

## **Exploring the Sustainable Development Model within the European Union**

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**Abstract:** The existence of close relationship between ecology and economics was rediscovered in last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Consequently, calls for the implementation of a sustainable development model have increased both at the international and European levels, especially after mid-1990s. Taking these calls into account, the European Commission has prepared many documents that have started a new phase in environmental protection, during which more importance is being given to the implementation, and in this connection, to the achievement of the sustainable development model within the European Union (EU). This study aims to explore the strategies, programs, policies, and practices that are connected with the implementation of sustainable development model at the EU level. Before doing so, it will focus briefly on the meaning, importance, and emergence of sustainable development approach within the EU context.

### **Sustainable Development at a Glance**

The fact that the terms “ecology” and “economy” derives from the same Greek word “oikos”, which means “home”, shows the long-rooted awareness of human being on the close connection between the two terms (Marshall, 2001, 26). However, following the Industrial Revolution in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, this awareness was replaced by the idea that human being was superior and could master the nature. Giving the priority to economic growth, this perspective ignored ecological or environmental problems emerged as result of the established economic system (Andersson et al, 1995, 7). It was only in the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century that the significance of such problems for national and global economy was recognised commonly. This introduced the term “sustainable development” to human being (Han & Kaya, 2006, 257; Minibaş, 1998, 49). Being used for the first time in 1987 in a report prepared by the UN Commission on Environment and Development under the chairmanship of Brundtland and titled as “Our Common Future”, the term sustainable development envisages a development model that “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Thirlwall 1994, 212). It was also the main theme of the Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, at the end of which participating world leaders listed several principles on sustainable development through a declaration.

The sustainable development, in essence, reflects an understanding that notices the close connection, interdependency, and interactions between the environment and economy. Therefore, it considers these terms as complimentary to each other, seeing no contradiction or conflict between the environmental protection and economic development (European Parliament, 2001, 15). For this reason, sustainable development gives importance to the use of market and price mechanisms in environmental protection. Indeed, the so-called economic instruments, which affect the attitudes and behaviours of economic actors by affecting the costs of alternative options for them, are of great importance for sustainable development model to reach its goals (Dündar, 1997, 185-190).

Following World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002, sustainable development has become a model that needs to be implemented urgently. As the most active and leading actor in the field of environmental protection, the EU has involved in this issue to a great extent. This study aims to explore the strategies, programs, policies, and practices that are connected to the implementation of sustainable development model at the EU level.

### **Early Attempts towards Sustainable Development within the European Union**

Protection of the environment within the EU has, on the one hand, been shaped by six environment action programmes implemented since 1973, and on the other hand, gained a status of policy based on explicit legal provisions brought by the amendments in the Founding Treaties in the course of time. In this early phase of environmental policy, measures and practices connected with sustainable development were at a low level.

The Fifth Environment Action Programme, prepared in parallel with the principles of Rio Declaration and came into effect in 1992, set sustainable development as a goal to be matched by the EU with an encouraging vision. However, advances towards the achievement of this goal were slow in practice, making most of the targets set by the Fifth Programme unattained at the end of its term in 1999 (Commission of the European Communities, 1999, 5-6 and 22). On the other hand, particularly since the mid-1990s onwards, calls for a stronger commitment to sustainable development at the EU level increased in parallel with the increasing international efforts. Consequently, sustainable development was incorporated into the Amsterdam Treaty among the basic goals of the Union in 1997. The Treaty also underlines the need for the integration of the environmental protection with the main EU policies in other fields (Cebeci et al, 1998, 73-177).

The Six Environment Action Programme sets environmental objectives and targets to be reached at the EU level by 2010, together with necessary actions expected to contribute to the achievement of them. Depending basically on the Fifth Programme, this Programme, in addition to the principle of sustainable development, contains many new aspects such as its emphasis on the integration of environmental concerns into other policies, development of environmental headline indicators as well as those of integration, establishment of a Union liability regime and that of an environmental data-base system, new principles of "substitution" and "burden of proof", and examination of possible impacts derived from many new issues, like GMOs, on the environment (Dündar & Fişne, 2001, 1).

