

# Twenty Years of Political Commitment to Sustainable Development?

Federal Report on Sustainable Development 2011

## Synthesis and Recommendations

November 2011

**Task Force on Sustainable Development**

This document presents the *Synthesis and Recommendations* of the Federal Report on Sustainable Development 2011. The full report is available in French and Dutch at <http://sustdev.plan.be/>.

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# Synthesis and Recommendations

## Context

1. The second Rio Conference, planned for 2012, aims at **renewing the political commitment to sustainable development** taken on by the international community during the first Rio Conference in 1992. That renewal requires, among other things, an assessment of the progress made and of the flaws in the implementation of the commitments from international treaties and conferences on sustainable development. In support of these requirements, the evaluation period of the present *Federal Report on Sustainable Development* was extended to the past twenty years.
2. During the 1992 Rio Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), the different governments agreed to adopt **sustainable development strategies**. This *Federal Report on Sustainable Development* is the Federal Planning Bureau's (FPB) sixth publication contributing to the learning process of that new policy, in accordance with the 1997 Federal Act on *the coordination of federal sustainable development policy* which sets the framework for the Belgian federal strategy.
3. The Federal Report 2011 is the sixth edition in a series of biennial reports elaborated by the Task Force on Sustainable Development (TFSD) since 1998. Those reports deal with the situation, foresight and methodologies of sustainable development and, just like the plans and civil society opinions, contribute to the learning cycles of the sustainable development policy instituted by the 1997 Act. The 2010 revision of that Act organizes the reports' contents in two parts within a five-year cycle: **a state of affairs and an assessment of the current situation and the pursued sustainable development policy** on the one hand, and a long-term foresight on the other hand.
4. The Federal Report 2011 presents a state of affairs and an assessment of the current situation and the pursued policy. Three aspects of that state of affairs and assessment are broached.
  - **Part A of the Report** focuses on the evolution towards a sustainable development, observed since twenty years, based on 25 headline indicators. By comparison with objectives with different time horizons (among which 2050), they illustrate the social, environmental and economic challenges and those related to the means of implementation. The indicators reflect, among other things, the impact of the thematic policy as it is assessed in part C. These indicators can be consulted on the website at [www.indicators.be](http://www.indicators.be).
  - **Part B of the Report** presents the successes and failures of thirteen years of federal sustainable development strategy. The processes are first evaluated according to the course of the successive cycles and then according to the functioning of their main instrument, the Federal Plans for Sustainable Development.
  - **Part C of the Report** analyzes a series of policy measures regarding eleven sustainable development themes. For each theme, the description is centred on a case study, which allows assessing the usefulness of the sustainable development plans and objectives for the gradual elaboration of long-term policy for those different themes.

5. The three-part synthesis is followed by **recommendations** based on the recommendations from the five previous Federal Reports. They indicate that, in several cases, the recommendations expressed in the course of the learning cycles were met by the observed evolutions in policy. For instance, progress was made in the application of certain principles from the Rio Declaration which were new in 1992. Another part of the recommendations, both general, specific or thematic, was not acted upon. As a result, those recommendations are re-included in the Federal Report 2011 in order to be intensified.

## Part A - Twenty-Year Evolution of Sustainable Development Indicators

6. The 25 headline indicators presented in this Report **measure the evolution toward a sustainable development in federal Belgium since 1992**, the year of the first Rio Conference. The choice of that year allows for an evaluation over a long period of time and a comparison with more recent turns. The balance of that evolution and the selection of those indicators are based on the methodology summarized in paragraph 13.
7. **Socially**, the Belgian society has grown more inclusive since 1992: **the average standard of living has increased considerably without a rise in income inequality**. That evolution is rather remarkable, as income inequality has increased in most OECD countries. The educational qualification of youths has also improved comparatively. However, the headline indicators also reveal **other, less favourable trends**. In 2009, more than two million people were at risk of poverty or social exclusion in Belgium, with a higher vulnerability for women. Furthermore, access to the labour market for younger generations clearly deteriorated and the increase in the standard of living slackened as a result of the strong increase in debt ratio since approximately 20 years, which was, in its turn, caused by a rise of consumer credit and mortgage loans. The general improvement in the state of public health conceals the fact that a growing part of the population suffers from chronic illnesses, such as cardiovascular diseases, which are the main cause of death in Belgium.
8. **Environmental progress** is visible in the **reduced emission of several air and water pollutants**, such as nitrogen oxides in the air and nitrogen in the water, and, to a lesser extent, of greenhouse gasses. Although the lowering of environmental pressure is encouraging, the current **state of environmental resources remains alarming**. The **loss of biological diversity** requires at least as much vigilance as the **risks posed by climate change**. Numerous as they may be, the efforts made in that domain remain insufficient to attain the multilaterally agreed goals in the long term. As the conclusions on the environmental evolutions since 1992 in the balance are limited to indicators for which national data are available, they must be completed by the reports of the three regions on the current environmental state.
9. As for the **economic progress made on the road to a sustainable development**, it is suitable to evaluate this in light of the **reduction and elimination of unsustainable production and consumption patterns**. **A decoupling between GDP and certain types of consumption is currently ongoing, albeit partial and insufficient**.

