



Guidelines for sustainable development policy

The guidelines for sustainable development policy are rooted in the Swiss Federal Constitution¹, Arts. 2, 54, 73) as well as in important international sustainable development reference documents issued by the United Nations² and the OECD³. The European Union's revised strategy⁴ is another important source of information. The following guidelines update and flesh out the guidelines that the Federal Council submitted to the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development in its report entitled «10 Jahre nach Rio – Die Schweiz auf dem Weg zu einer Politik der Nachhaltigen Entwicklung» («Ten years after Rio – Switzerland's path to a sustainable development policy»)⁵ and laid down in its own Sustainable Development Strategy 2002.⁶

1 Taking responsibility for the future

The fundamental challenge, of ensuring that the needs of all people, and specifically those in developing countries, are met while at the same time reducing resource consumption and the burden on the environment requires a long-term process of deep-seated change within business and society. According to the principle of common, yet divided responsibility that is laid down in the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, with their particular responsibility for past and present development processes and their greater financial and technical resources, the highly developed industrialised countries must lead the way in this. Given their pace of growth, developing countries, and middle-income countries in particular, must nonetheless follow swiftly on their heels.

Responsibility for the future means promoting the principles of prevention, «producer pays» and liability as the essential framework for sustainable, long-term economic, environmental and social action at all levels. A preventative approach is required to avoid possible harm to human health or to the environment, and so that preventative action can be taken even if scientific cause-and-effect has not yet been fully proven or disproven. Care must be taken to ensure that prices reflect true costs, and that harm to human health or to the environment is paid for by the person or body that causes it.

2 Balanced consideration of the three target dimensions

The essence of the criteria defined in the Sustainable Development Strategy 2002 with a view to explaining the objectives to be pursued under the three dimensions of «environmental responsibility», «economic performance» and «social solidarity» are retained in the revised strategy (see list below). When formulating policy, care must be taken to include all three target dimensions and all sustainable development criteria (holistic view of the three dimensions of sustainability).

Economic performance	<p>Incomes and employment are to be maintained and increased in line with needs, taking socially and spatially acceptable distribution into account</p> <p>Productive capital, based on social and human capital, is to be at least maintained and its quality improved</p> <p>The competitiveness and innovative potential of the economy are to be increased</p> <p>In the economy, market mechanisms (prices) are to be the primary instrument, factoring in key scarcity factors and external costs</p> <p>The public sector is to manage its business in a way that will not be paid for by future generations (e.g. in the form of debt or neglected maintenance of value)</p>
Environmental responsibility	<p>Natural areas and biodiversity are to be maintained</p> <p>The use of renewable resources is to be kept below the regeneration or natural level</p>

¹ SR 101

² UN DESA: Guidance in Preparing a National Sustainable Development Strategy: Managing Sustainable Development in the New Millennium. New York 2002; UNESCO: International Implementation Scheme for the United Nations Decade for Education for Sustainable Development 2005–2014. Paris 2005

³ OECD: The DAC Guidelines, Strategies for Sustainable Development: Guidance for Development Co-operation. Paris 2001

⁴ European Council: EU Sustainable Development Strategy, adopted on 15/16 June 2006

⁵ Swiss Federal Council: «10 Jahre nach Rio 1992 – Die Schweiz auf dem Weg zu einer Politik der Nachhaltigen Entwicklung». Report dated 3 June 2001 to the secretariat of the Commission on Sustainable Development. Bern 2001

⁶ See also the Interdepartmental Sustainable Development Committee (ISDC): Sustainable Development Strategy 2002 – Review and Recommendations for Revision. Bern 2007

	The use of non-renewable resources is to be kept below the development potential of renewable resources
	Pollution suffered by the natural environment and by humans is to be reduced to a non damaging level
	The impact of environmental disasters is to be prevented or reduced, and accident risks are to be entered into only if no permanent damage lasting more than one generation would be done even in the worst possible case
Social solidarity	The health and safety of humans are to be comprehensively protected and promoted
	Education, and with it the development and identity of the individual, are to be guaranteed
	Culture, as well as the maintenance and development of social values and resources are to be encouraged in the interests of social capital in general
	All people must be guaranteed the same rights and the same legal security. This applies in particular to gender equality, equal rights and protection for minorities, and respect for human rights
	Solidarity is to be encouraged, both between generations and world-wide