Upon the request of Helsinki European Council in 1999 to prepare a long-term strategy that considers all together the environmental, social, and economical dimensions related to sustainable development, European Commission developed the first sustainable development strategy for the EU in 2001. In the same year, the Göteborg European Council discussed this strategy, specifically titled as "A Sustainable Europe for a Better World: A European Strategy for Sustainable Development". This Strategy started a new phase for the efforts towards sustainable development within the EU context, giving more importance to implementation and practices. It reflected an understanding that noticed the effectiveness of the economical instruments compared to adopting legislation in attaining the determined targets connected to sustainable development. The Strategy focused particularly on the issues of climate change, poverty, and emerging health threats and proposed a number of measures to deal with them (European Commission, 2001, ). It can be said that this first Strategy is successful in bringing good results and some progress in many areas towards sustainable development across the EU.

## **The Present Sustainable Development Strategy of the European Union**

To achieve further progress towards long-term sustainable development, the Council adopted some guiding principles in 2005. In addition, the Commission reviewed the first strategy, assessing the progress made and the tasks remained. Developed on the basis of this assessment, the Renewed EU Sustainable Development Strategy was adopted by the European Council in June 2006. It is a complex strategy that covers all EU policies connected to sustainable development. Like its predecessor, the present Strategy deals with economic, environmental and social issues in an integrated way. However, the Strategy differs from the previous one in including some additional key challenges that are listed as climate change and clean energy; sustainable transport; sustainable consumption and production; conservation and management of natural resources; public health; social inclusion, demography and migration; and finally global poverty. The present Strategy also has a stronger stress on the need to change the behaviors and attitudes of European citizens in order to reverse the unsustainable trends. For this purpose, it makes several suggestions to them to follow in their daily life to make a difference towards sustainable development in each of the listed areas.

The basic targets set out by the Strategy related to the determined challenges are examined in the following pages together with the main suggestions to the citizens to make a difference towards sustainable development. Before this examination, it should be noted that the Strategy envisages the use of the following means to achieve the listed goals: education and training; research and development; economical instruments; communication; and finally follow-up work (European Commission, 2007, 9-10).

### **Climate Change and Clean Energy**

The EU has been tackling with the challenge of climate change since mid-1990s when it was discovered as a potential threat. In this connection, it committed to cut its greenhouse gas emissions by 8%, from 1990 levels, by 2012 under the 1997 Kyoto Protocol. In addition, in 2007, the Council agreed to establish a new integrated climate change and energy policy, adopting a comprehensive package of measures. To contribute sustainable development, the new targets to be matched by the EU in this area by 2020 are as follows:

- Reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 20% and if agreed internationally by 30%,
- Improving energy efficiency by 20%,

- Raising the share of renewable energy to 20%,
- Increasing the level of bio-fuels in transport fuel to 10%.

In attaining these targets, besides a wide range of programmes and laws, the Strategy suggests to the European citizens to use a carbon-dioxide footprint calculator; opt for a cleaner mode of transport, unplug electrical appliances when not in use; choose higher energy efficient products; and install home insulation (European Commission, 2007, 16-21).

### **Sustainable Transport**

In order to provide European citizens with the cleanest and most efficient modes of transport, the EU has involved in coordinating actions in several related areas. The targets to be met by the EU through these coordinated actions include:

- Reducing pollutant emissions to minimize effects on human health and the environment,
- Achieving a balance in the frequency of use between different modes of transport,
- Cutting vehicle CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, targeting 140g/km by 2009 and 120g/km by 2012,
- Halving the number of road deaths occurred in 2000 by 2010.

For the given targets to be met, in addition to a number of legislative and economic measures, the Strategy invites people to make a difference through sharing their cars; using public transport as much as possible; traveling by bike; and considering safety by wearing a seat belt, smart driving, listening to music at a lower tempo, choosing lighter colors for car as well as fitting safety devices for children (European Commission, 2007, 25-27).

### **Sustainable Consumption and Production**

Today, the average product lines in a supermarket in Europe have risen to over 15,000 compared to those in a grocery in the 1960. This can be seen as a simple sign of the changed consumption and production patterns in Europe. In order to make these patterns less harmful, the present Strategy underlines the need to change how Europeans produce, buy and throw away. For this purpose, it identifies the following main targets:

- Terminating the destructive link between economic growth and damage to the environment,
- Increasing the use of objects that have been produced responsibly,
- Urging the public authorities in all member states to buy environmentally-friendly products and services by 2010,
- Extending the market for environmentally-friendly technologies and innovations,
- Improving the welfare of animals both at EU and international level.

