiS renewal document states the following: “*The Commission proposes to refocus the Lisbon agenda on actions that promote growth and jobs in a manner that is fully consistent with the objective of sustainable development. The actions falling under this strategy should reinforce the Union potential to meet and further develop our environmental and social objectives*” (CEC, 2005h:12). The new year 2005 EU SDS also generally overlooks the conflict: “*the Lisbon Strategy makes an essential contribution to the overarching objective of sustainable development focusing primarily on actions and measures aimed at increasing competitiveness and economic growth and enhancing job creation*” (CoEU, 2006:6). But specifically how can this requirement be fulfilled and to what extent? Neither the social sciences representatives nor the EU documents have so far provided a thorough analysis of this problem.

An analysis of the EU documents illustrates that the relationship between the Lisbon Strategy and the EU SDS is not clearcut. Some interpretations suggest that the LiS and the SDS are on the same level. According to the revised SDS: “*EU SDS and the Lisbon Strategy for growth and jobs complement each other*” (CoEU, 2006:6). The medium-term Lisbon Strategy review and the 2005 EU SDS review refer to the LiS/SDS relationship as “*Being mutually reinforcing, they target complementary actions...*”. (CEC, 2005a:4; CEC, 2005h:4-5).

However, other sentences in these documents refer to the pre-eminence of the SDS: “*Lisbon remains **an essential component** of the overarching objective of sustainable development*” (CEC, 2005a:4; CEC, 2005h:4-5); the LiS “*is also to be seen **in the wider context of the sustainable development requirement***” (CEC, 2005d:2); “*the two strategies must be coherent under the overarching objective of long-term sustainable development. In this way ‘Lisbon’ can be **an important step** on the way to sustainable development, but it cannot be a substitute for a long-term sustainable strategy*” (CEC, 2005b:5).

Most of the quoted paragraphs are located in the initial introductory parts of the documents and the statements remain at a general level; they are not supported by arguments or concrete examples. An even bigger problem is that when reading the LiS no elements can be found referring to SDS objectives or even its spirit.

Again we have to emphasize that the EU documents do not even discuss the basic contradictions between the LiS and the SDS. They also sidestep existing tensions and, as far as their content and approach are concerned, this constitutes a shortcoming.

Both strategies can potentially fulfil the EEAC requirement “*In our view the annual Lisbon process should be sharpened in scope and direction so that it becomes the occasion for a true annual assessment and stock-taking of the progress of the Union towards the long-term goals defined by the sustainable development strategy. It is not sufficient for the Lisbon process to focus on the narrow traditional economic goals of growth and competitiveness. The sustainability challenge makes it imperative to focus on a broader and longer term concept of the well-being and social health of society and its relationship to the natural environment as the true goal. Conversely the SD strategy needs to take full account of the economic dimension and to help identify the technological and economic opportunities that will arise in the transition to a more sustainable society in the future.*” (EEAC, 2006:3)

In the following section we summarize the facts regarding the LiS/SDS relationship in the following manner. First of all, both strategies are viewed as intrinsic to the European Union since their initial purpose was to set the main tendencies for EU long-term development. Despite this, the two processes run parallel and their contradictions are obvious, although efforts have recently been made to treat them in a uniform way. For some interest groups strengthening economic growth, increasing competitiveness, and creating a knowledge-based society seem utmost and thus they receive greater emphasis in the EU documents. Those representing another school of thought have a different view. They rightly respond that **global ecological sustainability is more important, and that objectives and instruments must be subordinate to this when revising the Lisbon Strategy.**

Unfortunately, even the recent SDS Review process was carried out separately from the Lisbon Strategy. According to Wijkman, “the logic would be to merge these two strategies. Instead we are continuing to discuss issues related to economic growth, social development and environment protection on parallel tracks.” (Wijkman, 2006:6)

However, we contend that future revision processes must complement each other. The sustainability strategy was designed for a period of decades while the Lisbon Strategy originally was projected until 2010. Any future review should insist that the Lisbon Strategy adjust to the longer term requirements of the former strategy. Both strategies should serve as a basis for sectoral and other strategies that focus on smaller fields and problem areas.

