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Developing a handbook of guidance for conducting peer reviews of National Sustainable Development Strategies in the European Union

Reflections on the French/IIED methodology and recommendations

By: Seth D. Vordzorgbe
Ghana
Member of French NSSD Peer Review Team
vsethov@yahoo.com

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1. Specific conditions relating to the process

These concerns also applied to the French review process.

A. Independent management of review process

This is essential for several reasons, such as: ensuring professional handling and facilitation of the process, enhancing neutrality of the review, and, ensuring timely completion. But the Peer Review Team (PRT) needs to be strong to take consultant's comments as just that and be able to craft its own process steps and expected outputs, and, make up it its own mind on the issues.

Issue: is the consultant part of the review team? No. The consultant should be a professional facilitator of the process and consultant to both the review team and the country being reviewed.

B. Participation of broad group of actors

There are two levels to this: membership of the peer review team and representation and involvement of a broad group of actors in country team for the review process. On the review team: civil society representation should not be limited NGOs; it should include knowledgeable professional consultants, relevant academics, rights advocates, etc. On the country team: this essential condition has to be well managed to ensure the following:
  (a)   adequate inclusion of the views of actors in national reporting on NSSD
  (b)   knowledgeable participation by actors
  (c)   ground-truthing of government assertions
  (d)   ownership of review recommendations by all actors
  (e)   feedback loops between government and non-state interests in the review process.

C. Multi-country peer review team

The four-country mix worked well in the French review in terms of north-south balance, responsiveness to time and resource limitations, allowing broad mix of civil society representation on the PRT, and, acceptance of the review process and outcomes by the larger group/bloc represented by the PRT countries. A larger group of PRT countries would not have improved optimization of the gains of the process.

2.   Flexibility to approach

Time, resource and single-country-review considerations imposed some strictures on the French review methodology. For example, it was not possible to do a scoping exercise to help plan the exercise – the production of a background report on the French NSSD by the consultant partly served this purpose. Also, it was not possible to collect additional or corrective information on parts of the background report prior to the review meeting. Consequently, knowledge of members of the PRT of how things work in France was

inadequate during the review which may have impacted how some issues were reviewed by peers.

However, these constraints do not diminish the flexibility of the methodology: in a multi-country review situation with adequate time, elements of the methodology engender flexibility. For example, the production and dissemination of background information on the NSSD process to PRT members could take many forms. The interactions between PRT members and the focus country officials could be structured differently, including the PRT undertaking field trips. The key questions for the French review were somewhat generic and could be selectively applied to specific country situations. Conclusions of the review could be reached and presented in many different ways.

3.   Replicability of approach

The methodology is amenable to replication in other EU countries: it was somewhat generic. Being the first peer review process and given time and resource constraints, it was not possible to tailor the methodology to the circumstances of France (the way things work in France) than occurred. For example, incorporation of issues of local authorities and overseas territories was less than optimal, given the decentralized local administrative organization of France and its strong promotion of Francophonie.

Nonetheless, the methodology is sufficiently rigorous for replication because:
- of use of standard tools (interview questionnaires, etc) in information collection
- the methodology preparation meeting of PRT allowed expert and team agreement of key methodology steps/actions
- of prior selection by PRT of key questions they wanted to explore that they could illustrate with their own country experiences: this procedure and stipulation required PRT to bring real experiences to the table
- there was discussion of alternative ways of reaching and documenting conclusions of the review sessions before deciding not to apply formal scoring, the traffic lights systems or placement on spectrum of change approaches before selecting agreed recommendations as the preferred way
- the main categories for the analysis were agreed to allow conformity to the categorization of recommendations in the UN guidelines for NSSDs.

Ultimately, common acceptance of agreed review process formats (template, method and core specifications for reviews) in the proposed EU guidelines will promote methodological rigour without getting too analytical or academic.

4.   Categories for the analysis and supporting questions

Both were appropriate. However, the choice of categories resulted in some overlaps, particularly between some process and outcome questions. But that was to be expected. An alternative to classifying categories (the thematic approach) would have been to adopt the NSSD cycle/steps approach, but that would have likely increased the review time.

