

Intervention Paper from a Gender perspective: The Review of the European Union Sustainable Development Strategy

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Thematic Network 'Sustainability Strategy'

The objective of the Thematic Network is to use the diversity of scientific approaches to the problems of sustainability as a resource for improving the European sustainability strategy, especially its further elaboration and implementation. This requires the creation of a trans-disciplinary network focused on sustainable development, bringing together technical, economic and political science insights, and capable of monitoring the European sustainability strategy, while building a bridge to experts and civil society networks committed to European policy co-ordination. The creation of such a thematic network would not only contribute to the achievement of sustainable development in Europe, including the policy co-ordination objectives of dynamic economic development, full employment and stronger social cohesion and of integration of environmental issues into all policies. Its functioning as an integrated discursive space would furthermore strengthen the governance structure of the European Union, by making it more accessible to its citizens, and reinforce the basis for a constructive role of the EU in global partnership.

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What will be the relation between the revised Lisbon Strategy for growth and jobs and the revised Sustainable Development Strategy?

The EU is in the process of reviewing its 2001 Sustainable Development Strategy (EU-SDS) (Gothenburg / Barcelona). This review started in February 2005, when the Commission presented a critical stock-taking and laid down its future orientations for the SDS. In June 2005, the Council adopted a draft declaration on guiding principles for sustainable development.

The Commission presented a concluding paper for its review of the EU sustainable development strategy in December 2005. This proposal to conclude the mid-term review is now in the process of being discussed with the Council, the European Parliament, the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions.

How could the renewed Lisbon Strategy work for a truly sustainable development in Europe?

Sustainable development issues are not referring only to the way we understand and define economic growth, or how we can achieve a comprehensive view of the ecological, economic and social aspects of sustainability, or how we may work out a societal consensus on the goals to be achieved to realise sustainability, but also how to achieve inter-, intragenerational and intergender equality.

The EU has elevated the “equality between men and women” to the level of a core objective of the Community, and “gender mainstreaming” has been instituted as the binding strategy to reach this aim. (Art.2, Treaty of Maastricht 1994 and Amsterdam 97/99). Article 3 states: “In all the activities referred to in this article, the Community shall aim to eliminate inequalities, and to promote equality between men and women”.

The strategy of gender mainstreaming could be a powerful vehicle for transporting gender concerns, even if there are disappointments and serious misgivings concerning its concrete articulation and implementation as pointed out by gender experts, or feminist and other researchers. However, in line with the predominance of a narrow economic approach, as it is defined by the neo-liberal agenda, any critique of patriarchal gender relations and any attempt at formulating transformative policies and politics on its basis seem to lose ground. At the same time, even societally more ambitious criticisms of the interim results of the review process set out to lead to a renewed EU-SDS seem to be formulated with the usual gender blindness. This seems to be the case with most of the Stakeholders involved in the review process, so far. There are obvious aspects of a gender deficiency within the EU-SDS which are not addressed by the review process or within the broader public debate accompanying this process.

The following example illustrates this clearly:

During a stakeholder meeting on March 6th 2006, unions and NGO leaders stated¹:

“The revised Lisbon Strategy on growth and jobs is incomplete and imbalanced. It is putting the main emphasis on the economic pillar of competitiveness, mainly focussing on building an internal market that has no barriers for business. And meanwhile, it is forgetting that the

¹ “Move up a gear for sustainable development!” – Comments and proposals from ETUC, Social Platform and EEB, for the 2006 Spring Council on the Lisbon Strategy, March 7th 2006.

forces of competition need a social and ecological framework to keep them away from cut-throat competition, social dumping, environmental degradation and the depletion of natural capital.”

