

Reviewing Sustainable Development: The National Audit Office's Approach in The United Kingdom

Marcus Popplewell

National Audit Office – NAO
United Kingdom

BACKGROUND

This article is based around a summary of a paper, prepared by Joe Cavanagh and Tom Wallace of the United Kingdom National Audit Office, for the meeting of the Steering Committee of the INTOSAI Working Group on Environmental Audit in Costa Rica in January 2003 and subsequent developments.¹ It sets out:

- (a) The broad aims of the United Kingdom's Sustainable Development Strategy
- (b) Who is responsible for promoting sustainable development in the United Kingdom
- (c) How sustainable development is being integrated into policy making
- (d) How the UK is seeking to implement the goals of the World Summit on Sustainable Development
- (e) What the Sustainable Development Strategy has achieved to date
- (f) The National Audit Office's plans to review progress in achieving sustainable development

(A) THE BROAD AIMS OF THE UNITED KINGDOM'S SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

In May 1999 the United Kingdom Government published its first Sustainable Development Strategy.² The Strategy set out how sustainable development was to be achieved, including the arrangements within central government bodies. The Strategy recognised that for sustainable development to be successful, it must be integrated into central and local policy making and the behaviour of individuals and private companies. The main aims of the Strategy are:

- social progress which recognises the needs of everyone;
- effective protection of the environment;
- prudent use of natural resources;
- high and stable levels of economic growth and employment.

-
1. Implementation of sustainable development in the UK, United Kingdom National Audit Office, July 2003
 2. A better quality of life: a strategy for sustainable development for the United Kingdom, Cm 4345, The Stationery Office, London, ISBN 0-10-143452-9, http://www.sustainable-development.gov.uk/uk_strategy/content.htm

(B) RESPONSIBILITIES FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has the key role in promoting sustainable development across government and society, and internationally by:

- ensuring that policies across Government address sustainable development issues;
- acting as an advocate for sustainable development;
- monitoring and reporting on progress;
- leading on sustainable development policy internationally.

One of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs' 10 high level targets is to "Promote sustainable development across Government and the country as a whole as measured by achieving positive trends in the Government's headline indicators of sustainable development."

Sustainable development it is not a policy that can be delivered by one department alone. In addition, therefore, there is:

- A committee of Government ministers to co-ordinate sustainable development policy - the committee produces a report each year summarising progress made in greening government procurement and operations.
- A Parliamentary Committee devoted to environmental audit - the Environmental Audit Committee was set up in 1997. It is responsible for monitoring the progress of Government bodies in meeting environmental protection and sustainable development targets. The National Audit Office has recently agreed to support the Committee in this work.
- A Sustainable Development Commission - the Commission is a Government sponsored body whose objectives are to: review progress in achieving sustainable development; recommend action to reverse unsustainable trends; raise awareness of sustainable development issues; and stimulate good practice.³

• Regional and local sustainable development strategies - all regions and local communities have their own sustainable development strategies. A set of 29 local sustainable development indicators are used to monitor the performance of local authorities.

(C) INTEGRATING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT INTO POLICY MAKING

The Government's Sustainable Development Strategy, launched in 1999, identified 10 guiding principles and approaches that underpin the achievement of sustainable development:

1. Putting people at the centre.
2. Taking a long term perspective.
3. Taking account of costs and benefits.
4. Creating an open and supportive economic system.
5. Combating poverty and social exclusion.
6. Respecting environmental limits.
7. The precautionary principle.
8. Using scientific knowledge.
9. Transparency, information, participation and access to justice.
10. Making the polluter pay.

The Government has developed a Policy Makers Checklist to provide officials with helpful information and contact points on statutory requirements (e.g. Human Rights Act), good practice (e.g. consultation) and the full range of impact assessment and appraisal tools (e.g. Environmental Impact Assessments, Regulatory Impact assessment).

