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*Pursuing sustainable
development in Norway:
The challenge of living up to Brundtland
at home**

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FOREWORD

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ABSTRACT

With the Norwegian Prime Minister, Gro Harlem Brundtland, as chair of the World Commission on Environment and Development, Norway became an early mover in politics for Sustainable Development (SD). The pursuit of SD goals has been expressed in several national policy documents, though it was not until 2002 that Norway adopted an explicit “National Strategy for Sustainable Development” (NSSD). This was followed up by a “National Action Plan for Sustainable Development” (NASD) in 2003. Neither of these initiatives have been actively implemented, and both are now being evaluated and revised by the current “red-green” coalition government. The article presents and assesses strategic SD initiatives from 1989 to the present day. The major conclusion of the analysis is that the Norwegian SD profile is “long on promise” and “short on delivery”; and that a major reason for this is an exceptional surplus in state revenues due to a booming petroleum economy. The surplus fosters intense political competition over the dispensation of economic and welfare benefits, pushing the national SD agenda into the background. Given the ability to also use the surplus for development assistance, Norway stands forth as an SD “frontrunner” in international aid, and an SD “laggard” in sustainable production and consumption at home.

1 INTRODUCTION

With the Norwegian Prime Minister, Gro Harlem Brundtland, as Chair of the World Commission on Environment and Development, Norway became an early mover in politics for Sustainable Development (SD) (Langhelle, 2000). Political ambitions for SD were manifested in several policy documents and initiatives throughout the 1990s, but a specific “National Strategy for Sustainable Development” (NSSD) was not prepared until 2002 (MoFA 2002), and an “action plan” for implementing the strategy (NASD) did not appear until late 2003 (MoF 2003). A marked shift in approach can be identified between the launch of the Brundtland Report in 1987 and the adoption of the NSSD and NASD. While the earlier efforts to promote SD were mainly “top-down”, with little stakeholder involvement, the later efforts were more inclusive (though not necessarily more consensual). On the other hand, however, the earlier efforts were followed up by formal initiatives to achieve SD policy integration, while the later efforts have yet to be seriously implemented. At the time of writing (December 2006), the current ‘red-green’ (centre-left) Government¹ has launched a major revision of both the strategy and action plan (along with an external evaluation by the Swedish Ministry of Sustainable Development), despite the fact that little has been done to specifically implement either.²

In both the Brundtland report (WCED, 1987) and the action plan from Rio (*Agenda 21*), the goal of adapting economic and social policy to environmental concerns was viewed as the “chief institutional challenge in the 1990s” (WCED, 1987: 313). This challenge was subsequently conceptualized as “Environmental Policy Integration” (EPI), an idea that has been actively profiled by, among others, the UN, EU and OECD as a key feature of “governance for sustainable development” (Lenschow, 2001; Lafferty and Hovden, 2003; Lafferty, 2004). We have also argued elsewhere, that although NSSDs are an extremely important governing mechanism, they will only function effectively within a supportive context (Lafferty and Meadowcroft, 2000). This interdependency has also been highlighted by the UNCSD in their check-list of “key characteristics” for NSSDs. The strategies should be: based on existing initiatives (such as existing plans); reflect current priorities and take into account emerging issues; be based on the widest possible participation and involvement of all segments of society; involve a system for monitoring and evaluation; and, of most importance in the present context, reflect a country’s commitment to put in place the institutional mechanisms necessary to the achievement of SD through integrated economic, social and environmental policy planning.³

In the following assessment, we have used these perspectives and guidelines to select what we believe to be the most crucial initiatives for promoting strategic SD initiatives in Norway. The initiatives are presented in accordance with the categories suggested for the special issue, and reflect the opinion of

the authors that: (1) the documents and routines adopted post-Brundtland can be viewed as an unofficial 'strategy'; (2) the process has been both cyclical and fragmented; and (3) the key factor qualifying the success of the strategic initiatives is an unresolved conflict between the material and welfare opportunities offered by a rapidly expanding petroleum economy, and the "political will" necessary to convert SD norms into SD reality.

2 STRATEGIC INITIATIVES FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN NORWAY

In order to understand the basis and context for the cyclical and relatively fragmented approach to sustainable development in Norway, we will first briefly outline the major white papers that constitute strategic initiatives. We will then in the following sections present a more detailed account of specific proposals from the documents.