- Since 1992, the decoupling between GDP and material consumption is complete, but the total reduction in material consumption does not take into account the incorporated materials in imported finished and semi-finished goods. The decoupling between GDP and energy consumption and between GDP and road transport are relative and even especially weak for road transport, which remains the dominant transport mode.
  - Due to the evolution of the energy mix, greenhouse gas emissions decreased, especially owing to the substitution of coal by gas, as well as to a quasi-tripling of the share of energy from renewable sources in the primary energy consumption between 2000 and 2008. As for food, finally, the slight reduction in meat consumption is insufficient to speak in terms of an actual change in the food consumption patterns.
10. **Between 1992 and 2007, the headline indicator for public debt improved.** This trend was **abruptly reversed by the 2008 economic and financial crisis.** As a result, it has become even more difficult to finance public spending, e.g. for R&D and development aid, since the government's financing capacity for those expenses, as well as for the required physical investments to meet the future generation's needs, depends on its debt ratio. As regards the institutional means, a well-elaborated legal framework is established to safeguard the vitality of the federal strategy for sustainable development. It is, however, clear that the degree of implementation of the Federal Plans for Sustainable Development arising from that strategy remains hardly satisfactory.
11. The balance of headline indicators in part A shows the above-mentioned long-term evolutions, as well as the **current situation in Belgium with regard to agreed quantified intermediary objectives.** The life span of those objectives lies between the most recently observed year and the very long-term horizon of 2050. 10 of the 25 headline indicators are linked to a quantified objective to be attained in or by 2010. Those **ten indicators** relate to various subjects such as employment, education of youngsters, emissions of air and water pollutants, primary energy consumption (including renewable energy), official development aid, R&D expenses and public debt. The assessment shows that all ten indicators have approached their quantified intermediary objectives. Two of those ten indicators, relating to renewable energy consumption and greenhouse gas emissions, should reach their objective in time. The other eight, including those relating to employment, nitrogen emissions in water, R&D expenses and public debt, show insufficient progress to reach their objectives in time. That assessment implies that a certain progress was stimulated by the adoption of those objectives, but at the same time concludes that, in most cases, the progress was insufficient to attain those objectives.
12. Based on the balance of past trends, part A of the report finally discusses the **objectives of the EU 2020 strategy. Do those objectives for Belgium constitute an intermediate step in the transition to a sustainable development by 2050?** The EU 2020 strategy, replacing the Lisbon strategy, unites two essential challenges in the centre of the European policy to enhance a sustainable development: the fight against poverty and the fight against climate change. The strategy is aimed at enlarging the coherence of European policy in order to overcome the economic and financial crisis. It includes eight quantified objectives, to be attained by 2020, on five main themes: employment, research and development and innovation, climate change and energy, education and poverty/social exclusion. The Report shows that the quantified objectives of the EU 2020 strategy

are essential to the transition to a sustainable development, since (as suggested before) the quantitative objectives seem to stimulate a certain progress and various objectives are considered ambitious in comparison with past trends. For the two transversal challenges of a sustainable development, **relating to climate and poverty, the strategy's quantified intermediary objectives appear not to be ambitious enough.** If the efforts necessary to attain the objectives in 2020 are pursued at the same pace until 2050, the progress will probably not be fast enough to attain the sustainable development goals relating to the fight against poverty and climate change (the temperature rise should not exceed two degrees Celsius by 2050).

