

Research note: Sustainable Development Structures and Policy

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Introduction

This research note gives an overview of the main governance structures, policies and legislation that are currently in place globally, and at an EU and UK level. The paper also looks at how sustainable development (SD) policy in Wales fits within these structures.

International SD Governance Structure

Since the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) there has been a global agreement on SD. Our **Quick Guide to Sustainable Development: History and Concepts** gives more detail on the history of SD and its development through the United Nations, along with common concepts and principles of SD.

The current framework for international action on SD was agreed at the UN Rio+20 Conference on Sustainable Development in 2012. The conference resulted in an outcome document, **The Future We Want**, which set out three over-arching objectives for global sustainable development:

- poverty eradication;
- sustainable consumption; and
- protection and management of the natural resource base of economic and social development.

The Future We Want identifies **24 thematic areas in which action is required to achieve sustainable development**. These areas include poverty eradication, environmental protection and enhancement, energy, climate change, resource extraction and use, transport, food and water security, education, health and social inclusion. The document also **encourages 'regional, national, sub-national and local authorities to develop and utilize sustainable development strategies** as key instruments for guiding decision-making and implementation of sustainable development at all levels'.

The outcome document re-iterated Principle 1 of the original Rio Declaration of 1992, that **people are at the centre of SD**. It also recognised that **good governance and the rule of law are essential for SD**, and that 'goals, targets and indicators, including where appropriate gender-sensitive indicators, are valuable in measuring and accelerating progress.'

Another major outcome of the Rio+20 conference was a mandate within *The Future We Want* to establish a suite of **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**. The 17 SDGs have now been published and include poverty eradication, action on climate change, access to education, gender equality, action to halt biodiversity loss, economic growth and sustainable energy.

Reporting Structures

Participating UN Member States voluntarily provide information on their SD policies, strategies and legislation. Reports that were produced under previous frameworks, as well as those produced under the current Rio+20 framework, can be accessed on the **UN Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform**. Member States have made vastly different levels of progress, with some having detailed policies and strategies and others being at the beginning of their SD journey. Notable countries include:



- Finland, which has established a **National Sustainable Development Commission** to promote and monitor progress on their sustainable development strategy; and
- Canada, which in 2008 introduced a **Federal Sustainable Development Act** to provide the framework for production, delivery and monitoring of their **Federal Sustainable Development Strategy**.

European Union SD Policy

The renewed **EU Sustainable Development Strategy** was published in 2006. The strategy sets the **EU's definition** of SD and has **four overarching objectives**:

- **environmental protection** (including halting biodiversity loss, living within environmental limits, reducing pollution and promoting sustainable consumption);
- **social equity and cohesion** (including democracy, inclusion, health, working towards a just society, human rights, cultural diversity and combating discrimination);
- **economic prosperity** (including innovation, knowledge, competition, eco-efficiency, high living standards and full, high quality employment); and
- **meeting international responsibilities** (including peace, security, freedom and promoting democracy and sustainable development globally).

The Strategy identifies **ten guiding principles** for sustainable development decision making, which include the well-recognised precautionary and polluter-pays principles in addition to principles relating to citizen engagement, promotion and protection of fundamental rights, democracy and transparency, integration and coherence of policy, governance and knowledge use. The Strategy also sets **seven key challenges**, to which are attached targets, operational objectives and actions:

- climate change and clean energy;
- sustainable transport;
- sustainable consumption and production;
- conservation and management of natural resources;
- public health;
- social inclusion, demography and migration; and
- global poverty and sustainable development challenges.

EU Member States are expected to reflect the overarching objectives of the EU Strategy and take action on the identified key challenges through their own SD policies.

Monitoring and Reporting

The EU has a suite of **Sustainable Development Indicators**, which have been used for monitoring progress since 2000. The EU Strategy committed the EU to producing progress reports every two years. The most recent **review of the EU Strategy**, in 2009, notes the EU's **efforts to mainstream SD across policy areas**, but also recognises the **persistence of unsustainable trends** and the need for an intensification of action on SD. EU Member States must also report to the EU on progress with their National Sustainable Development Strategies (NSDSs) every two years.



UK SD Policy

In 2005 the UK published *Securing the future – delivering the UK sustainable development strategy*, which set out the **UK's definition** of SD and focused on **four priorities**:

- sustainable production and consumption;
- climate change and energy;
- natural resource protection and environmental enhancement; and
- sustainable communities.

It also identified **five guiding principles for decision-making**:

- living within environmental limits;
- ensuring a strong healthy and just society;
- achieving a sustainable economy;
- promoting good governance; and
- using sound science responsibly.

In 2011 the Coalition Government published a paper called *Mainstreaming Sustainable Development: The Government's vision and what this means in practice*. It highlighted the importance of 'stimulating economic growth and tackling the deficit' as a component of SD, as well as maximising well-being and protecting the environment.