3. The development of a strategic approach for agriculture

Since the end of the 1990s the strategic approach to agricultural and rural development problems has been reinforced within the EU. Previous agricultural strategies focused on price support schemes and paid little attention to structural transformation programmes. (Szabó, 2001)

The European Union lacks a definite (long-term, comprehensive, documented) agrarian strategy. Some researchers have recently emphasized the necessity of an agricultural strategy at both the national and the EU level. According to Judit Kiss, the absence of an EU agricultural strategy gives Hungary the opportunity to elaborate its national agricultural strategy according to its own interest and conditions (Kiss, 2006). Here we also share Gábor Szabó’s view which emphasizes the necessity of an EU agricultural strategy determining the right direction and approach for national agricultural strategies (Szabó, 2006).

Regulation of EU agriculture is determined by the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). However, agricultural policy objectives rarely appear “in an explicit way in the official documents” (Fertő, 1999:32). It is nevertheless important that agricultural objectives be clearly established, and. Fertő emphasis the following:

- They have to be meaningful to the agricultural public;
- They present agricultural problems which the government deems important to those involved in the debate,
- They serve as a guideline to officials participating in implementation;
- They ensure a starting point and a basis for comparison in evaluating agricultural policy. (Fertő, 1999)

Creating an agricultural and rural development strategy and formulating agricultural policy objectives are necessary due to the need for long-term, strategic thinking. The CAP laid down fundamentally important strategic objectives and these objectives have been achieved.

The CAP which, prior to the Treaty of Rome was a source of debate, is now a major common policy and is paramount in forming cooperation with the EU. Articles 39 of the Treaty of Rome summarized CAP objectives in five points (1st: to increase agricultural production; 2nd: to ensure a suitable standard of living for those involved in agriculture; 3rd: to stabilize agrarian markets; 4th: to guarantee safety of food provision; 5th: to ensure consumer supply at an acceptable price (Halmai, 2004:15)). However, among these agri-environmental directives did not appear. In 1962 the CAP was initially launched as an EU support policy, and was implemented through the price support scheme. Its primary objective was reducing food shortages and ensuring rural Europe's livelihood, and thanks to the CAP these problems were either diminished or solved. But with the CAP came a growing number of negative effects (e.g. an increasing produce surplus, market distortion due to price supports) (Buday-Sántha, 2001) Common agrarian market rules had negative effects both on the Community and the world market, and proved expensive to maintain.

The 1992 CAP reform was a watershed, and it was inspired by both internal and external factors. Among external factors was the GATT Uruguay round. Among internal factors were a distorted market balance, growing expenditures, and agriculture's impact on the environment. The reform's main merit was changing the system from a price-support policy to an income-support policy. The reform's environmental impact was ambivalent. Although it did not encourage intensive production, it also failed to reduce input consumption and thus did not bring about significant progress. Thanks to the reform dealing with the market surplus became cheaper, and thanks to decreasing prices EU produce became more competitive on the world market. From an environmental standpoint, the reform included some important steps. These were introducing regulations for agricultural environmental management support (2078/92/EEC) and for afforestation of agricultural land (2080/92/EEC). These were included in the so-called 'accompanying measures' (Katonáné, 2006).

After the 1992 reform, other reform measures were promptly called for in agricultural policy. Again these were inspired by market and financing problems. In July, 1997 the Commission published a document called AGENDA 2000 which – among other things – comprised detailed plans for a new agricultural policy. Due to external and internal factors radical CAP reform again became necessary, and this caused the Commission to act. The external factors were growing world market demand for food products, adjustment to international market liberalization tendencies, and the Eastern expansion of the EU. The internal factors were uncertainty regarding market balance, the Treaty of Amsterdam, meeting customers' expectations, decentralization, and a demand for enhanced perspicuity.

AGENDA 2000 had several aims. Among them were increasing market control, and accelerating competitiveness in international markets which meant bringing EU prices closer to world market prices. Other aims were strengthening the EU position in WTO negotiations which entailed cutting back export refunds and further transforming market subsidies to direct ones. AGENDA 2000 also sought to prepare the EU for new EU member states and to further integrate environmental aims into agricultural policy. Finally, AGENDA 2000 strived to create uniform rural developmental regulations, a second CAP pillar. AGENDA 2000 also

described the European Agricultural Model which aims to implement multifunctional agriculture. (Ángyán, 2001; Szabó, 2001)

