

INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Governments all over the world are trying to achieve a better quality of life for their citizens, now and for generations to come. This includes ensuring the health of the natural environment upon which we depend – clean air, clean water, and clean land. It also means ensuring access to health, education and social services as well as extending the benefits of economic prosperity to a broader segment of the population. We have to find a way to do all this without diminishing the availability of these resources for future generations.

The World Commission on Environment and Development (the Brundtland Commission) called this effort “sustainable development”. Since then, governments around the world have adopted this broad concept as a key public policy goal and explored how to translate it into concrete steps for action.

National governments and international organizations have recognized that achieving sustainable development is about fundamental change. It requires a strategic approach to set a long-term direction and to integrate policies and actions across all sectors of government and society. This is a complex challenge. Kofi Annan, Secretary General of the United Nations, has stated that “Our biggest challenge in the new century is to take the idea that seems abstract – sustainable development – and turn it, too, into a daily reality for all the world’s people”.

THE CANADIAN EXPERIENCE

At the end of the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, Canada committed to making progress towards sustainable development. Therefore, in 1995 the federal government created the position of Commissioner of the Environment, required 28 departments and agencies to develop sustainable development strategies, and produced terms of reference for greening government activities, which were to be taken into consideration by the departments when developing their SDSs.

A Guide to Green Government, published in 1995 in response to Agenda 21, allowed Canada to take the next step toward sustainable development. In this document, the federal government made a commitment to “turn talk into action” and integrate sustainable development “into the way government defines its business and makes its decisions.”

The federal government has set out five objectives to fulfil its commitment to sustainable development (SD):

- sustaining our natural resources;
- protecting the health of Canadians and ecosystems;
- fulfilling our international obligations;
- promoting equity;
- improving the quality of life and well-being.

Moreover, the government has selected the following concrete means for meeting these objectives:

- good use of non-renewable resources;
- sustainable management of renewable resources;
- protection of natural areas and preservation of biodiversity;
- pollution prevention;

- fair distribution of costs and benefits among generations and between the poor and the affluent;
- elimination of nearly all-persistent toxic substances, protection of the ozone layer, and reduction in greenhouse gas emissions.

Fundamental structures have been put in place

Amendments to the *Auditor General Act* in 1995 constituted the most decisive institutional change ever to take place in Canada. Under these amendments, the federal government required that each department prepare a Sustainable Development Strategy, including objectives and an action plan for integrating SD into its policies, programs, and activities, that would provide benchmarks for measuring progress. In addition, the government created the position of Commissioner of the Environment and

Sustainable Development whose responsibilities include reporting to Parliament annually on a number of important issues including those related to the environmental aspect of sustainable development, and especially monitoring and reporting on the progress made by the departments toward attaining their sustainable development objectives.

The Government of Canada has made the issue of sustainable development one of the main objectives of its official policies. It believes that sustainable development is an objective essential to governmental policies. But what does this mean in concrete terms?

Sustainable development involves three fundamental concepts.

1. *Development* is more than economic well-being, and encompasses quality of life and well-being as

determined by measures such as income, health, level of education, cultural diversity, community vitality, and quality of the environment.

2. SD is an *integrated approach to decision-making* that takes into account all these factors. It requires foresight and must not be seen as a hindrance to economic development. In fact, Canadians have increasingly come to understand that the state of the environment influences their health and economic prospects.
3. This integrated outlook must incorporate a *commitment to equity*, that is, not only the creation of wealth and preservation of the environment, but also ensuring fair distribution. This calls for a more equitable distribution of the costs and benefits of development among countries, between generations, and between the poor and the affluent.

The twenty-nine departments and agencies that prepare SDSs differ greatly in their mandates, in their resources and in their ability to influence Canada's sustainable development prospects. Consequently, the role of their SDS and the approaches taken when preparing their Strategies differ. Strategies may be used to encourage departments to pursue new strategic directions, they may be integral to delivering the mandate of a department, or they may be primarily focussed on operations. However, each Strategy outlines the department's goals and action plans for integrating sustainable development into their policies, programs and/or operations for a three-year time period. They are to be comprehensive, results-oriented and developed in consultation with clients, partners and other stakeholders.

As such, Sustainable Development Strategies must become change-related documents that broaden departments' perspectives on what they are doing and how they are doing it, by systematically taking

into account the environmental, economic, and social factors.

The CESD serves an important accountability and challenge function by measuring and reporting progress on the federal government's environment and sustainable development commitments.

Over the last few years, my office has conducted a number of audits that focussed on assessing the value of the SDSs. We have concluded that:

- most of the strategies do not constitute a commitment to change;
- strategies emphasize past accomplishments and the status quo;
- they are too general and include too many goals and objectives.