2.1 Key SD documents

The 1989 white paper “*Environment and Development: Norway’s follow up of the World Commission’s report*” (White Paper 46, 1988-89) stands out as the historic point of departure for the Norwegian approach to an SD strategy. The White Paper has been characterized as Norway’s first “green plan” (Jänicke and Jörgens, 2000), but having been presented by Gro Harlem Brundtland as Prime Minister, and with several specific references to *Our Common Future*, it is generally acknowledged as the most ambitious and principled SD document produced by a Norwegian government. Mrs. Brundtland described the document as follows:

The White Paper [46] is the Norwegian Government’s major policy document on sustainable development. It presents a plan that involves all ministries, not only that of the environment and implies a change in attitudes and policies, as well as tough challenges for ministries such as energy, industry, transportation, finance, foreign affairs and trade. The Prime Minister’s Office has been directly engaged in charting a course for the future that cuts across all these sectors” (Brundtland, 1990: 155)

The White Paper was thus a “strategy” in practice, if not in name. It specifically transcended a narrow environmental approach; referred explicitly to “sustainable development”; and placed the principle of cross-sectoral policy integration at the centre of the Government’s SD programme (Langhelle, 2000).

The next major document was White Paper 13 (1992-93), the follow-up report from the Rio Earth Summit in 1992. The principal aim of this document was to give Parliament an overview of the decisions made in Rio, with a detailed assessment of the results. The Government here argued that a precondition for the success of *Agenda 21* was that every country should prepare national action plans with the *Agenda* as a point of departure (White Paper 13, 1992-93: 25). As we have seen, however, this goal remained unfulfilled in Norway for another 11 years.

Prior to the “Rio+5” meeting in New York in June 1997 (UNGASS), the Government put forth yet another major policy document entitled “Environmental Protection for Sustainable Development” (White Paper 58, 1996-97). While introducing several new mechanisms for the strengthening of environmental policy in all sectors, and making a particularly strong appeal for “Local Agenda 21”, the

general profile of the document was clearly more narrowly “environmentalist” than either of the two white papers outlined above. Furthermore, it marked a palpable lack of willingness on the part of the MoE to “front” the entire spectrum of SD issues, and no other governmental body at the time filled in the gaps.

The gaps remained open for the next four years. With less than a year left to the WSSD in Johannesburg, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs initiated a process for producing an official “National Strategy for Sustainable Development” (MoFA 2002).⁴ Both the process itself and the final (very short) document, were strongly criticized by researchers and NGOs alike (Lafferty et al., 2002). The process was coordinated by an inter-ministerial working group with representatives from several Ministries. The resulting NSSD is relatively concrete on conventional environmental policies, but is abstract and vague on policies related to socioeconomic issues and the global dimension. In general the strategy reiterated established environmental policy goals, but was very sparse on new objectives and targets.

The turmoil created by the NSSD process resulted in a promise by the Government to initiate a more ambitious SD action plan after Johannesburg. This time the responsibility for the process was given to the Ministry of Finance (MoF). The goal was to develop a more consequent platform for the plan by linking it to the annual state budget (making it, in fact, a separate sub-chapter of the budget). As such the procedure is in line with a Norwegian tradition of incorporating major policy-integration initiatives into the budgetary process. The consultation procedure for the NASD was broader and more interactive than for the NSSD, and was generally received positively by the environment-and-development community. The resulting plan was clearly more comprehensive and specific than the strategy, with numerous general objectives for a wide range of SD-related issues, but was nonetheless criticized as being weak on targets and timelines.⁵ Implementation of the plan was entrusted to an inter-ministerial committee of state secretaries (deputy ministers), under the leadership of the Ministry of Finance, and with representation from the Office of the Prime Minister and Ministries of the Environment, Foreign Affairs and Development, and Municipal and Regional Affairs.

In sum the principal SD-related policy declarations in Norway have been put forth in a relatively haphazard political fashion, with diverse administrative origins and little consistency or cumulative interdependence. In the following sections we explore the results of this process in closer detail, viewing specific strategic mechanisms in terms of: their “horizontal” and “vertical” dimensions; the instruments used in implementation; the participatory aspect; and the provisions for monitoring and evaluation.⁶

2.2 Integrating SD horizontally at the national level

As developed in Norway, this dimension involves activities of inter-ministerial coordination and cross-

sectoral procedures related to planning and the budget. It is here that the critical SD aspect of cross-sectoral coordination and the prioritisation of alternative interests and goals (“trade-offs”) come in. Although Norway never has had a separate “Green Cabinet” per se, it was made clear in White Paper 46 that the Government itself was to take full responsibility for SD in Norway (Langhelle, 2000: 181-183). This was, however, never actively profiled beyond the White Paper, and was certainly not realized in practice. We know of no instance where a Cabinet has been convened with “sustainable development” as a guiding principle for decision-making. The most prevalent horizontal governing mechanisms have been ad-hoc, inter-ministerial committees and budgetary and long-term planning procedures.