The WTO's 2003 Cancun negotiations brought about agricultural reforms and these were sparked by overproduction that still existed despite preventive reforms and limits on long-term financing. The Cancun round's major objective was to make fundamental changes in agricultural financing. To do this it was essential to decouple subsidies and production and to simplify regulations. It was also important to establish cross-compliance between sustainable agricultural production and consumer demand. Another aspect of reform was reinforcing rural development and this entailed modulation, and expanding the range of rural development support. At last it was deemed necessary to promote agricultural production competitiveness and to meet WTO requirements while maintaining agricultural budgetary discipline. (Kiss, 2003)

As previously mentioned, the Union, in the narrow sense of the term, lacks an agricultural strategy. Ongoing CAP reforms were prompted by market and financing problems associated with external and internal pressures. However, environmental and sustainability issues were only complementary. One of the reasons for the lack of strategic planning may be extremely powerful lobby-interests, which hinder a major breakthrough in agricultural policy. The reformed CAP and AGENDA 2000 determine EU agricultural priorities, but they can only partially substitute for an overall agrarian strategy.

It became obvious that the EU desperately needed an agricultural and rural development strategy, and thus following the EU budgetary period, Council Regulation 1698/2005/EC created the Common Agricultural and Rural Development Fund. The primary aim of the decree is to harmonize rural development policy with the Gothenburg and Lisbon Strategy objectives even though the relationship between the objectives is often unclear. The Union thus intends to allow old and especially new member states the opportunity to establish agricultural and rural development policies. These policies need to conform to the new market-oriented agricultural policy, meet sustainability requirements, and encourage structural transformation. Furthermore, the EU sets strategic member state priorities so the member states can prepare their national agricultural and rural development strategies (EC, 2005) This regulation is an important step, as it attempts to integrate the objectives defined in the two main EU strategies into its functions. However, it does not establish which strategy is preeminent as the various objectives receive equal emphasis.

4. Thematic strategies regarding agriculture

The EU level lacks a document that could be considered an agricultural strategy. However, other than the agricultural policy outlined by decrees and programmes, there is a new type of instrument that supports agriculture sustainability. In the past few years the EU reinforced its sustainability strategic approach by preparing seven so-called thematic strategies related to the 6th EAP. Three of the strategies are closely related to agriculture, while the other four contain a few references to agricultural and rural development processes.

Table 1 summarizes the most important data of the analysed documents, and helps to compare them. Next we examine to what extent these strategies' objectives are in harmony with the SDS of the EU.

Table 1

Some characteristics of the documents and strategies in the EU

Title of documents	Publication date	Number of pages	Time span (year)	Number of objectives/ measures
Thematic Strategy on the sustainable use of natural resources	21.12.2005.	23	25 (2006-2030)	4 <i>measures</i>
Thematic Strategy on air pollution	21.09.2005	13	15 (2006-2020)	6 <i>measures</i>
A Thematic Strategy on the prevention and recycling of waste	21.12.2005	32	10 (2005-2015)	3 <i>measures</i>
A Thematic Strategy on the Sustainable Use of Pesticides	12.07.2006	13	-	5 <i>objectives</i>
Towards a Thematic Strategy for Soil Protection	16.04.2002	35	non final strategy	-
Thematic Strategy on the Urban Environment	11.01.2006	12	5 (2006-2010)	6 <i>measures</i>
Thematic Strategy on the Protection and Conservation of the Marine Environment	24.10.2005	9	15 (2006-2021)	overall objective
Environment 2010: Our Future, Our Choice – 6 th Environmental Action Programme	22.07.2002.	15	10 (2001-2010)	4 <i>objectives</i>
A Sustainable Europe for a Better World: A European Union Strategy for Sustainable Development	06.2001.	17	-	4 <i>objectives</i>
Review of the EU Sustainable Development Strategy – Renewed Strategy	09.06.2006	29	50 (2006-2055)	4 <i>objectives</i>
Common Actions for Growth and Employment: The Community Lisbon Programme	20.07.2005	10	6 (2005-2010)	2 <i>objectives</i>
The new Lisbon Strategy – An estimation of the economic impact of reaching five Lisbon Targets	01.2006	122	5 (2006-2010)	5 <i>objectives</i>