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has now developed an Integrated Policy Appraisal tool to improve the integration of environmental and other sustainable development objectives.⁴ The tool provides a framework for a standard assessment of policy proposals against a series of environmental, social and economic impacts. The Government also uses fiscal measures to encourage more sustainable development, such as a low fuel duty for "ultra-low sulphur diesel" and an above inflation increase in petrol duty each year.

3. <http://www.sd-comission.gov.uk/>

4. www.defra.gov.uk/ebus/enabling/procurement/susdev-ipas.pdf

(D) ADAPTING THE UNITED KINGDOM'S SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY TO REFLECT THE WORLD SUMMIT

Rather than establishing a separate process for following up the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development, the United Kingdom Government intends to build on existing sustainable development processes. In 2003, the Government set out its 17 main commitments from the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development, along with related objectives, actions and follow-up process.⁵ The areas where commitments have been made are: sustainable consumption and production patterns; renewable energy and energy efficiency; biodiversity; fisheries; oceans; integration of environmental issues into country-led poverty reduction processes; water and sanitation; access to energy; finance; corporate social responsibility; trade; agriculture; international sustainable development governance; co-ordinated World Summit on Sustainable Development/Monterrey follow-up; partnerships; human rights; chemicals.

In 2003, the United Nations Environment and Development United Kingdom Committee carried out a consultation exercise to identify priorities for the United Kingdom arising from the Summit. Predictably this found that different stakeholder groups have very different agendas. However, the main themes identified by the various groups included:

- Energy;
- Corporate accountability and responsibility;
- Sustainable production and consumption;
- Mainstreaming sustainable development and joined-up thinking;
- Biodiversity.

A key element of the World Summit on Sustainable Development is assistance for developing nations. The Government plans to increase its overseas development assistance from £3.0 billion to £4.5 billion by 2005-06. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is also developing a strategy for sustainable consumption and production.

(E) THE UNITED KINGDOM'S PROGRESS TO DATE

Each year since 2000, the United Kingdom Government has produced a report recording national progress using 19 "Headline" indicators.⁶ The indicators cover three broad themes: economic, social and environment. These indicators are part of a larger set against which progress can be measured. Since the Sustainable Development Strategy was launched in 1999, ten headline indicators show improvements towards meeting targets. Four indicators have deteriorated significantly: robbery, air quality, road traffic volumes and household waste (see Figure 1 below).

The Sustainable Development Commission recently produced its own assessment of the Government's reported progress on sustainable development since 1999.⁷ The Commission noted that the Government's strategy *A Better Quality of Life*, launched in 1999, was intended to provide a framework for guiding and monitoring progress. The Commission concluded that the Strategy and the subsequent assessment of progress have been a valuable means of keeping sustainability on the agenda, and showing where progress is being made and where it is lagging. The Commission said:

"The UK is one of very few governments anywhere in the world that have established a process of this kind. During the period of the strategy, there has been some significant progress on several aspects of sustainability in the UK, as *Achieving a Better Quality of Life (ABQL 2003)* demonstrates. Sustainable development is gradually becoming more widely recognised as a key policy goal. There are numerous aspects of government policy and action by other bodies that have been modified to some extent by the requirements of sustainability. A number of the key indicators of sustainability are moving in the right direction. There is a somewhat more widespread understanding of the need for a more sustainable society amongst the public and in schools and colleges." (paragraph 5 of the Commission's assessment)

5. <http://www.sustainable-development.gov.uk/eac-wssd/commitments.htm>

6. Review of progress towards sustainable development: Government annual report 2003, <http://www.sustainable-development.gov.uk/ar2003/index.htm>

7. Shows promise. But must try harder, An assessment by the Sustainable Development Commission of the Government's reported progress on sustainable development over the past five years, April 2004, <http://www.sd-commission.gov.uk/pubs/assessment/index.htm>

“We see a set of indicators several of which are either inappropriate for measuring true sustainability, or for which the targets and timetables that have been established are insufficiently demanding to represent significant progress towards sustainability.”