Most examples of the former are ad-hoc committees set up to report on single issues such as environmental taxes, climate policy, environmental policy instruments, biodiversity and sustainable consumption (Hovden and Torjussen, 2002). There have, however, also been instances of inter-ministerial committees of State Secretaries (deputy ministers) with a more explicit responsibility for SD themes. A committee of this type was set up by White Paper 46 in 1989, but had little visibility and even less impact in the promotion of SD. More recently, similar committees have been established to develop both the 2002 NSSD and the 2003 NASD. As yet, however, neither of these has been demonstrably effective in pursuing the SD agenda. The major accomplishment to date of the committee established to promote the NASD within the Ministry of Finance has been to commission a new set of SD indicators (see below). Whether this committee will be more effective under the leadership of the new red-green coalition remains to be seen.

A much more ambitious attempt to ensure horizontal integration of SD issues in Norway has been the so-called “National Environmental Monitoring System” (NEMS)⁷. The NEMS can be characterized as a procedural tool to organize national environmental policies and to integrate environmental concerns into other policy areas. Although horizontal integration is only one of the goals of the system, we will here provide a comprehensive overview of the initiative, and make more cursory references to the system in the other sections.

Building on and expanding provisions initialized in White Paper 46 (1988-89), the NEMS was formalized in White Paper 58 (1996-97), with the Ministry of the Environment (MoE) given the responsibility for operationalization and implementation. As originally designed, the NEMS was a very ambitious effort to develop a monitoring framework for managing, not only sectoral efforts, but also the overall Norwegian national “environmental” effort. Two years after the launch of the system it was further specified in White Paper 8 (1999-2000: 9) that: *“Just as the State Budget describes the framework for the Government’s economic policy and economic trends, this White Paper is intended to describe the Government’s ecological policy and environmental trends.”* Even more importantly in the present context, the White Paper also openly declared that: *“With this report the Government wishes to*

emphasize the ecological perspective as the foundation for policy formation in all areas of society” (ibid: 9). An assessment of the NEMS provisions thus goes to the core of the SD strategy and initiatives in Norway.

The original purpose of the system was to provide continuous reporting and updates on the outcomes and impacts of national environmental policies. The model was specifically outlined as a five-stage “circular” effort, with an interdependent interaction among all five elements (as presented below).

The single most important element of the present national environmental policy in general, and of the NEMS in particular, is the series of bi-annual White Papers on “The Government’s Environmental Policy and State of the Environment”.⁸ The series constitutes the principal publication – and in many ways the cornerstone – of the NEMS, and is the only element of the system still operational. The reports contain systematic accounts of trends within eight specified priority areas (Box 1), and present the main elements and priorities in Norway’s “ecological” policy.⁹ Four “State of the Environment” (SE) reports have been published thus far, and a fairly strict framework for systematizing the reports has been established. Each priority area is structured in the same way: it contains a presentation of the goals and targets of the specific area, the state of the environment, goals achieved, and the policy instruments and initiatives in use.

Box 1: The eight priority areas for official environmental reporting in Norway

1. Conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity
2. Outdoor recreation
3. Cultural heritage
4. Eutrophication and oil pollution
5. Hazardous substances
6. Waste and recycling
7. Climate change, air pollution and noise
8. International cooperation and environmental protection in the polar areas

(Source: White Paper 58, 1996-97)

The second component of the NEMS consists of “Sectoral Environmental Action Plans” (SEAPs). These were to be prepared by each ministry, with the aim of: describing the principal environmental challenges within each sectoral domain; setting objectives and targets; and indicating the policy instruments available to meet the challenges. The plans were to be updated every four years, and were designed to show how each ministry could contribute to fulfilling the Government’s overall policy on sustainable development. To date, however, the ministries have prepared only one generation of SEAPs, and, subsequent to an unfavourable evaluation in 2003 (Statskonsult, 2003), the plans have now been phased out. According to the MoE, further efforts to achieve sectoral integration will be pursued by coupling integration more strongly to the SE reports and/or through the green budgeting

provision (EPSB – to be presented below).

The third NEMS component – ministerial reporting on the actual implementation of the SEAPs – was a crucial element of the original NEMS design. This part of the system (registering progress on the strategic objectives and sectoral targets) was *supposed to be* executed annually. This was not only to facilitate ministerial follow-up, but also to enable the functioning of the other elements of NEMS in accordance with the established routines, formats and standards, as well as to facilitate the reporting section in the SE reports. To our knowledge, however, no ministry has ever carried out this task.