The «capital stock» model provides an additional foundation for Swiss sustainability policy.⁷ Developed by the World Bank, this concept is based on the idea that there are three dimensions of sustainability, or capital stocks: the environment, the economy, and society. The «capital» that is found on earth may not simply be used up, but must be renewed continuously. Sustainability means living off the interest, rather than the capital, in the long term. The capital stock model has been refined further to include the concepts of strong and weak sustainability, which address the issue of whether capital stocks can be substituted for each other. Strong sustainability demands that none of the three capital stocks be permitted to decline over a longer period, while weak sustainability imposes this condition only on sustainability capital as a whole. Weak sustainability therefore permits, for example, the environmental capital stock to be eroded, as long as this erosion is «offset» by the creation of more economic or social capital.

Based on the legal content of the sustainability provisions in the Federal Constitution (specifically Articles 2 and 73),⁸ the Federal Council has taken the middle road between strong and weak sustainability. This is referred to within expert circles as «sensible sustainability» in English-speaking countries, and as «weak sustainability plus» in Switzerland. This approach rests on the precept that individual elements of the aforementioned capital stocks can be substituted for each other. They can therefore be offset against one another to a limited extent, provided such offsetting is transparent, is not systematically detrimental to the same sustainability dimension, and the biosphere's overall ability to bear the attendant burden is respected. In the view of the Federal Council, many aspects of the environmental dimension display specific characteristics which, even taking the potential for technological advancement into consideration, make it unrealistic that they could ever be replaced by social or economic capital. Many environmental goods such as a stable climate, biodiversity, fertile soils or the atmosphere's ozone layer are vital for the survival of humanity, and capital would not, as a rule, compensate for their destruction. Intervention in the natural world must not be allowed to result in an irreversible loss which compromises future generations' scope for action.

The «weak sustainability plus» concept means that certain frameworks or limits to substitutability must be observed when giving full consideration to target dimensions in project development or assessment:

- Minimum social, economic and environmental requirements 14⁹ must be respected,
- Developments or effects that are difficult or impossible to reverse must be avoided,
- Adverse impacts that are not associated with a corresponding benefit may not be transferred to the future generations,
- Environmental pollution and social problems should not be shifted abroad,

⁷ Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, Federal Office of Spatial Development: Sustainable development in Switzerland: Methodological foundations. Bern 2004
Under the capital stock model, the term «capital» is less broad than the target dimensions. It covers factors such as production facilities, natural resources or the capital represented by social sentiment. The target dimensions, meanwhile, include further aspects, such as distribution issues and principles for formulating policies. While the concept of capital can be described without particular difficulty with regard to the economy and the environment, social capital is still a controversial issue in the academic literature.

⁸ Federal Office for Spatial Development, ARE: Fragen im Zusammenhang mit den Nachhaltigkeitsbestimmungen in der Bundesverfassung – Rechtsgutachten (Issues in connection with the sustainability provisions of the Federal Constitution – A legal opinion). Bern 2004. The term «sustainable development» is used in a broad sense in the general «object» article of the Federal Constitution. This article refers to the Brundtland definition of sustainable development, while emphasising the three target dimensions, the priority to be given to the basic needs of disadvantaged persons, and the tolerance limits of the biosphere in general. The constitutional principle of sustainability, as laid down in Article 73, obliges the federal government and the cantons to endeavour to bring human demands on the natural environment into balance. One of the main features of this equilibrium is its focus on capacity for renewal. Article 73 therefore addresses the environmental dimension specifically, setting it out in greater detail than Article 2. This is because sustainability is now recognised alongside the prevention and producer pays principles as one of the three supporting tenets of environmental action.

⁹ These might be: thresholds laid down in law (e.g. emissions, health-related environmental norms under conservation legislation and its corresponding ordinances), scientific thresholds that are not (yet) reflected in statutory limits (e.g. greenhouse gas emission levels at which further global warming would be halted), socio-political norms such as equal opportunities, minimum wages, dignified living conditions, a social safety net and guaranteed human rights.

- Great care must be taken in the case of uncertainties or risks that exist because of an insufficient degree of knowledge, or that are unlikely to occur, but have the potential to cause great harm,
- Efforts must be taken to prevent further deterioration in areas that are already afflicted by acute sustainability problems, or in which the effects might, in the light of current trends, worsen existing problems.

The Federal Council provides the necessary tools to ensure that initiatives are assessed from the sustainable development viewpoint in accordance with standard criteria (see Section 4.2).