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Some supporting questions required longer time for reflection by the national team than was available. Consequently:
- some questions generated lively discussion (e.g. monitoring systems/mechanisms),
- discussion of some was slow (e.g. whether the NSSD integrate economic, social and environmental objectives and cultural dimensions)
- other questions were not adequately addressed (e.g. presence of a SD policy leaning process in the NSSD, and, ways in which the NSSD led to innovation and step-change)
- some questions were not addressed (e.g. whether the NSSD points to clear priorities over the next 2-5 years, and, whether there were plans to include citizen satisfaction as a monitoring indicator).

5.   Information gathering methods

Methods used in the French process included:
- desk review of NSSD documents;
- scoping questionnaire and interview of key actors in the NSSD for developing the background report;
- questioning of French official attached to the PRT;
- review discussions with French counterparts

These methods were the appropriate under the circumstances.

6.   Appropriateness/necessity of methodology components

Considering the overall review process, not just the actual method of review, its components were necessary.

7.   Links to regional and global levels

Links with the EU review process and EU SD concerns were covered, including through presentations by and participation of EU (EC/DG Environment) in both the sessions to prepare the methodology and the actual review. Also, EU concerns were considered in the French NSSD. Issues considered were:
- How to ensure coherence between French NSDS and he European strategy?
- How does the Lisbon strategy relate to French NSSD?
- How can the French strategy benefit from European reviews?
- How should links between the French and European strategies be improved to derive maximum benefit from working together?

There was inadequate time, analyses and information to comprehensively discuss all the above. Nonetheless, some findings emerged, such as:
- gaps exist between several national and European policies
- the NSSD has established links between national and European legislation

- there is limited policy space at the national level, given the dependency on EU policy
- it is difficult to compare the French NSSD monitoring indicators with European indicators; hence, there is the need to harmonize the French indicators with EU ones

Global links were considered in the review through:
- involvement of developing country peers; this was important and necessary to allow adequate capture of global links
- inclusion of action programme areas of the French NSSD on Territories, and, International Action, including integrating objectives of SD into French assistance tools (under the latter)
- consideration of the positive effect of the France review on the NSSD agenda of the WSSD.

However, the Peers recommended the need for the French NSSD to promote partnerships with developing countries and to consider the external dimensions of its domestic strategy more fully. For example, the SD process in France was started at the national level and the territorial dimensions were not taken on board.

8.   Cross-cutting elements of SD

This needs to be considered at two levels: inclusion of these elements in the French SD, and, extent to which the review approach/methodology allowed the review to capture those elements.

The French NSSD was not structured along the lines of core/main themes and cross-cutting issues. It adopted six main axes that subsumed many cross-cutting themes (e.g. rural/urban development, climate change, and globalization).

Regarding the review process, eth key questions of content focused on extent of integration of the pillars of SD in the French NSSD, not explicitly on extent of inclusion of cross-cutting elements. The review concluded that the NSSD was more successful in addressing environmental dimensions and integrating its interactions with the economic dimension, but less so with the social dimension. The peer recommendation was to better integrate social issues and that they should better reflect agreed EU priorities.

9.   Timeframe and resources for the review

I cannot comment on the resources expended but a lot of time of the consultant, national officials, CSOs, UN staff and PRT members went into planning and implementing the process. The cost-effectiveness has to be analyzed, but any review approach would likely be intensive in terms of demand on time and information. Overall, there was inadequate time for the review of key questions but the four-day process was sufficiently managed to yield planned outputs. Extensive prior preparation (e.g. availability of background information on national SD, pre-meeting of some peers with selected national contacts,

and, team building meetings of the PRT) should help minimize the actual review time/cost.

10.   Success of wider stakeholder involvement in the review

There was strong CS involvement in the review process.   Their representatives were at all meetings, took part in all discussions and several CSO groups made verbal presentations to the PRT.

The review process provided space for CSOs to voice views on eh NSSD process/document that they did not have the opportunity to discuss with their government counterparts. Thus, the review was not seen merely as satisfying UN/global commitments under the WSSD but as a further platform for engaging non-state interests in debating the NSSD.

11.   Ownership of the review process

France demonstrated full ownership of the process (see Question 13 below). There were no contentious conclusions of the review and the Minister of Ecology and Sustainable Development undertook to implement the report recommendations.