As for the fourth component of the NEMS, the State Pollution Control Board (SFT) was to develop a “Results and Documentation System” (RDS); a web-based instrument designed to bring together and coordinate various statistical sources for assessing progress and the ministerial reporting on the actual implementation of the SEAPs. Data from the RDS were to be channelled into the bi-annual State of the Environment report; to be otherwise used by the environmental and sectoral authorities; and to be made available online at a separate website for presenting a more popularized version of the RDS (<http://www.environment.no>). The SFT developed a prototype of the system, but the response from the MoE was ambivalent and further work on the system has now been shelved (though this has not yet been formally acknowledged by the MoE).¹⁰

Finally, based on information derived from the RDS, “cross-sectoral analyses” were highlighted as a potential source of integrated assessment within the NEMS.¹¹ Such analyses were intended to form the basis for cross-sectoral applications and assessments of policy instruments. The initiative was, however, only related to NEMS in the first SE report (White Paper 8, 1998-99). Similar references in later reports have been dropped, and we have not been able to document why this fifth component of the system has simply ceased to function. The SFT did, however, conduct a cross-sectoral cost-benefit analysis of measures to abate climate change in 2000, and revised it in 2005. As nearly as we can determine, these studies have had little impact on the formulation of climate policy.

The breakdown of the NEMS is of crucial importance with respect to the implementation of the national SD action plan, since the plan specifically designates the system as a key instrument for achieving cross-sectoral integration. Given that the inter-ministerial committee entrusted with the implementation of the NASD has initiated no other mechanisms for horizontal integration, the objectives of the action plan remain dormant.¹²

2.3 SD strategies and vertical integration

In the present context the vertical dimension refers to the interaction between the central and local levels of governance. Being a unitary state, with only limited delegation of political and administrative responsibility to the middle (county) level of governance, the principal SD focus in Norway has been

on the relationship between national and municipal authorities within the context of “Local Agenda 21”.¹³

A framework for integrating ecological concerns more broadly into Norwegian policy-making was launched in 1997 by a Labour Government under Thorbjørn Jagland (Aall, 2001). The framework included approaches to the interaction between relevant ministries and external participants; facilitated both national and regional networks; and provided communication facilities between the MoE and the municipalities (ibid: 85). The MoE had also previously experimented with several SD-related pilot programs, and had financially sponsored the establishment of “environmental officers” in all municipal administrations. These efforts were subsequently channelled into a relatively late, but ultimately very active, initiative on Local Agenda 21 by the MoE. A specific LA21 unit was established in the ministry and special resource units were established within the county administrations to channel information to the municipalities and develop network facilities for joining the central and local levels. (Aall, 2001; Bjørnæs and Norland, 2002) Other instruments were the dissemination of guidelines and recommendations for LA21, many of which were derived from specific research and evaluation activities (Lafferty, 2001a). There were, however, no procedures for coordinating policy priorities between the local and central levels.

The broad-based LA21 initiative thus had no basis in a coherent national SD strategy, and in 2002 the centre-right government phased out the resources allocated to the LA21 program. In the NASD presented in 2003, Local Agenda 21 was barely mentioned, and no official evaluation of the earlier initiatives has been carried out. Current political signals indicate that central-government support for LA21-like activities will be stepped up, and the MoE sponsored (in cooperation with the Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities - KS) a high-profile conference on local sustainability in October of 2006. A comprehensive overview of the LA21 experience in Norway (Lafferty et al., 2006) will be presented in January of 2007.

2.4 Implementing SD-related initiatives at the national level

The first systematic attempt to promote sectoral integration was the so-called “Environmental Profile of the State Budget” (EPSB), a relatively modest attempt to “green” the budget. It was introduced as early as 1989, and was presented (until 1992) in the principal document of the budget under the heading “Follow-up on the World Commission for Sustainable Development”. The EPSB was the predecessor of the NEMS, and was to achieve three major goals: First, the ministries were to use the EPSB to highlight the main environmental challenges, targets and initiatives for the sector in the forthcoming fiscal year; second, the ministries were to provide an overview of budgetary allocations according to their degree of “environmental motivation” (that is, intent – not impact); and, third, “if possible”, the ministries were to assess the environmental effects (actual outcomes) of budget allocations for the

previous two years (Riksrevisjonen, 1999).

The EPSB was the first governing mechanism specifically designed to realize SD policies in Norway, and the task was portrayed in the White Paper as: “*A cross sectoral policy [which] will place new demands on the public administration*” (ibid: 71).

Both the scope and the methodology of the EPSB have been developed over time. Since the introduction of the NEMS in 2000, reporting in the EPSB has corresponded to the eight policy priority areas of the NEMS (Box 1). The NEMS and the EPSB have thus been leading parallel – and somewhat overlapping – lives, despite the fact that the NEMS was originally introduced to replace the EPSB. The problem appears to be a classic case of “unresolved turf” among the ministries. The MoE is responsible for NEMS and for the overall coordination and assessment of the *environmental* reporting from the various ministries; but it is the MoF which has the overall responsibility for coordinating the budget, *and* for providing the ministries with directives on how environmental reporting should be carried out.