13. The summarized analyses were possible thanks to a **signalling system with 25 headline indicators** chosen from the list of indicators from the 2009 Federal Report and from policy strategies, such as the EU 2020 strategy. That choice is therefore grounded in a multidimensional reality on various levels, both Belgian, European and global. Those headline indicators have **communicative and educational potential** for the interdependent challenges of sustainable development. The joint analysis and regular follow-up of their evolutions allow transparent communication as well as better comprehension and steering of social, environmental and economic phenomena for which the federal government has taken on commitments for sustainable development. The balance offers information on the implementation of those commitments by measuring the pace at which the indicators evolve toward or away from the objectives of sustainable development, according to a **method adopted from Eurostat.** That method assigns the indicators to three categories: those moving fast toward their objectives, those moving slowly toward their objectives and those moving away from their objectives. This clear and simple method offers a **synthetic balance** of the various quantitative trends in our society's evolution. It should be completed by a more qualitative analysis of the policy pursued in order to attain the objectives, as presented in part C of this report.

## Part B - Assessment of the Federal Strategy for Sustainable Development

14. Belgium was **one of the first countries** to elaborate a **federal sustainable development strategy**, acting upon the commitments from **Agenda 21** adopted during the first Rio Conference and drawing up a **legal framework.** Up until the 2010 revision, that legal framework safeguarded the continuity of the four-year learning cycles with the Plans 2000-2004 and 2004-2008/2011 (the second plan was prolonged until the adoption of a new plan) and the six Federal Reports evaluating that new policy from 1999 until today and exploring the outlook for sustainable development. The legal framework also consolidated the public consultation procedures by strengthening the civil society's counselling body on the sustainable development policy and, moreover, expanded the capacity to elaborate that innovative policy. The strategy's functioning is evaluated according to a methodology summarized in paragraph 20.
15. Since 1997, that strategy has **continuously stimulated various activities of both the federal government and the civil society in favour of sustainable development.** The **revision of that act**, which had been under discussion since 2008, **confirmed its dynamics in 2010**, preserving the principle of learning cycles and extending their life span to five years. By subscribing the adoption

of a long-term view and embedding the Sustainable Development Impact Assessment (SDIA) in the act, it gained impetus. This provision reinforces sustainable development policy, since the definition of a final goal clarifies the steps to be taken and facilitates assessment, and since there are still too little goals included in the (preliminary draft) Plans for Sustainable Development. However, **the revision also raised some uncertainties** by allowing for the composition of the Federal Council for Sustainable Development (FCSD) to be altered and a current plan to be modified by a new government. In addition, it remains to be seen to what degree the revision will allow a response to the Court of Audit's question concerning the fact that the instruments and actors of the sustainable development policy have remained in the margin of the decision-making process.

16. Prior to the Plans, the procedure to elaborate a preliminary draft for the plan is clearly stipulated and **the government adopted the first two Plans at a pace fixed by the act**. The functioning of the successive cycles, which had been continuous up to then, was **interrupted between the consultation and the decision on the third Plan**. The negotiations on the legal framework's revision were accompanied by the non-adoption of a third Federal Plan for Sustainable Development. According to the report of the Interdepartmental Commission on Sustainable Development (ICSD) for the year 2008, the cause of that interruption was the risk that the government's adoption of a third Plan would go against the revision of the act which the government was still working on at the end of 2008. It would, however, have been possible to give a legal ruling on the content of a preliminary draft before the end of the act's revision proceedings. It is a fact that the government's choice not to decide on a third Plan during those two years also involved the risk of weakening that instrument at the political level. In addition, the interruption involves the risk of weakening the ICSD and the sustainable development cells, which are charged with the follow-up.
17. That long interruption **could discourage the civil society, which reacted on the Preliminary Draft of the Plan 2009-2012** during the public consultation that took place as planned in 2008. Furthermore, the legal framework brought about the organisation of successive public consultations during the learning cycles, complying with the **participation** principle. However, the **results of those consultations on the preliminary draft plans for sustainable development were insufficiently valorised for the second and third preliminary draft plans**. The government significantly modified the text of the second preliminary draft plan before the public consultation in order to make it more consistent with the measures from the federal coalition agreement to which the government already had fully committed itself by definition. For the third preliminary draft plan, the importance of the public consultation was reduced by confusion due to the simultaneous organisation of two different federal consultations on very similar subjects: the regular consultation on the Preliminary Draft of the Plan for Sustainable Development and the special consultation by the panel on the *Lente van het leefmilieu* ("*Environmental spring*"). In addition, the consultation on that preliminary draft plan was complicated by the low readability of the text and the ambiguous legal status.
18. As for the **elaboration of the Federal Plans for Sustainable Development**, a **commitment by the federal administration** was observed during those thirteen years. However, the current learning process for the elaboration of such plans still faces **various challenges**. Its grounding in scientific findings and international commitments has been insufficient up to now and the role of indicators