Source: Facts collected by the authors

First of all, it is outright odd that the thematic strategies are not directly connected to the SDS of the Union, but rather subordinated to the 6th Environmental Action Programme. To a large degree this fact clearly illustrates the immaturity of the EU strategic documents system. The thematic strategies focus on a specific aspect of a topic and rightly ignore irrelevant information. However, it remains necessary to create common ground, a “0 strategy” of which the objectives could serve as a basis for the thematic objectives so that they can be coherently adapted to. If the EU SDS does not fill this role, and responsibility is subsequently given to a single-minded environmental programme such as the 6th EAP, there is a danger that the thematic strategies will either fail to promote sustainability or do so inadequately. One already observes this dilemma in the chosen time span. In some cases the thematic strategies objectives’ time span exceeds those of the 6th EAP (Table 1). In other words, the

nature of the problem necessitates a long-term approach, which is an important characteristic of strategic thinking.

In the following section agricultural thematic strategies are analysed according to the critical aspects mentioned above, meaning their time span and objectives.

4.1. The time span

An important criterion of the strategic character is the long-term approach. This is especially true when coming up with solutions to current and potential ecological problems based on principles of sustainability. The time it takes ecological processes to change and the need to protect future generations necessitates a decades-long vision. First, by utilizing the two fundamental strategies, we illustrate factors regarding the time span. It is noteworthy that no concrete time span was indicated in the 2001 strategy of the Union. The reviewed document has this to say:

“The Commission should elaborate a concrete and realistic vision of the EU on its way to sustainable development over the next 50 years. Such a vision should be prepared in a participatory manner and should identify the main long-term objectives and describe intermediate stages and steps towards their achievement.” (CEC, 2005a:25)

During revision of the Lisbon strategy there was also a shift towards a long-term approach. At the very beginning of the document they emphasize the long-term negative social and economic impact of the social problems: *“...Europe must address the challenge of ageing populations which in the long-run will result in a considerable shrinking of the working-age population while increasing the share of retired persons.”* (CEC, 2005d:2). Thus the document raises the need for a long-term approach toward economic growth and employment. The document also discusses how social problems can create social and economic tensions. Some of these social problems are an ageing population and a decrease in the working-age population, which will accentuate over the next decades.

Appropriately, the problem of choosing the time span also arises for thematic strategies. This issue is highly important because the time span could indicate how long the strategy-makers think they are able to influence the processes in a given area. The majority of strategies that specify their time span – differing between 5 and 25 years – usually fail to explain why they chose the given time period. In the thematic strategies’ objectives and measures there is little mention of other EU programmes’ objectives and target dates (e.g. 6th EAP, Lisbon Strategy).

It is a complex topic and the Thematic Strategy for the use of natural resources states the following: *“To address the environmental concerns relative to the use of natural resources (e.g. raw materials and land), the strategy will put in place actions that will track and monitor the use of natural resources through their whole life-cycle – “from cradle to grave” – and develop the actions necessary to reduce their environmental impacts. The focus of the strategy is to identify – during the 25 year timeframe – the most serious environmental impacts related to the use of natural resources and promote solutions and actions to overcome them by increasing knowledge of them and providing easy access to it.”* (CEC, 2005f:16).

Moreover, in the thematic strategies there is no other reference explaining the selection of time spans. However, explaining the selected time span could also provide important and useful information about the strategic objective. Perhaps the organizing principle could

be the time needed for ecological processes, the time horizon for technological change, or the period necessary for changing social processes and customs.

Overall, in the thematic strategies there is no clear link between time span and sustainability. However, one does detect movement toward a long-term approach. (see: Thematic Strategy on sustainable use of natural resources).

4.2. Objectives

The thematic strategies usually focus on one given field such as natural resources, soil, and use of pesticides. They also establish general objectives regarding these areas. They link measures and objectives, of which the relationship with the EU SDS can also be analysed. The SDS determines four main objectives which are environmental protection, social equity and cohesion, economic prosperity, and meeting our international responsibility. There are also seven main challenges. Among them are climate change and clean energy, sustainable transport, and sustainable consumption and production. The other challenges are conservation and management of natural resources, public health, social inclusion, demography and migration, and finally Global poverty and sustainable challenge.

Most of the thematic strategies strive, at least superficially, to mesh with SDS objectives, but a firm relationship is still difficult to discern. One of the reasons for this could be the disjointed relationship among the documents, as they are originally connected to the SDS via the EAP. However, they should serve as its environmental dimensions.