Europe is seen to be confronted with major social and ecological challenges: “Poverty is on the rise. Precarious jobs – that pay breadline wages, provide little security, give no access to training nor prospects to move to a better position – are spreading throughout Europe. More and more workers are being forced into accepting pay cuts and working longer hours while profits are soaring and an elite ‘happy few’ is enjoying unimaginable perks. Similarly, environmental issues are pressing. Climate change can dramatically deteriorate the conditions for prosperity on our continent. Biodiversity is essential for our natural capital. People urgently need protection against pollution that affects their health.”

The European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), the Platform of European Social NGOs and the European Environmental Bureau (EEB) declare themselves to be worried “that the ‘competitiveness’ agenda of the internal market is becoming dominant and this jeopardises fundamental objectives of the Treaty. We disagree fundamentally with those claiming that competitiveness is necessary – and sufficient for social cohesion and ecological sustainability.”

In their joint declaration they point out: “European leadership must be driven by wider concerns than a business-friendly agenda of internal market and simplified regulation. What matters for the welfare of present and future generations within and outside of Europe must be the heart of any real leadership – this is the basis of good governance for sustainable development. – Put social Europe and environmental protection at the heart of the Lisbon Strategy and national reform programmes!”

As a political consequence, they call upon the European Commission, the Council and the Parliament “to present a roadmap for social justice and fair working conditions to make productive and positive change happen. As a first step, practices of excessive labour market flexibility inhibiting innovation and upward mobility need to be identified. As a second step, new European legislation and / or renewed European coordination of labour market policies – to remedy or eliminate this excessive flexibility – needed to be considered and implemented.”

In this perspective, the main recommendations supported by these stakeholders are:

“ endorsement of the 6 priority areas of the Commission’s review proposal – climate change and clean energy, public health, social exclusion, management of natural resources, sustainable transport, global poverty – but wished to add a seventh priority: sustainable competitiveness and innovation; urgent need to develop an EU strategy for sustainable consumption and production, as promised during the Johannesburg conference; sustainable impact assessment for all EU subsidies and funds; SD criteria to be used for the review of the EU’s long-term budget (‘financial perspective’) in 2008; sustainable development committees to be set up in the European Parliament and the EESC; a Communication strategy for SDS; clear guidelines for coherence between the national sustainable development strategies and an independent EU advisory council for SDS.”

Sustainability Strategy and Gender?

Even if we agree with these recommendations, it is important to notice that there is a further gap, where the revised Lisbon Strategy on growth and jobs is incomplete and imbalanced:

Gender concerns and gender equality!

The aim of gender equality policy is that women and men have the same opportunities, rights and responsibilities in all areas of life.

Equality between women and men was reinforced in the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe so that in addition to existing EU Treaty provisions on gender equality, equality is

now mentioned among the Union's values and Article I-2 mentions equality between women and men as an element characterising our model of society. In the model of European society that we aspire to, the achievement of gender equality is not only a matter of social justice or of fairness to women, it is a matter of democracy and human rights and an essential factor for sustainable human development. The Union's values in relation to achieving equality between women and men must be promoted not only within the EU, but also in all aspects of its responsibility and its relations worldwide.

The existing articles in the Treaty of the European Community define equality between women and men as an objective of the Community and provide a strong legal basis for very broad action at EU level in a wide range of areas.

The EU-SDS and the revised Lisbon Strategy ignore this gender objective:

As a first step in preparing the review process, the „Public Consultation Review of the EU Sustainable development Strategy“ by the European Commission (July 2004) did not include gender aspects, neither in the part „Policy Context“, nor in the questionnaire's „six priority issues“.

In the report: „Facing the challenge - the Lisbon strategy for growth and employment“ from the High Level Group chaired by Wim Kok (November 2004), which has been a decisive element of the review of the Lisbon strategy preceding the review of the EU SDS, the gender aspect has been addressed in one point, only: „Invest in a high-skilled labour force²“.

The main line of the Kok-Report refers to the challenges for a society which is aiming at global competitiveness, measured in terms of rather abstract economic growth targets and efficiency calculations. This does include eco-efficiency issues, and it is limited to an approach to work which is based on an extension of the 'male-breadwinner model' to women. This orientation does not point towards a sustainable society, or to one which is on its way to becoming sustainable.

