

Abstract

Sustainable development : The coordination of the federal policy of sustainable development

The Court's audit report on the coordination of the federal policy of sustainable development highlighted the discrepancy between the Government's commitments and delivery. So far, the federal Government has failed to turn its sustainable development plan into a genuine strategic tool or to integrate sustainable development criteria into the normal processes of management of activities and services falling under its administration. Admittedly, the Court welcomes the adoption of an action plan by the Council of ministers on 25th March 2005 in line with its report but it continues to think that a revision of the law remains indispensable.

Sustainable development is a development that meets today's needs without compromising the capacity for future generations to secure their own needs. According to the Belgian Act of 5 May 1997 on the coordination of the federal policy of sustainable development, a change process resulting inter alia in modifications in the use of resources, in the allocation of investments and in institutional structures is needed. Measures to be taken are determined every four years on the basis of a federal plan of sustainable development.

In order to assess the implementation of this plan, the issue selected by the Court as a case study was the part dealing with the control by Government departments of their non-renewable resources. The Court noticed the poorness of the strategic objectives, which were stated without including the conduct of a preliminary inventory. Four years later after the strategic objectives were adopted as part of the first federal plan of sustainable development (2000-2004), it is still impossible to assess to what extent these objectives were implemented.

The Court pursued its analysis by an examination of the structural difficulties that might be attributable to the law and the resulting decrees, as this might explain the discrepancy between commitments and delivery. The 1997 act instituted a learning cycle according to which lessons would be drawn from two-yearly annual assessment and prospective federal reports with a view to the four-year sustainable plan. The law is based on an action rationale requiring that the Government would act as an example, that networking were set up, that an organisation would spearhead it and that resources were committed to its continuous support, all key elements for a successful implementation.

The Court noticed that the scheduled timeframe for reporting to federal authorities could not be complied with, that the means available were out of step with the actions to take and that processes were progressing slowly and were hardly binding. The discrepancy between commitments and delivery could also be attributed to the fact that no institutional player had been entrusted with leading the initiative. Moreover, the four-year principle embedded in the plan was not in step with the cabinet's term of office and could overlap the Government's own programme declaration. If the law is not revised, the Court is of the opinion that the odds are that no results are to be expected within a reasonable period of time.

The Court suggested that a medium or long-term plan (10 to 30 years) depicting the prospective view envisaged for the State should come instead of the four-year federal plan. The intermediary objectives and the actions needed should be built inter alia into the general policy notes and the budgetary documents.

In response to the Court's audit, the Council of ministers adopted on 25 March 2005 a range of measures aimed at solving the issues raised. It, however, added that the law could be implemented in an efficient way and that it asked the Senate to reflect on the definition of a long term strategy and on the articulation of the plan with the Government's term of office.

The Court forwarded to the federal Parliament its final audit report which takes up the full answer of the Council of ministers.