In the following section those thematic strategies' objectives which are closely connected to agriculture are analysed, with special emphasis on their relationship with SDS objectives. Investigating the thematic strategies related to agriculture indicates that, although they are not clearly linked to the SDS, they nevertheless endeavour to harmonize their objectives with the sustainability strategy. This statement is further supported through analysis of three thematic strategies.

The **Thematic Strategy on the sustainable use of natural resources** meshes with some SDS general and concrete objectives. Examples of this are the conservation and management of natural resources, plus Sustainable Consumption and Production. It highlights that *“The sustainable use of resources, involving sustainable production and consumption is hence a key ingredient of long-term prosperity, both within the EU and globally”* (CEC, 2005f:4). The importance of preparing a thematic strategy is justified by the 6th Environmental Action Programme and the objectives of the Lisbon Strategy: *“... the EU Strategy for Growth and Jobs endorsed by the Spring Summit of 2005 gives high priority to more sustainable use of natural resources. It also calls for the EU to take the lead towards more sustainable consumption and production in the global economy. Europe therefore needs a long-term strategy that integrates the environmental impacts of using natural resources, including their external dimension in policymaking. This Thematic Strategy on the sustainable use of natural resources is a response to that challenge.”* (CEC, 2005f:4). It should be said that the thematic strategy consistently and repeatedly emphasizes a long-term approach, one of the main requirements of sustainability.

In the introduction only a brief sentence refers to the fact that a thematic strategy *“... has to be seen in context with the recently reviewed Sustainable Development Strategy (SDS) and contributes to it”* (CEC, 2005f:4), which could suggest that there is no close connection

between the two strategies. However, a detailed analysis proves that the objectives of the document are in perfect harmony with the objectives of the reviewed SDS.

One of the most important SDS objectives is the preservation of natural resources: *“Safeguard the earth’s capacity to support life in all its diversity, respect the limits of the planet’s natural resources and ensure a high level of protection and improvement of the quality of the environment.”* (CoEU, 2006:3). And it expresses its general objective as follows: *“To improve management and avoid overexploitation of natural resources, recognising the value of ecosystem services”* (CoEU, 2006:13).

The thematic strategy is even more specific: *“The strategic approach to achieving more sustainable use of natural resources should lead over time to improved resource efficiency, together with a reduction in the negative environmental impact of resource use, so that overall improvements in the environment go hand in hand with growth. The overall objective is therefore to reduce the negative environmental impacts generated by the use of natural resources in a growing economy...”* (CEC, 2005f:5).

The two strategies share responsibilities in a viable and efficient manner. The EU SDS sets the general and operative objectives. These objectives include improving resource efficiency, the promotion of eco-efficient innovations, and improving management. They also include avoiding overexploitation of renewable natural resources, and halting the loss of biodiversity. They also focus on elaboration of new plans and programmes, and they ensure that various agreements are fulfilled. The thematic strategy is more concrete. It is more futuristic and, besides describing the objectives, it determines how they can be achieved. To achieve the objectives, the strategy includes measures to: *“improve our understanding and knowledge of European resource use, its negative environmental impact and significance in the EU and globally; develop tools to monitor and report progress in the EU, Member States and economic sectors; foster the application of strategic approaches and processes both in economic sectors and in the Member States and encourage them to develop related plans and programmes; raise awareness among stakeholders and citizens of the significant negative environmental impact of resource use.”* (CEC, 2005f:5-6).

CAP reform has continually emphasized the need to use the natural resources in a more sustainable manner. From this the thematic strategy draws the following conclusion: *“Recent reforms in certain policy areas, particularly the fisheries and farming sectors, have gone a long way towards taking the environmental impacts of resource use into consideration. Indeed, the Sustainable Development Strategy was adopted in response to this need for consistent, joined-up policy making across economic, social and environment fields.”* (CEC, 2005f:7).

Overall, the Thematic Strategy for the sustainable use of natural resources corresponds with the EU SDS as it further elaborates its objectives and specifies concrete steps to achieve the goals. The relationship is bilateral as the previously illustrated strategic objectives strategies complement each other.

