

Twelve sustainability actions for the new Government

COMHAR

Sustainable Development Council

Introduction

The new government taking office in June 2007 has an opportunity to make sustainable development the fulcrum around which national policy in all areas can be built. We believe that time is of the essence, and that this commitment needs to inform the actions of government from the beginning of its term. While much progress has been made, it is now opportune to make Ireland a leader in development that is sustainable.

Sustainable development means organising our affairs such that our economy continues to compete successfully in global markets and gives employment to all who seek it, our social and family life is fulfilling, and our quality of life generally rises, all while protecting and enhancing the quality of the natural environment.

We have seen in Ireland the unimaginable become a reality

- In Northern Ireland, nemeses of old agree to share power.
- In the Republic, what was a poor country whose main export was its cattle and its people has become the richest in the European Union, where desperation to escape has been replaced by making Ireland a home to those of talent and energy from other countries.

Our challenge is to build on these remarkable achievements, to find our path towards making the island not just peaceful and prosperous, but sustainable, a place that makes modest demands on our natural endowments, where social life and networks allow us all to be fully participating members of our families and communities.

It is clear that a high-quality environment is central to Ireland's economic performance. Even the perception that environment is deteriorating will damage tourism, the food industry, and the view of Ireland as a 'quality destination' in which to invest and to live. It is also the case that the poorest citizens are most vulnerable to environmental degradation. The rich can move and escape, but the poor cannot.

Drawing on Comhar SDC's existing policies and principles, we set out some of the actions that the new government should take to make Ireland a leader in this regard, and why. We use the same template as the European Union's Sustainable Development Strategy by drawing on the Strategy's seven "key challenges" (recommendations 6-12)

1. Adopt a revised Irish Sustainable Development Strategy

- Commit to the publication of a revised Irish Sustainable Development Strategy by the end of 2007 as called for in Towards 2016, the ten-year framework agreement for social partnership.

- The Strategy should be implemented with a set of short- and long-term targets and a series of broad measures to provide direction and coherence for all national policy. Key elements in this strategy are proposed in this note.

Why?

Sustainable development requires that various strands of policy be integrated across government departments and across national, regional and local government, linked to European strategies. A revised Irish Sustainable Development Strategy that makes operational sense and to which the public and key stakeholders are committed will provide the template around which we can organise our affairs. It can also provide a basis for linkage to parallel aspirations in Northern Ireland, and meet our requirements to the European Union.

2. Adopt suitable governance and implementation institutions and mechanisms

- Establishment of a sustainable development **cabinet subcommittee** to ensure better, more integrated policymaking at national level. This policy-making subcommittee, could be supported by an administrative coordination and implementation unit comprising the High-Level Interdepartmental Group, which is already playing such a support role in the development of the new Sustainable Development Strategy.
- Re-establishment of the **Oireachtas Committee on Sustainable Development**
- A central role for the **Department of Finance**. The Department of Finance, through its functions in setting tax rates and public expenditure, plays the core administrative role in shaping policy. Its mission statement is: 'To promote a growing economy that will deliver a high level of sustainable employment, social progress and living standards'. This mandate needs to be re-cast to promote sustainable development as part of its core mandate. A revised mission statement could be: 'To promote an economy that will deliver development that is sustainable in terms of employment, environmental quality, innovation and quality of life'.
- These principles should be applied at all levels of government. Comhar SDC, the national forum for stakeholders, is willing to provide advice to government on such initiatives.
- Commit to the **subsidiarity principle**, so that decisions are taken as closely as possible to the citizen and regional and local government adequately resourced to deliver on sustainable development.
- It is also crucial that the **implementing agencies** charged with delivery on the ground have access to the relevant technical (financial, legal, engineering, economic, environmental) and managerial capacities to deliver and maintain quality outcomes on time and within budget. This includes having the scope and scale to deliver.
- **Education for sustainable development** (ESD) at all levels of education will be a key driver in reversing unsustainable trends. The Government should commit to the adoption of a national action plan for ESD during its first year in office.

Why?

The strategy will only be fully effective if it has leadership at cabinet level, if effective implementation arrangements are mobilised to ensure that the cabinet's decisions are followed through, if key stakeholders understand it and give it their support, and if fiscal and other incentives 'automatically' support the sustainability objectives. Unless we have thought through what it takes to deliver high-quality performance in financial, social and environmental terms, and then ensure that the pre-requisites are available, we should not start.

