



# Environment fact sheet:

# sustainable development



- Human progress is sustainable when economic prosperity, social justice and a healthy environment go hand in hand.
- These three issues are important to citizens in Europe and elsewhere. They are also key to ensuring welfare that not only takes our needs into account, but also the needs of future generations.
- The EU is committed to achieving sustainable development at home and globally. All European policies should contribute to this objective. This requires looking for synergies and reducing trade-offs between them.
- Since 2001, the EU has been implementing a sustainable development strategy. Under this umbrella, EU environmental policies seek to ensure an environment that is productive, clean and healthy.
- Despite important achievements in implementing the EU sustainable development strategy, unsustainable trends persist, ranging from climate change to the ageing of societies in developed countries and a widening gap between the rich and the poor in the world.
- The EU is renewing and strengthening the strategy to accelerate the pace of change towards a world that is more prosperous, environmentally healthier and more socially inclusive.

## **Fact 1: Sustainable development is needed to ensure lasting human welfare**

The most frequently used definition of sustainable development is 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'. It was coined in 1987 by the United Nations-appointed World Commission on Environment and Development, also known as the Brundtland Commission after its chair, former Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland.

Faced with widespread environmental degradation in the world and distressing global inequalities, the Brundtland Commission advocated a sustainable development that would simultaneously seek to meet the development needs of the poor and ensure that economic progress no longer harms the environment. Sustainable development thus offers a long-term vision of progress that integrates social, economic and environmental needs, local and global needs, and immediate and longer term needs.

Today, there is little doubt about the wisdom of sustainable development. But the world is still far from having reached such a development path. In the environmental field, the challenges range from accelerating climate change to loss of biodiversity and increasing water scarcity.

## **Fact 2: The EU is committed to sustainable development**

Sustainable development became a fundamental objective of the EU in 1997 when it was included in the Treaty of Amsterdam as an overarching objective of EU policies. At the Gothenburg Summit in June 2001, EU leaders launched a specific sustainable development strategy based on a proposal from the European Commission.

This strategy is composed of two main parts. The first proposes objectives and policy measures to tackle a number of key unsustainable trends in the EU and globally. The priorities are to:

- combat climate change;
- ensure sustainable transport;
- address threats to public health, such as chemicals pollution, unsafe food and infectious diseases;
- manage natural resources more responsibly and stop biodiversity decline;
- combat poverty and social exclusion; and
- meet the challenge of an ageing population.

The second — and arguably more ambitious — part of the strategy revises the very way that policies are made. It calls for a new approach to policy-making that ensures the EU's economic, social and environmental policies mutually reinforce each other. It also stresses the global dimension of sustainable development — the important contribution that the EU can make to helping all nations, particularly developing countries, reach a sustainable development path.

Launching the strategy, EU leaders declared that it 'adds a third, environmental dimension to the Lisbon strategy' of economic and social renewal. These two strategies are complementary.

The Lisbon strategy focuses on growth and jobs, while the sustainable development strategy is overarching and qualifies which kind of growth we want to pursue.

The Gothenburg Declaration forms the core of what is known as the EU's sustainable development strategy (EU SDS).

But this strategy also encompasses other programmes and commitments. For example, it includes the commitments made at the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg and the Millennium Development Goals agreed in 2000, as well as global pledges to increase official development aid and to take account of the needs of developing countries in international trade.



### **Fact 3: The EU is making progress towards sustainable development**

There has been some important progress over the first five years of the sustainable development strategy. A few highlights:

- The EU leads global efforts against climate change. Since 2000, it has put in place around 35 cost-effective measures at EU level — including the EU emissions trading scheme — to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The EU and most of its Member States are on track to reach their emission reduction targets under the Kyoto Protocol. Now the EU's focus is on identifying measures to achieve greater reductions in the future and on ensuring broad global participation in future efforts.
- The European Commission has proposed a far-reaching new EU regulatory system for chemicals, whose adoption is expected in 2006. Known as REACH, the new system will improve protection of human health and the environment from the risks that chemicals can pose. It will require producers and importers, for the first time ever, to generate and disseminate safety information about some 30 000 chemicals used in the EU.
- In 2006, the Commission will present a roadmap to reach the target of stopping the loss of biodiversity in the EU by 2010. The EU is close to completing its Natura 2000 network of protected nature areas, which is a key contribution to nature conservation in Europe covering almost a fifth of the EU's land and water.
- At the end of 2005, the Commission proposed a long-term EU strategy for sustainable use of natural resources. According to the UN millennium ecosystem assessment (2005), 15 out of 24 ecosystems that support life on Earth are being degraded or used unsustainably<sup>(1)</sup>. The resources strategy addresses these threats in the EU, but also globally.
- In 2004, the Commission launched the environmental technologies action plan, which seeks to dismantle administrative, financial and technical obstacles to the development and wider use of environmental technologies. Eco-technologies represent a win-win-win solution in the context of sustainable development since they protect the environment, increase competitiveness and create jobs.
- Since 2003, the Commission has carried out impact assessments of all its major policy proposals in order to analyse and balance their economic, social and environmental effects. Stakeholders are closely involved in this analysis.
- The 2003 reform of EU agricultural policy is reducing incentives for intensive production and makes payments to farmers dependent on respect of environmental, food safety and animal welfare standards. By cutting overproduction, it will also allow farmers in developing countries greater access to EU and world markets. The reform of the EU fisheries policy, which went into effect in January 2003, aims to reduce pressure on depleted fish stocks.
- The EU is following up on initiatives it launched at the WSSD in Johannesburg. It has made available EUR 500 million for the EU Water Initiative, which is contributing to achieving the commitments on drinking water and sanitation. The EU Energy Initiative aims to provide access to modern, affordable and sustainable energy services, with EUR 200 million available from 2006. The Johannesburg Renewable Energy Coalition, which promotes renewable energies on the basis of targets and timetables, has now over 90 member countries.
- EU Member States are on track to increase official development assistance (ODA) in line with the international 2002 Monterrey Consensus and a series of EU intermediate targets. In 2003, the EU's ODA reached an average of 0.35 % of gross national income (GNI), which makes it the world's largest donor, providing 54 % of global ODA. The final target is 0.7 % of GNI by 2015.
- Sustainability concerns are beginning to be integrated into development cooperation and trade agreements. They also play a central role in the new European neighbourhood policy, which governs relations with third countries around the EU's borders.



(1) See <http://www.millenniumassessment.org/en/index.aspx>. A popularised version of the Millennium ecosystem assessment synthesis report can be found at <http://www.greenfacts.org/ecosystems/>



## **Fact 4: The EU is gearing up for stronger action**

The EU has made a good start in applying the principles of sustainable development, but the Commission believes that the rapid pace of change needs increased efforts to put Europe on a sustainable path. This requires a strategy with a stronger focus, a clearer division of responsibilities, wider ownership and broader support, a stronger integration of the international dimension, and more effective implementation and monitoring.

In December 2005, the Commission presented a review and platform for further action. This is part of the review of the sustainable development strategy, which has to take place at the start of each new Commission. The reviewed strategy is due to be adopted at the EU summit in June 2006.

The Commission's proposals build on the existing priorities since these are as relevant today as they were in 2001. In some cases, the Commission is advocating a shift in focus to take account of progress made, tackle shortcomings and take account of new challenges. For example, today it is important that the EU works towards broad international agreement on future action against climate change and that funding for research, technological development and eco-innovation is increased.

The review also calls on governments, businesses, NGOs and citizens to become more involved. It is a starting point for ensuring that EU institutions and Member States work in an effective partnership to achieve change, measuring progress and regularly reviewing priorities. Furthermore, the Commission suggests that the external dimension of sustainable development (for example, global resource use, international development concerns) is better factored into EU internal policy-making and that the external impacts of EU policies are assessed more consistently.

## **Fact 5: Everybody needs to contribute to sustainable development**

Sustainable development is a vision and a way of thinking and acting. It will not be brought about by policies only — it must be taken up by society at large as a principle guiding the many choices each citizen makes every day, as well as the big political and economic decisions that affect many.

The EU's revised sustainable development strategy will put an emphasis on involving citizens and stakeholders. Ultimately, the vision will become reality only if everybody contributes to a world where economic freedom, social justice and environmental protection go hand in hand, making our own and future generations better off than now.

We must push ahead together with changing our societies. We need to produce and consume in smarter ways and discover new, more sustainable ways of growing economically, whilst making sure that everybody benefits from the proceeds of this growth. We need new and cleaner sources of energy, better ways of working with the Earth's resources, more efficient transport of people and of goods, and a more inclusive global society.

### **Further information**

The European Commission's sustainable development site with all relevant documents:  
[http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/sustainable/welcome/index\\_en.htm](http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/sustainable/welcome/index_en.htm)

European Commission's 'press room' on sustainable development:  
[http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/press\\_room/presspacks/sustdev/index\\_en.htm](http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/press_room/presspacks/sustdev/index_en.htm)

Progress in reaching the Millennium Development Goals:  
[http://europa.eu.int/comm/development/body/communications/communications\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu.int/comm/development/body/communications/communications_en.htm)

The EU and the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD):  
[http://europa.eu.int/comm/environment/wssd/index\\_en.html](http://europa.eu.int/comm/environment/wssd/index_en.html)

'Gateway' of the sustainable development communications network:  
<http://www.sdgateway.net/introsd/>