in the planning stage of the decision-making cycle is not clearly determined. Still, positive evolutions are observed, such as the more systematic mention of information on the responsible bodies and of a time frame for more than half of the measures from the Preliminary Draft of the Plan 2009-2012.

19. Finally, the federal strategy for sustainable development has contributed to the **follow-up and assessment of the decided measures within the federal administration**. The follow-up of the measures from the Plans by the ICSD in its reports and database, as well as the monitoring of indicators on the implementation of the measures in the Federal Reports on Sustainable Development, **could encourage the implementation of those measures**. The process indicators the TFSD developed, based on the information from the departments, show a relatively low degree of implementation at the start of the assessment of both plans. Subsequently, it increased considerably and after four years, about half of the measures were carried out. That number keeps on growing when the follow-up period extends. This progress is monitored with a headline indicator, which is a particularity of the Belgian Federal Reports.
20. The analysis covers thirteen years of Belgian federal sustainable development strategy. That period starts at the implementation of the Act of 5 May 1997, which installed the learning cycles for the sustainable development policy, and ends with its revision in 2010. In order not to be a mere copy of the detailed analyses from the previous Reports, part B focuses more particularly on the succession of facts and events with regard to **the two Federal Plans for Sustainable Development adopted by the federal government**, as well as to **the preparation of the third Plan (Preliminary Draft of the Plan 2009-2012)**. The method used to evaluate the strategy is based on five criteria for sustainable development: basic principles from the Rio Declaration used in all Federal Reports to broaden the definition of that concept in relation to the definition in the Brundtland report. Those criteria are completed by those from the *European Sustainable Development Network (ESDN)* in order to evaluate the aspects regarding the political commitment and the implementation and monitoring instruments. The Plans for Sustainable Development were thoroughly examined on both their preparation process and their degree of implementation.

## Part C - Commitments from the Federal Plans for Sustainable Development

21. The **eleven themes** analysed in this report have bearing on **the social, environmental, economic and institutional spheres**. They were selected according to the methodology summarised in paragraph 28. That diversity of challenges for the policy to improve the present generations' well-being without jeopardizing the satisfaction of the needs of future generations is definitely not limited to the issues of a green economy or environmental governance (the central themes of the second Rio Conference). The spectrum of the eleven examined themes demonstrates the relevance of transversal issues, such as the change of production and consumption patterns, especially for transport and food, in allowing our society's transition to a sustainable model. The results of thematic research in part C cannot be generalized for two reasons. Firstly, the eighty measures chosen from the Plans according to the methodology summarized in paragraph 28, have one



common characteristic: a higher degree of implementation than the average of the first two Federal Plans described in part B. Secondly, it only applies to less than 10% of the approximately 1000 measures from the two Plans.