A society in which unpaid care work and remunerated employment, levels of income and wealth, access to and management of natural resources, decision-making power and authority, rights and responsibilities and educational and career opportunities are divided unequally between men and women cannot be a sustainable society.

Sustainable development requires that gender aspects be incorporated into all policy-making and planning. The gender mainstreaming approach can be developed into an important factor capable of contributing to the reaching of this objective. Also in the further development of the SDS the gender dimension will therefore have to be applied cross-sectionally.

The SDS will have to address fundamental categories such as the objectives and constraints of the economy and the future of work, as well as underlying conceptions of growth and nature, in order to initiate a societal process of looking for feasible ways of redesigning them with a view of constructing fit future-proof models of ways of life and of concretising the principles of European sustainability politics. Debating the principles of societies' ways of approaching the interaction between nature and technology will, therefore, have to be given the necessary space in discussions of sustainable development.

² „In order to make a real option for all, more needs to be done to increase the participation of women. This calls for the removal of remaining tax disincentives to work, determined action to address the roots of the gender pay gap and the stricter enforcement of non-discrimination legislation. A better reconciliation of family and working life also demands the provision of availability, affordability and good quality of childcare and eldercare.“ (2, p.32)

It is of central importance that empirical and research findings about the interlinkages which exist between approaches to nature, to social and economic issues and ways of addressing gender relations will be incorporated both into the analysis of the global problems sustainability politics is addressing and into the development of prospective solution proposals.

An integrative handling of all three dimensions of sustainability is one of the requirements for SDS. Where linkages have been articulated so far, these are primarily between environmental and economic aspects (mainly focussing to eco-efficiency). By contrast, the connection between the social and environmental dimensions or those existing between all three dimensions on a more foundational level, e. g. ways of approaching nature, gender relations and the understanding of production, work and the economy, remain almost completely underexposed. Particularly when looking at the question of which grounds and circumstances stand in the way of changing towards a sustainable and gender-just development, it is essential to examine this kind of systemic contexts.

Looking at interrelations between problems from a gender perspective increases the political awareness of the interdependence of areas which are too often construed as being separate or opposing but which actually belong together. In a longer term perspective, such an approach will also open up new ways in which these areas can be substantively combined and dealt with.

„The Platform of Action of the Fourth World Conference on Women“ and the „Agenda 21“ call for a review of the effects which environment and development policy measures have on women and men. „Gender Impact Assessment (GIA)“ was developed as an instrument to identify potential impacts of policy decisions and strategies on gender relations.

A further instrument could be the gender budget, which enables the gender-specific analysis of revenues and expenditures in state, local authority and institutional budgets.

The „gender budgeting“ method can contribute substantially to the transparency and the gender-sensitive analysis and planning of public expenditure. Its widespread introduction would constitute a decisive step towards reinforcing gender and sustainability politics.

Gender equality principles and actions must be significantly strengthened within economic and social policy, as well as within environmental policy in order to make the Lisbon process sustainable.

The concept of environmental sustainability includes a number of issues very closely linked to the conditions for the quality of life of citizens, and therefore to the everyday practice of a gendered livelihood. Gender equality concerns must therefore be mainstreamed as an integral part of all environmental policy-making. Women have been seen to play a key role in environmental sustainability as consumers, producers, educators, and professionals.

Existing imbalances between women and men influences all areas of life and in order to achieve gender equality, action needs to be undertaken in the broad spectrum of European policies, especially in the Sustainability Strategy.

Equal participation of women and men is also called for, where women's lives are differently affected than men's in cases of environmental deterioration.

A new report³ on facts and figures on women's health in Europe highlights substantial differences in women's health status and exposure to health risks.

³ „Women's Health in Europe – Facts and Figures across the EU, report published by the European Institute of Women's Health (EIWH), March 7th 2006.

