

socialplatform

“Sustainable development:
The EU needs a strategy not a catalogue of existing policies!”

RESOLUTION FOR THE JUNE EUROPEAN COUNCIL 2006¹

The Social Platform has been monitoring the development of the EU sustainable development strategy (EU SDS) since 2001. After adopting a common position in 2001 in response to the European Commission's proposal for the EU SDS, Social NGOs concentrated their efforts in campaigning for a balanced implementation of the Lisbon strategy and a strong social pillar. Since 2002, Social NGOs have formed an alliance with the European Environment Bureau (EEB) and the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) to promote an integrated and balanced approach between the environment, social and economic objectives of the EU. This alliance has resulted in the adoption of common statements (usually on the occasion of the Spring Summit), the organisation of major European conferences¹ as well as a joint campaign on 'EU investment in sustainable housing and transport innovations: driving the economy, improving the environment and creating social cohesion'.

In Lisbon in 2000 and in Gothenburg in 2001 the European Council took the lead in developing an ambitious vision for the Europe of tomorrow. By defining mutually reinforcing objectives in the field of economic, social and environment policies, political leaders gave Europe a positive long-term project, reflecting the aspirations of its people, and in-line with Rio and Johannesburg's commitments to sustainable development.

6 years later, though all EU institutions regularly refer to sustainable development, **the Social Platform does not believe that a sustainable strategy is yet in place at the EU level.** For Social NGOs the reasons why the EU SDS never took off include the **lack of political commitment, the separation from the Lisbon strategy, the absence of clear objectives and measurable targets, the lack of visibility of the strategy** and the **weakness of the implementation/monitoring process.**

¹ The most recent conference was on the 6th of March 2006 and was on "Does Lisbon produce sustainable development?"

Social NGOs therefore welcome the review of the sustainable development strategy but believe that as with the Lisbon strategy, the EU institutions have failed to provide a transparent and inclusive review process. The Social Platform also very much regrets **the fact that the review of the SDS was not carried out at the same time as the review of the Lisbon strategy**². Indeed **by prioritising “growth and jobs” and introducing a distinction between short term (economic growth and employment) and long term objectives (social and environment) the proposal for the revision of the Lisbon strategy clearly contradicted the philosophy of sustainable development.**

Fortunately both the Spring Councils of Spring 2005 and 2006 reaffirmed the commitment of EU leaders to the objectives of sustainable development and to a strong social pillar for the Lisbon strategy. However making **competitiveness and economic and internal market objectives an urgent priority has a negative impact on European and national social agenda and therefore on the social aspects of the SDS.** Part of the solution should be found in a new constitutional treaty with stronger social objectives³ but Social NGOs also expect the new SDS to clarify the priorities of the EU, how they are implemented and the system in place to monitor progress⁴.

In light of these expectations Social NGOs believe that the **Commission’s communication** from December 2005 on the review of the SDS fails since it **does not give any indication of the most unsustainable trends in the EU, progress since 2001 and the implications of the lack of progress.** As a consequence the communication **lacks a sense of urgency.** The absence of a shared analysis of the situation and of an open process to determine priorities results in a list of priorities that, even if relevant, lacks ownership by the main stakeholders and therefore a political will to implement them. **The structure and wording of the priorities and targets (relegated to an annex) reinforce the impression that the Commission’s proposal is only a catalogue of existing policies rather than a real strategy.**

As a contribution to the future EU SDS Social NGOs present the following recommendations to Heads of State and of Government.

For the future EU sustainable development strategy to be a success Social NGOs call on EU heads of State and of government to formally acknowledge that:

- **Sustainable development is firmly grounded in the concept of fundamental rights, and particularly fundamental social rights.** Eradication of poverty, the fight against social exclusion, the promotion of gender equality and equality for all is central to sustainable development. The future strategy should fully integrate the commitments set out in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights and other sources of social rights such as the Council of Europe’s Revised Social Charter;
- **High social and environmental standards are not an obstacle to growth** but the best guarantee that: growth will be based on innovation and excellence and not on cheap labour and social dumping; growth will undermine the gains it produces by generating higher social costs through pollution of the environment, poor health conditions or increased inequalities;

² Members of the Social Platform who have taken part in the multi-stakeholders forum on SDS organised by the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) were frustrated by the lack of mandate of this forum, its unclear composition and therefore its incapacity to impact on the implementation and the development of the EU SDS

³ See resolution of the Social Platform for the European June Council 2006 on the period of reflection “The way out of the constitutional crisis? More participatory democracy and a stronger social dimension”