22. The **assessment** of those **eleven policy cases** constitutes a useful complement to the general analysis in part B on the implementation of the Plans. Those **eighty measures from the Federal Plans on Sustainable Development** are, indeed, concrete and varied, although their contribution to the realization of a sustainable development is not always plain, as a result of, among other things, a lack of long-term vision in elaborating the Federal Plans for Sustainable Development.
23. Furthermore, their **degree of implementation is often unsatisfactory due to two types of causes**:
  - A **very late government decision** on the measure, as was the case for the product policy adopted in the first Federal Plan for Sustainable Development and confirmed in the second Plan. Nine years passed between the approval of the first Plan and the government decision in 2009 to take note of a Federal Product Plan.
  - A **tardy or poor implementation of the measure**, as was the case for the SDIA adopted in the first Plan and repeated in the second Plan for Sustainable Development. Up to now, the government decision of 2007 to submit the Cabinet files to a SDIA procedure only led to one comprehensive *ex ante* impact study.
24. It is therefore **too early to analyse the contribution of four of the eleven policy cases to the pursued objectives**, since either their implementation has not yet made enough progress or the time the policy needs to produce effect has not yet passed. That applies to the policy to bring sustainable products on the market, to improve the energy performance of buildings, to share the advantages of genetic resources fairly and reasonably and to stimulate the SDIA. For the seven other cases, the measures were largely implemented and sufficient time has passed to assess whether the objectives were attained.
25. For the **seven policy cases for which the effectiveness could be analyzed over a sufficient time period**, two possible situations occur:
  - In **three cases the objectives were not attained, in spite of the efforts to implement the measures**. That is the case for the policy to extend working life, to stimulate a healthy diet and to reduce the excessive debt ratio of families. This Report emphasizes that the inadequate choice of instruments in the last two cases may impede the realization of their objectives. A thorough assessment should allow for the identification of other causes, apart from the chosen instruments.
  - In **four cases the objectives were realized or nearly attained**. That is the case for the policy to support the purchase of less polluting cars, to make health care accessible to everyone, to comply with the national emission ceilings for air pollutants and to intensify official development aid. In all those cases, the Plan measures have most likely supported the realization of the objectives. It is, however, not possible to compute their specific contribution to the realization of the objectives.

26. Finally, the **integration of that policy in the Federal Plans for Sustainable Development** plays a **different role depending on the novelty** of the type of the examined measure:
- Certain measures were relatively new, aiming at new challenges. The Federal Plans for Sustainable Development played a **pioneer role** by putting those challenges on the political agenda. That is, for example, the case for the policy to improve the energy performance of buildings with the third-party investor system, to stimulate a healthy diet and to introduce a SDIA.
  - Other measures contributed to current processes dating from several years before the Plans. They were simply included in those Plans as such, without associating them with other measures **to improve the integration and coherence of federal policy**. That applies to the introduction of a maximum bill to make health care accessible to everyone, as well as to the policy to prolong working life.
27. In the end, the **efforts made by the successive governments during the past thirteen years through the Federal Plans for Sustainable Development have largely remained in the margin** of their main activity. At the finalization of this Report, Belgium did not dispose of the third Federal Plan for Sustainable Development awaited for three years. Nonetheless, the learning process realized on the score of the first two Plans testifies to the usefulness of those Plans as an instrument for the integration and coherence of the federal policy. They have, indeed, brought up policy that is able to take up new long-term challenges and to include them in current processes, centred in a transversal policy vision aimed at the effectiveness, efficiency and equity both within and between generations.
28. The synthesis is the result of the **analysis of a series of themes or areas of sustainable development and case studies on each theme**. Those analyses relate to one or several measures from the Federal Plans for Sustainable Development. The themes were chosen in such a way that they point to the existence of driving forces and pressures, states and responses regarding our society's development. The method is systemic, since those elements are acknowledged as interdependent and their evolution depends on both the policy pursued for those themes and the linkages between those themes. Each theme and its corresponding case study are described and evaluated in a section with a set structure, presenting a current state of the existing situation, followed by its assessment. **Within each theme, a specific policy is described and evaluated**, offering a spectrum of eleven thematic responses by the federal government in the Plans for Sustainable Development. The assessment refers to the degree of implementation of that policy and also involves the adopted objectives and the existing situation. Those eleven policy cases share the common characteristic that sufficient information on the progress of their implementation is available in order to analyse them. Almost 10% of the approximately 1000 measures from the two plans are involved: 48 of the 622 measures from the Plan 2000-2004 and 32 of the 395 measures from the Plan 2004-2008/2011. The assessment of the policy in part C of this Report cannot be generalized, since those eighty measures (48 + 32) have a degree of implementation which is higher than the average of the two Federal Plans evaluated in part B.