The paper outlined how sustainable development decision-making would be mainstreamed throughout government departments and how this would be measured and scrutinised, including the development of a revised suite of 35 **sustainable development indicators**, which were published in 2013. The paper also emphasised the importance of the green economy, enabling community action through the "Big Society" and tackling climate change.

Since this paper there has been no further update of the UK's SD Strategy as a whole, but SD policies have been applied across UK Government Departments. Departments report on their SD progress annually. UK Government has also introduced **Greening Government Commitments**, which are 'targets for central government departments and their agencies to significantly reduce waste, water usage and carbon emissions by 2015'. They have introduced a variety of sustainable procurement policies as part of these commitments.

SD Policy in Wales

The UK Sustainable Development Strategy applies to Wales and the UK's two-yearly progress reports to the EU include Wales. However, under **Section 79 of the Government of Wales Act 2006**, the Welsh Government is also under a duty to prepare a Sustainable Development Scheme setting out 'how they propose in the exercise of their functions to promote sustainable development'. They must report on this Annually to the Assembly and in the year following an election they must report on how successful their scheme has been in promoting SD over the previous Assembly.

One Wales: One Planet

In 2009, the Welsh Government launched its new sustainable development scheme, **One Wales: One Planet**, which aimed to make sustainable development the 'central organising principle' of the Welsh Government. It used the following definition:

In Wales, sustainable development means **enhancing the economic, social and environmental wellbeing of people and communities, achieving a better quality of life for our own and future generations:**

- In ways which **promote social justice and equality of opportunity;** and

- In ways which **enhance the natural and cultural environment and respect its limits - using only our fair share of the earth's resources and sustaining our cultural legacy.**

Sustainable development is the process by which we reach the goal of sustainability.

The scheme set out its vision for a sustainable Wales and identified five headline indicators of a sustainable Wales, each with a chapter setting out the main policies and strategies that will help to achieve them. In each chapter a few specific actions were also identified. The five headline indicators are:

- sustainable resource use;
- sustaining the environment;
- a sustainable economy;
- a sustainable society; and
- the well-being of Wales.

The scheme also identified **two core principles** (involvement of people and communities, and integration) and **six supporting principles:** the precautionary and polluter pays principles, the proximity principle (not exporting social and environmental problems), reducing our ecological footprint, taking account of full costs and benefits and reflecting distinctiveness (responding to local circumstances). The two core principles should be universally applied in all decision making, whereas the supporting principles are to be selectively applied, depending on their appropriateness for the circumstances.

In addition to the annual SD reports required under the GOWA 2006 duty, the Welsh Government has a suite of **SD indicators** that it uses to measure its progress.

Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Bill

In 2011 the new Welsh Government committed in its Programme for Government to introducing legislation on sustainable development. It consulted on its **Sustainable Development Bill White Paper** in 2012-13 and laid the **Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Bill** on 7 July 2014.

The purpose of the Bill is to

- set a framework within which specified Welsh public authorities will seek to ensure the needs of the present are met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (the **sustainable development principle**);
- put into place **well-being goals** which those authorities are to seek to achieve in order to improve well-being both now and in the future, set out how those authorities are to show they are working towards the wellbeing goals;
- establish **Public Services Boards and local well-being plans** on a statutory basis and, in doing so, simplify current requirements as regards integrated community planning; and
- establish a **Future Generations Commissioner for Wales** to be an advocate for future generations who will advise, support and monitor Welsh public authorities in carrying out their duties under the Bill.

The Assembly's Environment and Sustainable Development Committee made 32 recommendations for the improvement of the Bill in its **Stage 1 report**. It also recommended that the Assembly agree the general principles of the Bill **only on condition that the Welsh Government agreed to 'accept and address' 12 specific recommendations** that the Committee felt were crucial to the effectiveness of the legislation. The Welsh Government agreed to accept 9 of these, and the Assembly agreed the general principles of the Bill on 9th December 2014.



The Bill has now been passed, subject to Royal Assent, following Stage 2 and 3 amendments that included **revisions to the sustainable development principle and the well-being goals.**

Following the introduction of the Bill, the Welsh Government proposed to apply to the UK Government **for powers to amend Section 79 of GOWA 2006.** These powers were granted and the Welsh Government brought forward an amendment at Stage 3 of the Bill's scrutiny process, which was agreed. The amendment substitutes a new Section 79 into GOWA 2006, which **allows the Welsh Government to discharge its duty to promote sustainable development by exercising their functions under the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015.** The Act will set a duty on public bodies to set objectives in accordance with the well-being goals, and take steps to meet them in accordance with the sustainable development principle.

The Welsh Government **will still be required to report annually on their promotion of SD,** and lay these reports before the Assembly. **The new Section 79 no longer refers to the requirement to make a sustainable development scheme.**

Further information

For further information on about **Sustainable Development Structures and Policy**, please contact **Karen Whitfield** (Karen.Whitfield@Assembly.Wales), Research Service.

See also:

Quick Guide to Sustainable Development: History and Concepts

- [European Commission SD policy web-page](#)
- [UK Government SD policy web-page](#)
- [Welsh Government SD policy web-page](#)

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