Thus in principle all ministries are to specify the environmental impacts of their budgets, and of the main sectoral policy goals in the State Budget; and, as of 2004, all ministries are to report on the relationship between their budgets and the objectives of the NASD. These reports are compiled and presented in the annual National Budget, but thus far the budget overview only refers to the sectoral information, with no reference to the implementation of the NASD as a whole.

The EPSB system is still functioning, but the tendency is for the accounts to be less and less detailed for each passing year. With the SEAPs phased out and the quality of the EPSB declining, there is an obvious lack of a coherent framework which connects overall governmental strategy with ongoing sectoral policy implementation. Furthermore, as indicated above, there has been no apparent attempt to integrate the goals and objectives of the NASD into sectoral policy, so that the national strategic intent of the plan remains unfulfilled as to both process and results.

2.5 Participation in the SD strategy process

In the wake of the first major SD strategy document (White Paper 46, 1988-89), the Government appointed in 1990 a National Council for Sustainable Development (NCSD). The intention was that the Council should play a major role in bringing together strategic stakeholders with key governmental ministries. The Council was chaired by the Prime Minister, with permanent representation for the Ministers of the Environment, Petroleum and Energy, Transport and Communications, and Trade and Industry. Other ministers were to participate on a theme-to-theme basis. In addition, there was permanent representation for the Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions (LO), the Confederation of Norwegian Business and Industry (NHO), the Norwegian Association of National and Regional Authorities (KS), and the Friends of the Earth Norway. Despite its very ambitious remit, the NCSD

clearly failed as a mobilizing and coordinating forum. It held a number of thematic meetings during the first years of its existence, but was quietly phased out in 1994 (Hovden and Torjussen, 2002: 26-27).

The only other body established of similar nature (in 1993), is the National Committee for International Environmental Questions (NIM). This organ, chaired by the Minister of the Environment, with broad ministerial and NGO representation, functions principally as a forum for contact and communication between the Government and civil society on issues of international environmental importance. Its goal is to guarantee transparency and (relative) consensus on Norway's role in shaping international environmental regimes, and has *very* little to do with promoting sustainable development at home. It still exists, and is a principal manifestation of the type of close state-NGO interaction that typifies Norway's SD performance in international fora.

Both of these bodies were presented at inception as important participatory channels for implementing SD strategy in Norway. Given, however, that the initial SD white paper was never followed up as a strategy per se, and that it was not until 2003 that the SD Action Plan was in place, it is clear that the bodies in question have not played a major role in either profiling or implementing domestic SD policy.¹⁴

With the exception of the MoE initiatives on Local Agenda 21 (from 1997), it thus seems valid to claim that the follow-up of SD-related policies prior to 2002 was predominantly top-down and bureaucracy-driven, with at best token stakeholder involvement. This changed somewhat with the processes leading up to the NSSD in 2002 (though the process itself was judged as seriously flawed); was improved for the preparation of the NASD in 2003; and was markedly improved for the process leading to Norway's new SD indicator set (see below). Comprehensive stakeholder involvement has also been projected for the revision of the NSSD to be finalized in 2008.

2.6 Monitoring and evaluation

As described above, reporting on the status of environmental impacts and changes is relatively sophisticated in Norway, and the NEMS system *could have been* a fairly comprehensive tool for monitoring and evaluating the ecological dimension of SD. But the NEMS model has now been eviscerated, and there are no designated official initiatives in place to monitor and evaluate Norway's progress on the broader SD agenda. A need for more specific SD indicators was expressed in both the NSSD and NASD, leading to the appointment of an expert commission. The commission conducted several open hearings, and appointed an ongoing "reference group" of academics and NGO representatives. The final set of indicators – "Simple Signals in a Complex World" (NOU 5, 2005) – was issued in 2005.

The indicators strongly reflect the conceptual logic of Norway's system of "national accounts" and

different types of “capital”. The set is designed to cover six issue areas: (1) Climate, ozone and long-range transboundary air pollution; (2) Biodiversity and cultural change; (3) Natural resources; (4) Hazardous substances; (5) Sustainable economic development; and (6) Social issues.¹⁵ With some minor amendments, the 16 indicators are to be used to evaluate the follow-up of the SD strategic objectives outlined in the Action Plan. The results are to be presented as reports within the framework of the National Budget, and Statistics Norway is assigned responsibility for updating and interpreting changes in the measures. As pointed out by several participants in the reference group, however, the indicators are mainly status-oriented (focussing strongly on the sustainability of national capital stocks), and seem to provide few direct insights into the dynamic relationship between critical social economic “drivers” and the “responses” necessary to alter negative trends. The relationship to an active implementation of either the NSSD or the NASD thus seems tenuous. Until this is resolved, the monitoring and evaluation of SD in Norway will remain relatively descriptive and static, focused on the presentation of incremental changes in the SD indicators in the annual State Budget and on the bi-annual reports from the MoE on the “State of the Environment”.