However, the **Thematic Strategy for the Sustainable Use of Pesticides** fails to harmonize with the EU SDS. Although the document doesn’t refer to the sustainability strategy, the objectives laid out in the thematic strategy correspond with the SDS’s main environmental protection objective. This is supported by the thematic strategy’s objectives: *“Increasing awareness of consumers and society at large about the possible risks from the use of*

pesticides has recently triggered actions by certain retailers and governments, as well as the Community, to support forms of agriculture and pest management methods that restrict or better target the use of plant protection products, such as organic farming, integrated pest management, or the use of less susceptible varieties. It is important to encourage a rational and precise pesticide use, as well as appropriate crop and soil management practices. Furthermore, it will be important to improve the behaviour of pesticide users (in particular professional users), who are responsible for a number of misuses including overuses, by ensuring better training and education.” (CEC, 2006b:6).

In several ways the thematic strategy’s objectives mesh with the EU SDS general environmental objectives. They strive to minimize pesticide hazards and risks to health and environment and to minimize pesticide use and to encourage pesticide-free cultivation. It is essential to point out that only on the list of relative policies is the relationship with the CAP mentioned (see: CEC, 2006b:7).

The final version of the **Thematic Strategy for soil protection** is still being elaborated. Based on the draft version we can only draw conditional conclusions regarding the future document. The first EU SDS stressed the significance of soil protection: *“The 6th Environmental Action Programme published by the Commission in 2001 established the objective to protect soils against erosion and pollution while the Sustainable Development Strategy, also published in 2001, noted that soil loss and declining fertility are eroding the viability of agricultural land.”* (CEC, 2002a:4; CEC, 2001a:4).

The document notes that *“In May 2001, the Commission indicated soil loss and declining fertility as a main threat to sustainable development as it erodes the viability of agricultural land.”* (CEC, 2002a:6). On the basis of the above mentioned it can be expected that the thematic strategy under development should be in harmony with the EU SDS.

The document still does not contain objectives, but we have to emphasize that it often refers to CAP objectives (see: CEC, 2002a:4; 8; 23).

5. Conclusions and lessons for Hungary

- 1 First of all, we have to emphasize that the European Union is a world leader regarding environmental sustainability issues. No other area pays such strict attention to sustainability principles. A recent example of this is the Union’s initiative to create a common energy policy (see: “energy package”), the results of which have prompted our paper to focus on the complexities of European strategy design.
- 2 Over the last couple of years the system regarding EU strategies have evolved. There are now endeavours for improving their relationship, but there is not sufficient harmony among them. This inconsistency also exists in Hungary. The national sustainable development strategy is still in an unofficial, draft version. While the second National Development Plan and the National Agricultural and Rural Development Strategy 2007-2013 are still a work in progress. These documents meet EU requirements, and although they are better harmonized than previous materials, there is still room for improvement.
- 3 The sustainability strategy and the economic strategy (the Lisbon processes) still reveal contradictions, which significantly decrease the chances for success for both sets of objectives.

In Hungary, the conflict is even more obvious as the political elite prefers increasing competitiveness and job creation to sustainable development.

- 4 Economy and environment represent a basic contradiction and within this contradiction Global ecological sustainability is fundamental. The ongoing revision of the Lisbon Strategy's objectives and instruments must give prevalence to this phenomenon. In Hungary, it will be very difficult to fulfil this requirement as sustainability takes second place, and sustainability is often misinterpreted.
- 5 What is necessary is a long-term, comprehensive agricultural and rural development strategy, and the CAP should support this strategy. Such a strategy should be based on the two basic strategies and serve as a foundation for the thematic strategies relating to agriculture. In Hungary, based on EU Regulation 1698/2005/E, a comprehensive agricultural and rural development strategy is being prepared. However, the time span is set according to the EU budgetary period, and it is doubtful whether it is possible to enact a viable approach that will satisfy SDS objectives.
- 6 Rather than on the 6th Environmental Action Programme, the thematic strategies should be directly based on the basic and agricultural strategies. In Hungary, as in other EU countries, this is no formal institutional system corresponding to the EU thematic strategies. There are only partial strategies and they are more or less independent from one other and these strategies need to be more cohesive.
- 7 In Hungary and the EU it is important to create harmony in terms of basic principles, time spans, objectives and instruments.

In Hungary and other EU member states, it is vital that the various macro-level strategies complement each other. In every country there are major shortcomings in this field. If the EU is able to make headway in this area, it will facilitate solving this problem at the national strategy level. And if these strategies succeed at a national level, this could pave the way for a broad cohesive EU strategy.

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