⁴ The Social Platform welcome the conclusions of the European Council of 12-13 December 2005 specifying that: *“The European Council looks forwards to adopting in June 2006 an ambitious and comprehensive strategy, comprising targets, indicators and an effective monitoring procedure; which should integrate the internal and external dimensions and be based on a positive long-term vision, bringing together the Community’s sustainable development priorities and objectives in a clear, coherent strategy that can be communicated simply and effectively to citizen”*

- **Economic growth does not in itself produce a socially integrated society.** Greater social cohesion does not result automatically from increased economic activity alone. A strong economy can have a positive effect on poverty, but securing such positive benefits requires effective social policies. The same goes for issues such as for example equality between men and women, the fight against discrimination, the integration of migrants, access to child and elder care, and the promotion of public health which require pro-active policies from governments;
- **Developing a sustainable development strategy is not simply a case of ‘bolting-together’ separate measures** in the social and environmental field but of reflecting upon the sustainability implications of all policies and economic policies in particular. This requires a real political commitment, a radical change of priorities and new form of governance;
- **The concept of sustainable development includes dealing with the respect of future generations, youth organisations therefore have an important role to play in the implementation.** This is often taken into account when the issue is discussed, both locally and globally (i.e. within the UN), but the EU has so far failed to reflect this in its sustainable development strategy;
- **Growth cannot be measured only in a quantitative way.** A qualitative dimension needs to be added through the use of more sophisticated indicators than the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). In order to keep options open for future generations, economic growth must not be at the expense of natural resources and environment or public health and social cohesion. The increased burden of economic activity on these areas is not reflected in most economic calculations used by the EU even though they represent a real cost to our society.

Following from these principles the Social Platform calls on the EU Heads of State and of Governments to:

- ✓ **Develop a coherent approach to ensure that processes such as the Lisbon process are specifically undertaken within a sustainable development framework.** The annual **Spring Summit** is an **ideal time to appraise the implementation of social, environmental, and economic objectives** of the EU as well as progress on the sustainability of EU policies;
- ✓ **Recognise the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) on social protection and social inclusion as an instrumental part of the social dimension of the EU SDS and of the Lisbon strategy** and commit to **mainstream the objectives of the OMC on social protection and social inclusion** and the conclusions of the joint report on social protection and social inclusion in other EU policies;
- ✓ **Open a consultation on how to make impact assessment a more effective tool to promote social and environmental objectives in all EU policies.** In principle impact assessment is a good tool to mainstream social objectives in all EU policies, however Social NGOs are very critical of the way it has been carried out so far by the Commission⁵. The independent and transparent nature of impact assessments needs to be addressed in the new EU Sustainable development strategy;
- ✓ **Introduce new forms of governance to stimulate an integrated approach.** Sustainable development is not only a compilation of sectoral objectives, but is also about building positive

⁵ The experience of Social NGOs is that recent impact assessment have not been carried out with the objective of balancing social, economic and environmental objectives but rather with the intention of demonstrating the positive impact of the new initiative on growth and jobs and on competitiveness.

interaction between different objectives in the social, environmental and economic fields and making them mutually reinforcing. Both the EU SDS and the Lisbon strategy have not succeeded here as it requires new policy-making methods and new forms of governance⁶. Social NGOs therefore support the development of **independent councils on sustainable development (including at European level)**. These councils could help **build bridges among policies and stakeholders** to stimulate an integrated approach but they should **not substitute the primary responsibilities of Member States and of the EU to implement their commitments to sustainable development**;

- ✓ Consider drawing up **new and more complete indicators** (beyond the GDP) which take account of the implications of economic activity (e.g. damage to the environment and to health, natural resources left for future generations etc.) as well as non-monetary activity (unpaid and voluntary work) alongside of more traditional economic indicators;
- ✓ **Targets for the eradication of poverty** are a necessary step if real progress is to be made and measured and they should be **at the core of the strategy and not in the annex**. However, they must be carefully selected if they are to translate into real improvements for people most at risk;
- ✓ Ensure that the sustainable development strategy and the implementation of the “growth and jobs” strategy take place in a context of participatory democracy, including **full consultation of NGOs and of people directly affected by policies regarding the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the strategy**.

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The Platform of European Social NGOs (the Social Platform) is the alliance of representative European federations and networks of non-governmental organisations active in the social sector. The Social Platform promotes social justice and participatory democracy by voicing the concerns of its member organisations. The Social Platform and its members are committed to the advancement of the principles of equality, solidarity, non discrimination and the promotion and respect of fundamental rights for all, within Europe and in particular the European Union.

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⁶ The Social Platform welcomes the efforts of the Austrian Presidency to involve all Council formations in the discussion on the review of sustainable development, but again the traditional division of policies does not allow for cross sectoral discussions and is therefore an obstacle to the development of an integrated approach.