A new initiative related to evaluation has, however, been introduced by the new Socialist-Left minister of the MoF (who has declared her wish to be known as the “Minister of Sustainable Development”). The Ministry requested the Swedish Ministry of Sustainable Development to evaluate the existing Norwegian NSSD and NASD as a whole. The responsibility for the evaluation was then transferred to the Swedish Ministry of Finance. An initial conference to prepare the evaluation was held in December 2006, but it remains unclear as to what the focus and dimensions of the evaluation will be.

2.7 Summary of the SD strategy process

In spite of the variety of strategic provisions and initiatives introduced in Norway, there are currently very few that function as intended. The overall impression is one of cyclical political interest, starts-and-stops and fragmentation. Even in the early Post-Rio 1990s there was a distinct lack of an overarching entity responsible for the horizontal integration of SD in Norway. Although the NEMS was planned as a comprehensive system, it was – as the name indicates – primarily a monitoring system, not a governing tool. On the vertical dimension the LA21 process was originally characterized by openness and cooperation between the MoE, local and regional stakeholders and external experts. For nearly a decade this was the *only* initiative in Norway with a direct reference to the Rio Action Plan.

With respect to those initiatives that in one way or another have been identified with SD goals, it is noteworthy that the EPSB has, in differing versions, functioned for almost two decades. The process has, however, been little profiled by the authorities; was never coordinated with the NEMS; and is not mentioned directly in either the NSSD or the NASD. We must also stress again that while elements of

the NEMS, particularly the SEAPs, *could* have facilitated sectoral implementation of SD policies, these ministerial action plans never functioned according to design and were discontinued after 2003.

The preparation of the NSSD in 2002 and the NASD in 2003 marked a “high point” for official emphasis on sustainable development in Norway. In retrospect, however, the emphasis seems to have been principally motivated by the need for an improved international image at the Johannesburg Summit. With the exception of the much-debated work on SD indicators, follow-up of the two national documents was minimal under the initiating centre-right government, and is now under revision by the existing centre-left government.

3 ANALYSING THE NORWEGIAN SD PROFILE

As evident from the above presentation, the process in relation to a Norwegian SD strategy has not been developed in a straight line. The original white paper – which was primarily a governmental strategy for integrating SD principles in all sectors – was neither explicitly profiled, nor followed up, as an “SD Strategy”. SD initiatives between the 1989 white paper and the 2002 “National Strategy for Sustainable Development” focused principally on the integration of “ecological” concerns in all sectors. The key instruments here were the NEMS and the EPSB. These were designed to be integrative and interactive in the promotion of sustainable development – but have been documented here to be fragmented and relatively ineffective in promoting the SD agenda. The most recent phase, which focuses on the NSSD and NASD, marks an important shift in responsibility from the MoE to the MoF, but has thus far only resulted in a new set of national SD indicators. The NASD has been integrated into the National Budget, but this is currently only a procedural convention and has not led to new procedures for evaluating the numerous goals of the NASD, or for effectively integrating sectoral initiatives with national strategy. The “storyline” for Norway’s national strategy for sustainable development is thus one of: “High ambitions – disjointed follow-up – inconsequential results”. Why is this so? What are the most plausible explanations for this apparent lack of robust SD processes and significant SD outcomes in the Land of Brundtland?

There are clearly no simple answers to the question, but on the basis of a continuous monitoring of the situation since the Rio Summit, we have identified certain key features of the Norwegian experience which point towards a very “idiographic” (particularist) explanation.¹⁶ Norway emerges as a distinct *anomaly* with respect to sustainable development. It is because the distance between rhetoric and reality is greater for Norway than for most other Western countries, that the case takes on a special significance. In the following, we explore possible reasons for this difference at a relatively high level of generalization. Beginning with the notion of “political will” – as stressed in this context by both academics (Lafferty and Meadowcroft, 2000; Jordan, 2002a, 2002b) and international organizations (OECD, 2001, 2002a, 2002b) – we point to the interactive effect between *domestic political leadership* and *international identities and ambitions*.¹⁷

A decisive point of departure for the initial attempts to institutionalize SD principles in Norway is the position of Gro Harlem Brundtland. Through her joint role as Chairperson for the WCED and Norway’s dominant political figure throughout the decade of 1986-96, Brundtland used her WCED role to introduce the principles of *Our Common Future* directly into Norwegian politics. Under her leadership, Norway also played a major role in the international preparations for Rio. These activities

led to both the highly ambitious White Paper 46 of 1989, and a *very* high-profile involvement of both Norwegian politicians and NGO leaders in Rio.