## Recommendations for Renewing the Political Commitment to Sustainable Development

29. The following recommendations, based on the 20-year experience of Belgium in sustainable development commitments, reinforce the recommendations from the five federal reports published during that period. Those recommendations were ambitious and concrete. From the first report in 1999, they advocated the application of the five most transversal principles adopted at the Rio Conference in order for the "*the transition to sustainable development to:*
- *involve Belgium in a societal project of which the challenges, at global and local levels, cannot be underestimated (principle of responsibility);*
  - *require the adoption of realistic intermediate objectives, contained in a clearly defined long-term perspective along with the necessary means to achieve them (principle of inter- and intragenerational equity);*
  - *require a better integration of social, environmental and economic matters, including at the institutional level (principle of integration);*
  - *recognize the existence of scientific uncertainty and ensure a better interaction between that scientific knowledge and the management of serious and irreversible risks (principle of precaution);*
  - *require, therefore, in a broadly participatory process, a clarification of the development options chosen by the Belgian society (principle of participation)".*
30. The Federal Report 2011 formulates ten recommendations for an accelerated application of these five transversal principles and hereby takes into account the successes and failures observed in the sustainable development policy over the last twenty years. The ten recommendations are the following.

### *Responsibility in a global partnership*

31. **Recommendation on international development-related commitments:** since 1999, the Federal Reports have stressed the need to honour the commitments for the planet's development, with particular attention to the Rio and Johannesburg (Rio +10) commitments on sustainable development. The increase in official development assistance over the study period is consistent with these recommendations. The commitment of Belgium through its presidency of the European Union was also observed at the Nagoya Conference on Biological Diversity or at the Cancun Climate Change Conference. The Federal Report 2011 contributes to prepare the second Rio Conference, which aims to renew and strengthen the political commitments in 2012. The two main themes of the conference are to improve the governance of sustainable development and to promote a green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication. **The Federal Report 2011 recommends the federal government to ensure that each federal department contributes to the preparation and implementation of the commitments on the two**

**themes of Rio+20 to accelerate their concretisation via the Belgian sustainable development policy, both inside and outside Belgium.**

32. **Recommendation on Sustainable Consumption and Production Patterns (SCPP):** the Federal Report 2007 recommended to particularly support the 2010/2011 negotiations aimed to implement the UN's *10-year Framework of programmes on SCP* adopted in Johannesburg to accelerate the change of unsustainable consumption and production patterns at the international level. The Federal Report 2011 assesses, even though moderate, the progress made in reducing unsustainable consumption and production patterns, as measured by the indicators for the decoupling between GDP and some negative environmental externalities. It allowed for example to adopt two important objectives: reducing the environmental and social impacts of products throughout their entire life cycle (manufacture, use and disposal) from the Product Plan 2009-2012 and making sustainable at least 50% of all public procurement from the Federal Action Plan for Sustainable Public Procurement. **To enhance this progress in achieving the overarching objective of SCPP, which play a key role for sustainable development, the Federal Report 2011 recommends each minister of the federal government to contribute to the achievement of these two objectives by deploying, both within and outside Belgium and in accordance with the sustainable development criteria, policy instruments under its jurisdiction.**

*Inter- and intra-generational equity in a long-term vision*

33. **Recommendation on the adoption of sustainable development goals:** since 1999, all Federal Reports have stressed the need to "*place the adopted or envisaged measures in a long-term perspective*" and, for this purpose, to set, "*a sufficiently large number of long-term sustainable development goals (SDGs)*", including "*intermediate steps between the present and the long term*". Meanwhile the concept of SDGs received a central place in multilateral negotiations on sustainable development. The process recently introduced by the revised act aimed to develop a long-term strategic vision for sustainable development is a step in the implementation of these recommendations. As the growing importance of social and environmental challenges has extended the concept "long term" to several decades, **the Federal Report 2011 recommends the federal government to adopt a sufficiently wide range of social, environmental and economic SDGs in the very long term (2050) in order to guide practical action in the short and medium term, that is in ten years.**
34. **Recommendation on the adoption of intermediate objectives:** the Federal Report 2007 demanded to "*divide the period between the present and the long term in intermediate steps in order to anticipate the logic and the transition process phases*". The EU 2020 strategy provides objectives for 2020, including the reduction of poverty, employment rates and CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. As for transport, objectives have been set at EU level for 2008, 2015 and 2020, which can be considered as intermediate steps towards 2050. But even if they inflect past trends, **the Federal Report 2011 recommends ensuring that all intermediate objectives have a sufficient level of ambition, in the context of a multidimensional pact between present and future generations, to put Belgium on the pathway of the above-mentioned SDGs.**