3. Include environmental and social considerations in policy and project appraisal

- Commit to the development and refinement of Impact Assessments for policies and programmes in order to assess in a balanced way the social, environmental and economic dimensions of sustainable development, including the costs of inaction.
- It is important that **the National Development Finance Agency's** mandate include expenditure and impacts related to key sustainability agendas, including climate change, air and water quality, biodiversity and social cohesion, and that in addition to 'commercial standards' their mandate incorporate the delivery of key targets such as greenhouse gas abatement, water and air quality and biodiversity that are not well measured by markets. Specifically, the National Development Finance Agency has the function to 'advise State authorities on the optimal financing of priority public investment projects by applying commercial standards in evaluating risks and costs. The overriding objective is to maximise value for money for the Exchequer'. This brief needs to be revised to reflect the above.

Why?

Policy loses credibility and public support if it is not efficiently and transparently executed, and if policy and project assessment does not address key dimensions that are important to the well being of society.

4. Use incentives and price signals to move behaviour towards sustainable individual, household and corporate behaviour

- Effective delivery of a sustainable society will require that all the **signals and incentives** that we receive as individuals, households, firms and bureaucracies will encourage and facilitate sustainable behaviour, and discourage the converse.
- This means applying the **'polluter pays' principle**, where those who use most, pay most, while those whose use of environmental and natural endowments is parsimonious are rewarded; this must be accompanied by robust environmental enforcement.
- This principle should be at the heart of the Department of Finance approach in shaping its taxation and expenditure strategies, and a strategy outlining how this is to be achieved should be prepared by the Department of Finance.

Why?

Smart taxation will encourage conservation and enterprise, and discourage waste, environmental degradation and the destruction of community cohesion. If we don't apply the polluter and resource user pays principle, those who use most are being subsidised by those who use less. This is both unfair and inefficient.

5. Adopt sustainable development indicators

- Commit to the establishment of a set of **national sustainable development indicators** by 2008, building on work already undertaken by the Central Statistics Office in Measuring Ireland's Progress, to provide credible, objective and tangible information to the public and policymakers about Ireland's direction.
- Provide a basis for the development of **regional, local and community indicators** that inform us about performance where we live and work.
- Develop a set of **satellite national accounts** that would provide a more realistic measure of progress.

Why?

What doesn't get measured doesn't get done. The Finland Sustainable Development Council found that indicators are the most important mechanism for generating substantive discussion on both objectives and performance, because their existence shifted the debate from qualitative aspiration to on-the-ground realities and tradeoffs. Towards 2016 commits the Government to examine the application of satellite accounts in the area of environmental sustainability; existing models include the United Nations' Human Development Index (HDI), and former World Bank economist Herman Daly's Index of Sustainable Economic Welfare (ISEW)

6. Climate change and clean energy

- Identify the **key area(s)** where Ireland can provide credible leadership in the European Union in regard to addressing climate change and low carbon energy, and how to exercise such leadership. The areas which should be assessed in this regard include: managing increased wind-energy penetration in the electricity sector, how to maximise energy efficiency performance with a dispersed settlement pattern, intensifying abatement options in agriculture, the role of forestry in sequestration, adaptation to climate change in some particular respect such as land use policy and management.
- Establish an associated **action plan** – preferably with all-party agreement – and binding targets for the medium term (e.g. 2020) and longer term (e.g. 2050) for the reduction of Ireland's greenhouse gas emissions.
- The process could be initiated with a **major conference** involving all relevant stakeholders.

Why?

We account for about 1 per cent of EU greenhouse gas emissions, and so whatever we do will on its own have negligible effect on climate change. This is sometimes used to justify a minimalist approach on our part. However, if we can lead in one of

more niche areas, and actively promote relevant actions at EU level and globally, then our own actions can have a multiplier effect, especially if it is associated with meeting ambitious national targets.

7. Sustainable transport

- Put in place strong institutional and governance arrangements for sustainable transport at national, regional and local levels which will in particular integrate land-use and infrastructure planning.

Why?

There are five key elements to a successful mobility strategy: investment in infrastructure; demand management of the capacity thereby provided; land-use planning that ensures that settlement patterns and business and commercial activity can make maximum use of the networks provided; integration that facilitates linkage within and between modes; institutions and governance arrangements that ensure that the investments are made on time and within budget, that high quality information and analyses are available at the right time, that integration is a reality, and that the relevant land use and other arrangements and facilities are in place.