But then something happened. Our previous analyses indicate that Gro Harlem Brundtland was (in private) very disappointed with the outcome of Rio (Lafferty et al., 1997 and 2002). Coupled with a conviction that Norway already was far ahead of the rest of the world on SD implementation (a perception that was not unrealistic, given the ambitions of White Paper 46), the attitude of the Government was apparently “Been there – done that”. This explains why the follow-up document from Rio (White Paper 13) was more a summary overview of what had happened at UNCED than either a strategy or action plan. It also explains why the MoE was extremely slow to either react to or endorse the single most successful global initiative from the Rio Action Plan, Local Agenda 21. After initially claiming that Norway already was a “league leader” on promoting SD at the local level, it was not until 1996 that the Government took a closer look at what was going on in the rest of the world – and finally initiated a support programme for LA21. As pointed out above, however, this programme became the *only* governmental initiative with express reference to *Agenda 21* – right up to the adoption of the national SD action plan in 2003.

With White Paper 58 (1996-97) a second generation of initiatives was grafted onto the first initiatives after Brundtland’s withdrawal from the leadership of the Labour Party in 1996. These initiatives were, however, neither adequately coordinated with the instruments laid out in White Paper 46, nor were they followed through in their own right. Throughout the entire decade 1992-2002, Norway increasingly developed an SD profile which was “bifurcated”: very active and morally pretentious in international environment-and-development forums; and increasingly passive and non-consequential in fronting and promoting SD at home. By the year 2000, a comprehensive analysis of SD implementation in high-consumption societies concluded that Norway was “reluctantly carrying the torch” from Rio (Lafferty and Meadowcroft, 2000).

In our view this “reluctance” is a direct reflection of national political priorities (trade-offs) related to the increasingly dominant role of the petroleum sector in the Norwegian economy. The impacts of the petroleum economy on the will to pursue sustainable production and consumption in Norway have been massive. The prospect of steadily increasing state revenues from the petroleum and gas activities of the Norwegian continental shelf, directly “fuelled” the politics of both “business as usual” and increasing welfare benefits. With the exception of Thorbjørn Berntsen’s initial period as Minister of the Environment (Labour – 1990-1996), no political leader in power has demonstrated any willingness to actively promote the Rio Agenda, or to put into place significant new SD steering instruments. The Government of Kjell Magne Bondevik (a centre-right coalition led by his Christian People’s Party), finally produced the NSSD in 2002 and the NASD in 2003 – and the rhetoric associating these initiatives with the Johannesburg Summit was again very florid and enthusiastic – but once again, the

follow-up was both minimal and formalistic. Given further that the major negative consequences of the petroleum economy are off-shore and global (greenhouse gas emissions), the cumulative result has been an SD political culture which actively embraces a frontrunner role in international development issues, while just as actively pursuing a non-sustainable business-and-welfare-as-usual path at home.

4 CONCLUSIONS

With respect to possible lessons for SD strategies in general, the Norwegian case manifests a relatively unique curve of activity. Beginning with a strong recognition of a need for overarching strategy in the period 1987-1992, the commitment declines progressively in the post-Rio decade; and only re-emerges immediately before and after the WSSD in Johannesburg. One sees throughout the 1990s selective attempts to promote SD through the sectoral integration of “ecological concerns”; but the follow-up of these initiatives fails to correspond with either intentions or possibilities. As indicated elsewhere in this volume, the situation is in direct contrast to Norway’s neighbour Sweden, where political interest in sustainable development *per se* has resulted in numerous strategic ploys and institutional reforms. As for participation and consultation in Norway, the record is also partial and cyclical. Procedures for consultation with business interests and civil society have been established; but they seldom go beyond consultation, and tend to be largely focused on international negotiations. A late-but-solid effort on Local Agenda 21 (1997-2001) represents an isolated exception to the general trend, but all-in-all – and allowing for possible new initiatives from the current “red-green” government – the record compares poorly with the participatory goals outlined for “Major Groups” in *Agenda 21*.

As a final point, however, it should be stressed that this generalization is specific with respect to an emphasis on *sustainable development*. Nearly all ministers of the environment over the “declining decade” would (and several explicitly have) defend their records as “working for sustainable development” – even if they haven’t called it that. And in a certain sense this is of course true. But, as clearly stated in the Brundtland Report, the goal of sustainable development transcends the “standard agenda” of focusing on environmental effects. The SD approach concentrates on “the policies that are the sources of those effects”, and the two approaches represent “distinctively different ways of looking both at the issues and at the institutions to manage them” (WCED: 310). In our assessment Norway has perhaps done reasonably well on the “standard” environmental agenda; but has yet to either institutionalize or realize an effective implementation of the SD strategy. Given the peculiarities of the Norwegian situation – the dominating role of Gro Harlem Brundtland at the start of the period, and the dominating effect of the petroleum economy at the end – it is difficult to discern relevant lessons for SD strategies in general.

