



# Coordination, Challenges, and Innovations in 19 National Sustainable Development Strategies<sup>☆</sup>

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**Summary.** — In this article, we study 19 developing and developed countries to identify key challenges, approaches, and innovations in strategic and coordinated action for sustainable development at the national level. We are interested in the institutional fabric of implementing sustainable development. What are governments actually doing to organize the processes required for this? What are the institutional innovations in this regard and what kind of typologies can be identified?

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Despite some true progress made, our findings indicate that countries are still at the early stages of learning toward effective action for sustainable development. This applies both to developing and developed countries. Key unsolved challenges include (a) coordination with the national budget, (b) coordination with sub-national level sustainable development strategies, and (c) coordination with other national-level strategy processes.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

For over a decade now, the United Nations has been asking countries to pursue strategic and coordinated action for sustainable development through the creation of national sustainable development strategies (NSDS, see for an overview UN DSD, 2004). Whereas the concept of sustainable development has established itself successfully as a central guiding principle for many different political institutions at all levels of public and corporate decision making, its translation into concrete action proves to be a much more difficult challenge (Lafferty, 2004; Lafferty & Meadowcraft, 2000; OECD, 2002). Five years after the Earth Summit in 1992, a Special Session of the United Nations came to a disappointing progress review: single success stories were outweighed by the overall failure of countries to give appropriate political weight to meaningful implementation (Brown, 1997).

This review led governments to agree on the target of having a NSDS introduced by 2002, the year of the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg. Being pushed by the OECD (OECD-DAC, 2001) and the United Nations (UN International Forum on National Strategies for Sustainable Development, 2001), nearly all countries intensified efforts and subsequently adopted new or revised NSDS shortly before or after the WSSD (Jørgens, 2004).

A meaningful translation of the rather broad paradigm of sustainable development into concrete action encounters many problems. International agencies (OECD, 2002; OECD-DAC, 2001; UN DESA, 2002) as well as academic scholars (Dalal-Clayton & Bass, 2002; Jänicke & Jørgens, 2000; Martinuzzi & Steurer, 2003) have developed a number of criteria of good practice for NSDS. They have been broadly reflected and repeatedly discussed in recent years. The list of criteria comprises the development of long-term visions and their linkage to short-term action, institutions for horizontal

and vertical coordination, broad participation by societal stakeholders, and a constant monitoring of action.

It is, however, also a well-known fact that these approaches clash with the core functioning principles of the modern government, like the division of sectoral responsibilities, path-dependencies of policy development, or the mode of negative coordination. Governmental discretion for long-term action is further constrained by the shortness of election and budget cycles.

In response to these clashes, strategies for sustainable development were often introduced as a tool to initiate change by learning and continuous adaptation rather than by challenging the existing institutions and power structures. Such an approach has been characterized as a step-by-step procedure: “developing an underlying vision through consensual, effective, and iterative process; and going on to set objectives, identify the means of achieving them, and then monitor the achievement as a guide to the next round of this learning process.” (Dalal-Clayton & Bass, 2002).

After more than a decade of strategic and coordinated action for sustainable development in many countries it is time to draw a balance: what are the achievements so far? How has the institutional landscape developed, both in developing and developed countries? How far are countries re-organizing their institutional structures to comply with the needs of integrated and long-term decision making, learning, and adaptation? Do remarkable differences between developing and developed countries continue to exist or do trends converge?

During the last few years, a number of studies have assessed progress at the national level. Recently, attention has been shifted from content toward procedural and institutional aspects (Dalal-Clayton & Bass, 2002; Steurer & Martinuzzi, 2005). This article contributes to this growing body of knowledge by comparing challenges, approaches, and innovations in strategic and coordinated action in 19 developing and devel-

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