“ Despite considerable progress in recent years at both national and international levels, gender inequalities in health remain in many areas across Europe. Strategies for promoting the health of women at the community level have not yet been introduced in any systematic way. Neither has a systematic analysis been undertaken of how the healthcare sector could, or should, respond with greater sensitivity to the varying healthcare needs of women across all 25 Member States. There is a growing understanding of gender as a key determinant of health, and an appreciation that gender is as important as the social, economic or ethnic background of any individual. To ensure gender mainstreaming in health it is necessary to make explicit how women’s physical, psychological and social health should be addressed at every stage of their lives. Good health is an integral part of life and an important resource for the quality of life of citizens across the EU, the success of the economy and social cohesion.”

With regard to social and economic policy, due attention should also be given to a study published by Eurostat on the occasion of the International Women’s Day 2006: “Women in Europe – better educated, worse paid, less leisure”⁴

“Although, on average, women in the EU have better education than men, they spend less time earning money and more time doing domestic work. Women in some EU countries spend more than three times longer than men doing domestic work like cleaning, cooking and childcare. In contrast, men in many countries spend more than twice as much time earning money or learning as women do.”

Important next steps for implementing Gender Equality:

The European Women’s Lobby presented in 2005 a “Gender Equality Road Map for the European Community 2006 – 2010”⁵ as a model for the official Communication on gender equality to be put forward by the European Commission at the end of 2005.

“The previous Community Framework Strategy on Gender Equality (2001 – 2005) initiated a new type of intervention covering all European policies using a dual-track approach of gender equality mainstreaming on the one hand and specific actions in favour of women’s rights on the other hand. This dual strategy should be pursued with the new Road Map for Gender Equality 2006 – 2010, as it acknowledges the fact that inequalities between women and men pertain to all areas of life. The European Women’s Lobby has defined six main themes with Strategic Objectives and concrete actions to be undertaken by the European Commission between 2006 and 2010. These themes are partly inspired by the Strategic Objectives of the United Nations Beijing Platform for Action (1995).”

This **Gender Equality Road Map** with its six main themes – institutional mechanisms for the realisation of gender equality and gender mainstreaming, economic and social justice for women, women in decision-making, women’s rights in an international context and ‘eliminate patriarchal roles and stereotypes’ – is fully qualified to be directly **implemented into the EU SDS**, especially into its social and economic policy dimensions.

Public and political acknowledgement of the linkages between gender and environment still has not been fully articulated. Even less developed is the awareness of the idea that sustainable development would not be possible to achieve without the realisation of gender equity - even though this conception has been clearly in the agenda 21 (chapter 24) or in the

⁴ Statistics in focus, population and social conditions: How is the time of women and men distributed in Europe?”by Christel Aliaga; 4/2006; Eurostat.

⁵ European Women’s Lobby – EWL – „Gender Equality Road Map for the European Community 2006 – 2010“, www.womenlobby.org

Beijing Platform of Action, and in other agreements referring to women and / or sustainable development issues. This delay is largely due to different views on sustainability, especially on the relations existing between ecological, economic and social aspects, which still have to be sorted out by sustainability politics, as well as to the gender-unequal access to power and decision-making, as it still is prevalent in most of today's societies.

What is needed now is a debate on how to take effective steps toward an official recognition of both the existing gender differences in approaches towards environmental policy, more specifically, and towards sustainable development, more generally. There is an urgent need for a stronger gender focus in order to achieve the progress on SDS. Such a gender perspective on SDS will contribute to overcoming casting women in the role of victims, but help to implement a pro-active definition of their own goals and perspectives by women.

The European Pact for Gender Equality from March 2006⁶ is an important step forward, but it only focuses on issues of labour market/growth/employment without referring to all the gender concerns to be taken on board for the implementation of a truly sustainable development.

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Literature

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⁶ Annex II, Presidency Conclusion, European Council March 23rd /24th 2006, 7775/06