12.   Pragmatism of the overall approach

The approach was pragmatic. Since the French NSSD was due to review in 2008, the review was focused on identifying strengths and key areas of transformation of improvement in terms of process, content, outcomes and monitoring. It did nto

13.   French response to the review

France responded positively to the whole review idea and process in several ways:
- electing at the WSSD to be reviewed;
- embracing developing country participation in the PRT;
- government and non-state actors participation and commitment to the review;
- undertaking by minister responsible for SD to apply the recommendations in improving the French NSSD process;
- feeding the review recommendations immediately into a meeting of the inter-ministerial committee on SD two weeks after the review; sharing lessons in CSD 13 a month latter;
- discussion of review outcomes and recommendations in meeting of the ministry of foreign affairs on Africa after the CSD.

14.   Voluntary methodology

The decision by a country to undergo the review is voluntary. Also the choice of methodological options is voluntary. But the decision to use an agreed and structured methodology for the review cannot be voluntary; it must be mandatory to ensure

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methodological rigour and allow cross-country comparisons. The proposed template and method should have options, but the core specifications should be standard across countries.

15. Recommendations on methodology

1) Extensive pre-review planning is needed, as recommended earlier in Question 9 above.

2) Do a national assessment prior to the peer review: this would provide a nationally-owned background document, kick-start the review process, enable the country to form its team for the review and agree on national positions on issues for the review.

3) It is more time consuming and expensive to focus on content issues in a peer review; hence, it is advisable to use the national assessment to analyze content issues for the review.

4) It is essential to ensure that government members of the PRT are knowledgeable and experienced in NSSD; they should not be members merely because of their position in government.

5) Resources and time should be allocated for PRT members to familiarize themselves with review country way of doing things prior to the review.

6) All SD actors need to indicate how they would take on board review recommendations during the wrap-up session of the review meeting.

7) Civil society members of national peer teams (e.g. consultants) need to participate fully in all activities related to the review, including post-review dissemination and sharing of review lessons, such as EU or UN events. Since not many developing countries have experience with SD processes, the pool of developing country experience available to partner EU peers would be expanded by fully using non-government experts consultants.

8) The reviews should contribute to generating national or EU guidelines based on best practice and shared learning of experience, not the other way round. For example, the core specifications (under the planned EU guidelines) could be finalized after one or two reviews, using a learning by doing approach.

9) The reviews should generate recommendations also for countries yet to do NSSDs, not only for peers who have done it.

10) The assessment of NSSD contents in the review could be taken by review countries as peers making value judgments on their policy choices. This feeling could be minimized by both PRT and the review country (not government only)

partners agreeing upfront on outputs or standards (national and/or EU) against which the NSSD would be reviewed. This requires review planning meetings.

11) Consultants reports on NSSDs should be complemented by providing additional information to PRT members to enable them have as much information as possible on the review country before the review meetings commence.

12) Based on the French experience, it would be les contentious to review the process category than the content and output categories. Thus, it is useful to identify ways of improving analysis of process issues. Considering the NSSD process cycle, and, steps in developing strategy mechanisms allows a comprehensive analysis of process issues in the NSSD review. I have integrated guidelines in the United Nations and OECD guidelines for NSSD as follows to show elements of the NSSD process cycle to be analyzed in peer reviews:

<u>The NSSD process cycle to be analyzed in reviews</u>

- assessing SD issues and debate priorities, including analyzing current strategies
- identifying stakeholders and their relations, responsibilities and rights
- establishing a mandate for the strategy
- developing administrative support for the process with adequate capacity, resource endowment and powers
- agreeing on rules governing the strategy process
- reaching consensus on vision and policy goals for SD, including:
  - political process: engendering strong and sustained political leadership and commitment
- planning for and investing in SD, including
  - technical process: undertaking the range of regular analytical, debate and planning activities involved in strategy development, including establishing an implementation schedule of the strategy process
  - participatory processes: sustaining involvement of all interested and affected parties
  - resource mobilization process: ensuring available, adequate and sustainable resources for planning, implementation and feedback
  - empowerment and capacity building processes
- establishing mechanisms to be used for planning, implementing and investing in SD, covering
  - information system, including research and analysis
  - economic, social, environmental strategic assessment
  - participation mechanisms
  - negotiation and conflict management
  - prioritization, planning and decision-making
  - financial resource mobilization and allocation
  - change management
  - communication and awareness creation
- mainstreaming SD, controls and incentives
- identifying trade-offs and how to manage them
- establishing a continuous monitoring and accountability mechanism to monitor strategy mechanisms and outcomes

All the above processes are underpinned by and utilize continuous communication, participation, coordination, information and learning.

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