8. Sustainable consumption and production

- Commit to establish, by end 2008, a national action plan on sustainable consumption and production.
- Put government leadership – especially through green public procurement – at its centre.
- The promotion of both the development and implementation of eco-friendly technologies is crucial in this regard, to help give Irish business a competitive edge in frontier technologies.
- Key opportunities are to start tracking carbon impacts associated with alternative investments, goods and services, and then shifting the portfolio towards lower carbon intensity, and the support of eco-efficient innovation generally. The Department of Finance and the National Development Finance Agency are crucial in this regard.

Why?

Government is the largest single investor, and the largest purchaser of goods and services in the Irish economy. Where it leads, others will follow.

9. Conservation and management of natural resources

- Understand what **ecosystems** have to offer us as regards goods and services, including flood control, conservation of genetic stocks, landscape conservation and tourism etc. with a special focus on the role of urban areas in this regard.
- Commit to review and strengthening of the **National Biodiversity Plan** by end 2007

- Commit to adoption and implement a national **Coastal Zone Management Strategy** and a **national inventory of outstanding landscapes** (last undertaken by An Foras Forbatha nearly 30 years ago)

Why?

Some of the problems we experience in regard to flooding, loss of landscape, diminished water quality, damage to rural tourism and loss of quality of life generally are related to ignorance about the protective services that nature provides, and how these can be compromised by inappropriate development. We need a quantum increase in popular understanding in these regards, and a parallel development and implementation of actions that ensure that we do not suffer irreversible losses.

10. Public health

- Understand the **relationships between better health and better environment**
- Ensure that **protecting our health** is a key variable in the development of policy generally, and in particular in regard to air and water
- Commit to improvement in food **labelling** to provide consumers with appropriate information on the provenance and nutritional value of food
- Ensure **compliance with relevant standards**, e.g. for drinking water, and invest in the necessary infrastructure
- Promote **walking and cycling** as well as a **shift to public transport**, to encourage a more active lifestyle and the reduction of air pollution

Why?

We have made important progress in Ireland in ensuring the quality of indoor air by the ban on smoking tobacco products in work places, which came into effect on March 29th 2004, with consequent reduced risk of damage to health from passive smoking. Likewise, the ban on the marketing, sale and distribution of bituminous coal in 1990 was associated with reduced damage to health from particulate matter. But we still face challenges. In most developed countries, water quality is managed so that adverse health effects are negligible, but as we have seen in Galway, this cannot be assumed to always be the case. As regards air quality, time series trends show falling ambient concentrations for all major air pollutants, and are better than the relevant EU threshold standard, with only NO_x indicating possible exceedence in the future.

11. Social inclusion, demography and migration

- A particular focus should be **young people** who, through whatever combination of family circumstance, lack of resources, education and training and social connections, are struggling to be fully part of society.
- Provide the **portfolio** of appropriate recreation opportunities, training, personal skills and access to jobs and rewards that gives them a sense of positive purpose, and integrates them into the wider society.

- **Gender mainstreaming** should apply in the case of appointments to all public bodies.

Why?

'Inclusion' means being given the opportunity to contribute positively to the economic, social and environmental life of Irish society, and having the interest, commitment and capacity to do so.

Improving social inclusion means finding ways to make it as easy as possible to do so. If young people lose their way early on, a re-enforcing cycle of failure and loss can become endemic, with serious consequences for themselves, their families and society as a whole.

12. Global poverty and sustainable development strategies

- Ireland's **policies on trade and aid** should support, facilitate and encourage sustainable development in developing countries. One key to this is the appropriate use of our funds to purchase reduction of green house gas emissions abroad via the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) so as to meet our Kyoto and related targets. To this end, direct the National Treasury Management Agency to investigate the use of the **Clean Development Mechanism** for projects that simultaneously further the aims of Irish Aid's environmental policy for sustainable development.

Why?

We now have an ambitious foreign aid programme, with the target of raising the volume of aid to 0.7 percent of GDP by 2012. We are also active in the CDM market, which involves purchasing reductions in greenhouse gas emissions in developing countries. It is important to maximise the benefits to the host countries so that both reductions in emissions are achieved together with sustainable local development. This may involve paying a premium for the allowances – the cheapest reductions may not contribute most to sustainable development.

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Comhar was established in 1999 as the forum for national consultation and dialogue on all issues relating to sustainable development. Comhar works in three-year cycles and began its third term in January 2006, under Chairman Professor Frank Convery.

Comhar, formerly the National Sustainable Development Partnership, has recently been renamed as Comhar - Sustainable Development Council. Comhar's 25 members are drawn from five pillars: the State sector, economic sectors, environmental NGOs, social/community NGOs and the professional/academic sector. Comhar is supported by a full-time Secretariat based in St. Andrew Street, Dublin 2.

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