Examples of SDS Commitments

While there are areas for improvement, there are commitments in the sustainable development strategies that could lead to positive change. For example, Natural Resources Canada has a commitment to undertake research and development in the area of recycling and resource recovery in the minerals and metals sector. Another example is Fisheries and Oceans Canada, who have committed to introducing the precautionary approach into their fisheries management decisions.

Our audits also revealed that a sound Sustainable Development Strategy included the following characteristics:

- commitment from senior management;
- acknowledgement that this is an ongoing process;
- allocation of financial and human resources; and

- observance of the fundamental components of a management system: planning, implementing, checking and corrective actions, and management review. Checking and corrective actions and management review are the key components required to facilitate improvement.

We have also recently examined the Government of Canada's performance with regard to sustainable development from a federal management perspective on some aspects of the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence River basin. We conducted this audit for a number of reasons:

- First, the basin is an environmental resource that is essential to the whole planet; it provides 18% of fresh water reserves worldwide. We are responsible for managing this resource efficiently.
- Second, the state of the basin has repercussions on the quality of the air and drinking water, health,

employment, and leisure for 16 million Canadians and 25 million Americans.

- Third, the basin is, in some ways, a sustainable development laboratory; it allows us to test the government's ability to attain its objectives of economic prosperity, quality of life, and environmental health.

In many respects, the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence River Basin have similarities with the Pearl River Delta.

Our report sought to answer three questions:

- In what condition is the basin?
- What is the federal government's role and performance with regard to these areas of interest?
- How can the government improve its performance?

Our audit looked at environmental issues such as municipal and industrial pollution, contaminated sediments, drinking water, habitat loss, fisheries management, aquatic invasive species, soil erosion, manure management, wetlands, endangered species, and federal programs involving the ecosystem among others.

Over the last 30 years, water quality in the Lakes and River has improved and we credit the federal government and a number of other organizations for these results. We have, however, noted that enthusiasm has waned in the last few years and that the improvements made are fragile. The government has not met the legislative requirements, nor has it fulfilled its international commitments. We also noted that, clearly, it had not allocated enough funding to fulfil its commitments, had not implemented appropriate strategies, had ill-defined roles, had not developed action plans to counter the main

environmental threats, had implemented ineffective scientific research and monitoring systems, had made limited use of its powers, and had provided Parliament and Canadians with incomplete information. Let me walk you through some selected findings:

We noted that the pressure exerted on the environment is increasing and may have serious consequences for the economy, the environment, and our health if we fail to correct the shortcomings observed with respect to funding and policy implementation. The federal government needs a long-term vision of what it wants to accomplish in the Basin.

In this audit, we used an ecosystem-based approach to examine the federal management of certain environmental and sustainable development issues.

We concluded that the federal government is not on the path to the sustainable development of the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence River basin. Although it is not often used, we have another important tool for sustainable development in Canada, relating to strategic environmental assessment.

Strategic Environmental Assessments

Strategic Environmental Assessments are another tool used by the federal government for progressing towards sustainable development. Unlike project-related environmental assessments, strategic environmental assessments are used to determine potential positive or negative environmental affects of policies, plans and programs. These assessments are undertaken early in the decision-making process, allowing federal departments to optimize the environmental benefits or minimize negative environmental effects of policies, plans are programs while they are being designed.

Implementation of these assessments has been slow. However, efforts are being taken to increase awareness regarding the use of strategic environmental assessments, and several federal departments are developing guidelines to help their officials undertake these assessments.

Conclusion

As the world gets prepared for Johannesburg, the key players on the international scene will note that progress since the Earth Summit in 1992 has been much slower than anticipated. The Canadian situation is not very different. In fact, despite serious efforts made by the Government of Canada to set the country on the path to sustainable development, results in this area are slow in coming.

Our work has shown that in Canada, the environment remains fragile; conservation of species and spaces is

still at risk. In the context of economic development, the environment is still treated as an unwelcome guest. Our individual and collective behaviour continues to encourage the over-consumption of our resources. Research and data-gathering efforts have experienced setbacks that make it more difficult to make enlightened decisions and set priorities.

We keep saying that sustainable development is a journey but we need to know where we are going (destination, objectives), who is part of the trip (stakeholders) and how we are going to get there (measures and actions). Moreover, we need a road map to figure out if we are going in the right direction (with stops on the road where we can measure progress). In the business of auditing we often say what is measured is what gets done. It is not different with sustainable development.

It is much simpler than we think. It needs few priorities with realistic expectations but more

important, political willingness, which means our government should walk the talk and act now.