3 Incorporating sustainable development into all areas of policy

The Federal Council regards sustainable development not simply as another sectoral policy, but as a regulatory concept to be integrated into all specialist policies. All areas of policy are to be geared to sustainable development. This derives from Article 2 of the Federal Constitution, which declares sustainable development to be a mandatory part of the federal and cantonal government remit and, in particular, insists that all federal authorities adopt it as a guiding principle. The «object» provision is to be understood as a legally binding directive and as a mandate for action for all authorities that either make or apply the law. The main purpose of this article is to give direction to top-level state authorities, be they federal or cantonal. The Federal Council for example, must feat its decision making on the aims and means of government policy to Switzerland's objectives as a state. The article also sets out the course that the Federal Supreme Court must chart in its capacity as the authority of last instance in matters of law. This directive means that sustainable development should be integrated from the very start into the existing planning and management processes of the Federal Council, the departments of the federal government, and other agencies. No further, parallel structures should be created for sustainability policy purposes.

4 Improving coherence and coordination between policy areas

Sustainable development requires the three target dimensions to be incorporated into policy-making at an early stage, as well as a concerted cross-agency effort to examine the issues and identify enduring solutions. The environmental, economic and social dimensions of sustainable development must be taken into consideration in the performance of each and every task. Integrating these three dimensions of sustainable development is a top priority in political planning and decision-making, as well as in specific initiatives. It must be ensured that important political decisions are made on the basis of proposals, the social, economic and environmental impact of which have been assessed transparently at an early stage, as required by Article 141 of the Federal Act of 13 December 2002 on the Federal Assembly (Parliament Act)¹⁰. Another important element in sustainable policy-making is the ex-post assessment of the impact of political decisions (Art. 170 Federal Constitution). Based on effectiveness reviews, these assessments are designed to provide information on how measures are implemented, how those who are targeted respond, whether and which side effects result, and whether or not the policy achieves its intended aims.

Transparent decision-making processes and the involvement of all the various parties concerned are designed to ensure that all conflicting interests are balanced against each other and to generate both broad support for decisions and feasible solutions, thereby helping to ensure that political decisions give maximum consideration to the sustainable development perspective. The conflicts revealed in this process must be disclosed, and reasons must be given for the way in which they are handled. Over and above these coordination and conflict management aspects, efforts must be made to optimise policies and to develop synergies. Sustainability assessment tools may assist in the coordination process by providing objective frameworks and decision-making support. The relevant regulations with regard to the implementation of this strategy are laid down in Section 4. Suitable collaborative structures are also required to improve coordination and coherence.

5 Forging sustainable development partnerships

Sustainable development is not just a matter for public-sector bodies or for the federal government alone. Many of the problems our country faces can be resolved constructively only by all three levels of the state working closely together. A federal strategy that restricted itself solely to federal policy would therefore be too limited in its effect. Cooperation with the cantons and municipalities is essential. Switzerland's structure as a federal state means that cantonal and municipal administrations wield considerable power and influence in many areas of relevance to sustainability. As such, promoting sustainability processes at cantonal, regional and municipal levels, where the public sector comes into direct contact with civil society, as well as encouraging a general receptiveness to the idea of sustainable development, is extremely important.

Given the influencing factors and stakeholder groups that are relevant to sustainable development today, a strategy that were limited to the public sector would fall short of its targets in the same way as would a strategy restricted to the federal level. Civil society and the private sector must therefore also be involved in sustainable development policies. Collaboration between government authorities and pressure groups already happens in practice. Where international sustainability policy is concerned, policy-makers have been working alongside

¹⁰ SR 171.10 Parlamentsgesetz (http://www.admin.ch/ch/d/sr/171_10/a141.html (in German))

interested non-governmental organisations, primarily from the environmental, development, business and social spheres, on a regular basis for many years. These organisations are included in the authorities' preparations for important international negotiations, and have lent considerable impetus to sustainable development in Switzerland over the last ten years. Cooperation with non-governmental organisations should be continued in the future.

However, non-institutional bodies and individuals must also incorporate the strategy's guidelines into their day-to-day activities. This specifically concerns private-sector enterprises, who are called upon to act responsibly. Companies can encourage sustainable development in their everyday operational activities by using their existing scope for action to design their products and production processes to generate the minimum burden and maximum added value for society and the environment.

A company's commitment to these principles can also result in it being respected as a leader in its compliance with the various regulations, norms and standards that apply to areas such as environmental management and social responsibility.