### *Principle of integration*

35. **Recommendation on the implementation of impact studies:** the Federal Report 2005 stated that *"in the future, certain identified integration tools should receive more attention at the federal level"*. Moreover, the Federal Report 1999 also emphasized the need for *"a better integration of social, environmental and economic matters, including at the institutional level"*. The process established by the revised act encourages policy makers to carry out more ex-ante studies of the multidimensional impact of federal decisions. But this integration tool should be used more frequently than during the study period. **The Federal Report 2011 recommends ensuring that the revision of the provision of the law regarding the Sustainable Development Impact Assessment (SDIA) leads to the effective renewal, extension and increased transparency of its application.**
36. **Recommendation on the consistency of thematic plans and the importance of the five-year Federal Plan for Sustainable Development as a tool for integrated development:** the Federal Report 2011 observes a partial progress in the integration of social, environmental and economic aspects of thematic decisions. An example of this is the decision of the "maximum bill" (ceiling for the reimbursement of patient's contributions to medical costs), an economic instrument aimed to enhance the population's state of health and prevent poverty. This is also true for the Fund for the Reduction of the Global Energy Cost (FRGE) that aims to enable low-income people to invest in home insulation and, thus, promotes their access to sustainable ways of life. However, the multi-dimensional integration of the Product Plan (for products that are responsible at economic, environmental and social levels) did not occur despite the importance of this issue. In nine years of development, only an environmental component of the Product Plan has been finalized; the social component and the integration of social and environmental components didn't come off. The SDIA instrument can detect such a gap, but it cannot fill it in. **The Federal Report 2011 recommends to strengthen the interdepartmental integration function of the Federal Plan for Sustainable Development and to help federal departments to also incorporate social, environmental and economic components in their thematic plans.**

### *Principle of precaution and scientific uncertainty*

37. **Recommendation on the use of indicators:** the Federal Report 2009 recommended *"not to excessively limit the number of synthetic indicators adopted to monitor the progress towards a sustainable development and to use simultaneously a large table and a small table of indicators, as a single indicator or a limited list of indicators provides less information, which gives an incomplete image of society's progress"*. During the previous period there has been progress in the follow-up of the indicators, including of those regarding the implementation of Plans for Sustainable Development. Moreover, the annual monitoring by the Interdepartmental Commission on Sustainable Development of the implementation of these Plans has improved significantly. **The Federal Report 2011 recommends to continue this monitoring in order to allow for ex-post evaluations of the implemented policy, and that the goals from the to be adopted long-term strategic vision for sustainable development can be used for ex-ante evaluations of the intended policy.**

38. **Recommendation on the information needed to prevent indebtedness:** the Federal Report 1999 pointed out that the national accounts record the consumption and production growth without reflecting their social and environmental externalities. However, these externalities increase as hidden debts, resulting, among others, from "*various types of pollution (waste dumps, stocks of toxic industrial products, polluted groundwater, diffuse scattering of thousands of chemical compounds with unknown effects...)* accumulating for decades without a solution". **The Federal Report 2011 recommends to strengthen the means which help the national accounting system to detect consumption and production patterns generating hidden social and environmental debts for both households and the country, in order to regularly inform decision-makers (households, enterprises, government) on the causes of this indebtedness to the detriment of future generations.**

### *Principle of participation*

39. **Recommendation on the interactions between the parties involved in the act:** from the first Federal Report in 1999, emphasis was laid on the need to "*clarify, in a broadly participatory process, the development options chosen by the Belgian society*". Thanks to the proper application of the act, successive public consultations were organized. However, the results of these consultations on sustainable development were insufficiently valued in the second and third Preliminary draft of the Plans, since the importance of the consultation is particularly reduced by the confusion with regard to other consultative processes on less transversal policy. In addition, the continuity of successive cycles is virtually suspended between the consultation process and the decision-making process related to the third Plan. **The Federal Report 2011 recommends that special efforts are made by the government to enhance the continuity and interactivity in carrying out the different missions of the act.**
40. **Recommendation concerning the representativeness of the Federal Council for Sustainable Development (FCSD):** this central body in the participatory process for sustainable development has ensured its mission by formulating 179 opinions on development policy in 14 years, including 25 on its own initiative. In addition, the democratic mechanism which obliges the government to motivate why it deviates from the FCSD's opinion on each preliminary draft still applies. **The Federal Report 2011 recommends the public authorities to be vigilant in resolving the weakening of the dialogue on sustainable development which resulted from the fact that the act revision failed to give a decisive ruling on the question of the composition of the civil society's representation within the FCSD.**