However, the Commission also said:

“Our own assessment is that neither the UK Government, nor the devolved administrations nor our society as a whole have as yet fully assimilated how far the goals of sustainable development represent a radical critique of present policies and achievements, how far adrift we are from meeting our global and national responsibilities and creating a fully sustainable society, and how very much more needs to be done in engaging society as a whole in facing up to the challenges of sustainability. The commitment given so far is too generalised and too patchy to deliver the changes needed. We all need to try a great deal harder.” (paragraph 8)

“The Government sees a set of indicators most of which are showing reasonable progress towards sustainability. We see a set of indicators several of which are either inappropriate for measuring true sustainability, or for which the targets and timetables that have been established are insufficiently demanding to represent significant progress towards sustainability.” (paragraph 10)

The Government itself produces a report each year on the sustainability of its operations – the Sustainable Development in Government Report 2003.⁸ The Report gives performance data in nine areas (overarching commitments, travel, water, waste, energy, procurement, estates management, biodiversity and social impacts).

8. Sustainable Development in Government: Second Annual Report 2003, <http://www.sustainable-development.gov.uk/sdig/reports/ar2003/index.htm>

Indicadores		Mudanças desde 1990	Mudanças desde a estratégia
ECONOMIC			
Economic output		✓	✓
Investment		↔	↔
Employment		↔	✓
SOCIAL			
Poverty & social exclusion		↔	✓
Education		✓	✓
Health		↔	↔
Housing conditions		✓	✓
Crime	- robbery	✗	✗
	- theft of, or from vehicles and domestic burglary	✓	✓
ENVIRONMENT			
Climate change		✓	✓
Air quality		✓	✗
Road Traffic	- total road traffic volumes	✗	✗
	- road traffic intensity (per GDP)	✓	✓
River water quality		✓	✓
Wildlife	- farmland birds	✗	↔
	- woodland birds	✗	↔
Land use		✓	✓
Resíduos	- household waste	✗	✗
	- all arisings and management	...	↔

- ✓ Significant change, in direction of meeting objectives
- ↔ No significant change
- ✗ Significant change, in direction away from meeting objectives
- ... Insufficient or no comparable data

(F) THE NATIONAL AUDIT OFFICE'S PLANS TO REVIEW PROGRESS IN ACHIEVING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

In developing our review of the progress in achieving the objectives of the World Summit on Sustainable Development, we intend to start by identifying each department's strategy for delivering the various Government commitments in the areas listed in section (d) above. This may not be straightforward, but once done we should then be able to identify and review the delivery mechanisms, the adequacy of objectives and targets, and consider how we review progress against targets.

In terms of future plans, we have identified a number of areas of potential interest for the United Kingdom Parliament and taxpayer. We think these areas might include: sustainable consumption and production – “decoupling” economic growth from environmental degradation; energy – increasing the use of renewable energy sources and access to affordable energy; oceans – building sustainable fisheries; biodiversity – significantly reducing the current rate of loss of biodiversity; chemicals – international processes for managing potentially hazardous chemicals; or corporate accountability – actively promoting corporate accountability and encouraging improvements in social and environmental performance in industry.

In a separate but related development, we produced a briefing in April 2004 on sustainable development in government operations, in response to a request from the Parliamentary Environmental Audit Committee. The briefing reviewed the Sustainable Development in Government Report 2003. In carrying out the work, we developed a framework of key questions which drew on our previous experience and data validation guidelines from recognised sources. The questions were designed to investigate four broad issues:

- **Targets:** The quality (e.g. appropriateness, clarity and coverage) of the sustainable development targets that departments are being asked to achieve;
- **Data:** The completeness and quality of the data included in the Report (including comprehensiveness, internal consistency and whether or not it had been validated);
- **Performance:** Departments' achievements, according to the data available;
- **Narrative:** The quality of the narrative which accompanies each section of the report and interprets the data (e.g. whether it draws accurate conclusions from the data and provides helpful illustrative examples).

Our analysis was based primarily on review of the published data and narrative, combined with detailed discussion with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs team and other contacts where necessary. We did not directly research departments' inputs to the Sustainable Development in Government Report 2003. This primary research will be an important element of further work we will carry out on specific areas of sustainable development in government. ■