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6 NOTES

¹ The Norwegian Labour Party is currently sharing Cabinet power with the Centre Party and the Socialist Left Party. The Socialist Left has been viewed as a principal proponent of SD in Norway, and the head of the party has been appointed Minister of Finance (the ministry entrusted with the implementation of the national SD action plan). Another Socialist-Left representative, Helen Bjørnøy, has been given the Ministry of the Environment.

² The current revision is to be managed by a State Secretary Committee coordinated by the Ministry of Finance. According to the announcement made by MoF in April 2006, the current revision is motivated by the SD ambitions enunciated in the Joint Political Declaration of the ‘Red-Green Government’ (*Soria Moria Erklæringen*). The goal appears to be a new strategy which, on the one hand, is more specific with respect to targets and datelines; and, on the other, more broadly inclusive with respect to involving a greater number of non-governmental actors in implementation and follow-up. As nearly as we can determine (from direct contacts with the Ministry), specific guidelines for the revision process are yet to be developed. The existing strategy will first be reviewed (in the spring of 2007) by an external panel coordinated by the Swedish Ministry of Finance. The outline of a new strategy will thus not be ready until the fall of 2007.

³ The guidelines are available at the website of the Division for Sustainable Development within the UN Department for Economic and Social Affairs: <http://www.un.org/esa/sustdev/natlinfo/indicators/isdms2001/isdms2001institutional.htm#strategy>

⁴ Norway’s National Strategy for Sustainable Development was presented by the Prime Minister on 14 August 2002. An English version is available at the MoFA website: http://odin.dep.no/filarkiv/158716/SustainableDev_1608.pdf.

⁵ “Norway’s Action Plan for Sustainable Development” (also referred to as “National Agenda 21”) was presented to Parliament by the Ministry of Finance on 3 October 2003. An English version is available at the Ministry of Finance website: http://odin.dep.no/filarkiv/206401/nat_action.pdf.

⁶ As indicated, the categories employed reflect the common approach of the special issue. They are, however, similar to the approach we have earlier developed for assessing governing mechanisms for sustainable development (with an emphasis on “environmental policy integration” – EPI) (Lafferty, 2001b; Lafferty and Hovden, 2003; Lafferty, 2004). The analysis here clearly builds on this earlier material.

⁷ “National Environmental Monitoring System” (NEMS) is a term coined by the authors. It is a loose translation of the Norwegian term “*resultatoppfølgingsystemet*”. No official English translation has been proposed by the authorities.

⁸ The original intention was to publish annual reports, but the Parliament later asked the MoE to prepare only bi-annual reports.

⁹ As indicated in Box 1, the “priority areas” include several dimensions (1, 2, 3, 7 and 8) which are not normally viewed as “environmental” issues. The inclusion of these areas within the “environmental” monitoring and reporting system is clearly a reflection of the initial SD discourse in Norway.

¹⁰ Telephone Interview with Mr. Grini of the MoE Oct 2, 2006.

¹¹ The Norwegian term is “*tverrsektorielle tiltaksanalyser*”

¹² The implementation section of the NASD also devotes considerable attention to the development of a “communications plan” for integrating and realizing the goals of the plan. To date there is no evidence that this sub-plan has ever been initiated.

¹³ Sub-national governance in Norway is divided into 18 counties (*fylke*) and 435 municipalities (*kommuner*). The larger cities also have sub-units for neighbourhood governance (*bydel*), but the powers transferred down by the urban municipalities are quite limited in scope.

¹⁴ This assessment contrasts sharply with an earlier assessment made in a report to the UNCSD by Sverdrup (1997). While we agree that the NIM has played an important coordinating role for *international* environmental policy, it has had virtually no effect on the promotion of SD as a cross-sectoral issue in Norway. See the more detailed evaluation in Hovden and Torjussen (2002).

¹⁵ An overview of the indicators and their rationale is available at the MoF website: <http://www.dep.no/filarkiv/246109/Indicators.pdf>.

¹⁶ The senior author has been the director, since 1991, of two contiguous research programmes designed to monitor and evaluate Norway’s post-Rio SD initiatives. Both projects have been financed by the Research Council of Norway, and the cumulative publications of the projects – including comprehensive five-year evaluations in 1997 and 2002 – are available at the ProSus website: <http://sum.uio.no/prosus>.

¹⁷ A much more comprehensive analysis of the factors underlying different national profiles for implementing sustainable development is available in Lafferty and Meadowcroft (2001, Chapters 12 and 13).