In addition to a variety of measures and schemes, the Strategy asks Europeans to add the following practices among their shopping habits and attitudes to make a difference towards sustainable consumption and production: collecting information about sustainable practices at potential destinations for them in traveling and tourism; looking for energy efficient household appliances; buying in local farmers' markets; purchasing FairTrade products that are produced responsibly; trying to be avoided from being manipulated by clever advertising by thinking carefully about their needs; giving the things that they no longer need to a charity; and following the instructions for recycling of an unwanted object (European Commission, 2007, 31-35).

### **Conservation and Management of Natural Resources**

The overall objective of the EU Strategy in this field is to improve the management of natural resources and to prevent their overexploitation in such a way that ensures regeneration. In accordance with this objective, it sets these goals:

- Reducing the rate of biodiversity loss across the world by 2010 and beyond,
- Restoring degraded marine environments by 2015 and protecting fish stocks from being over-exploited,
- Meeting the targets on forest protection set by the United Nations by 2015,
- Improving the efficiency of using natural resources,
- Encouraging recycling and reducing the generation of waste.

Besides a variety of measures for attaining these aims, the Strategy invites people to grow native plants in their garden; use eco-friendly products; visit nature reserves; educating children about the nature (European Commission, 2007, 40-42).

## **Public Health**

It is a legal duty deriving from the Founding Treaties for the EU to ensure a high level of health protection to its citizens through preventing illness and diseases and reducing the dangers to human health. In fulfill this duty , the EU has involved in a number of actions. The particular aims listed by the present Strategy include the followings:

- Ensuring safety in relation to chemicals by 2020,
- Halting lifestyle-related diseases, including alcoholism and obesity,
- Trying to reduce the inequalities in life expectancy,
- Ensuring health threats to be dealt with quickly and efficiently,
- Reducing suicide rates and improving mental health,
- Increasing the safety of food both for people and animals, particularly through hygiene and labeling,
- Providing high welfare standards to animals.

In addition to several legislative and coordinating measures, the Strategy ask European people to move more; balance their diet by cutting fat; stop smoking; reduce their stress levels; wear their seat belt in cars; avoid excessive drinking as well as pollution (European Commission, 2007, 48-50).

## **Social Inclusion, Demography and Migration**

In order develop a safe, dynamic, and democratic society throughout Europe, which provides protection and jobs to its members with a special care for the vulnerable ones among them, the Strategy outlines the following basic goals:

- Reducing risk of poverty and social exclusion by 2010,
- Ensuring territorial and social cohesion,
- Support the member states in modernizing their social protection systems that are under the pressure of falling birth rates and longer life spans,
- Promoting employment, particularly for women, older workers and migrants by 2010,
- Ensuring better integration of migrants into European society,
- Making young people more employable via vocational education, apprenticeship, training or some experience or qualification,
- Helping disabled people to find job.

Besides a range of funds, programmes, and laws, the Strategy makes many suggestions to Europeans to make a difference in this area. They include attending to evening classes; learning another language, voluntary teaching and running a conversation class; starting up their own business as well as starting up a club or a team (European Commission, 2007, 56-60).

## **Global Poverty**

The EU also works for sustainable development on a global level. In this connection, it declared its commitment to “the Millennium Development Goals” set by the UN Millennium Summit in 2000. Having a deadline of 2015, these goals include:

- Eradicating extreme poverty and hunger,
- Achieving universal primary education,
- Strengthening gender equality,
- Reducing child mortality,
- Improving maternal health,
- Combating HIV /AIDS, malaria and other diseases,
- Ensuring environmental sustainability,
- Developing a global partnership for development.

Particularly in accordance with the last goal, the EU adopted in 2002 a document titled as “Towards a Global Partnership for Sustainable Development”. Since then, it has involved in many initiatives and actions to achieve progress towards sustainable development on the global level.

As regards the first goal, that is eradicating global poverty and hunger, the Strategy considers development cooperation with major international and regional actors as an effective means. While the former include United Nations, World Trade Organization, and international financial organizations, the latter consists of African, Latin American, Caribbean and Pacific countries. In cooperation with these partners, the EU aims to supply water and energy to the poors in the world, which are two essential components for the reduction of their poverty. More precisely, the Strategy aims to ensure a 50 % reduction in the number of people without access to safe drinking water and adequate sanitation by 2015. As regards providing energy, it aims to attract capital,

technology and human resources to the needy parts of the world. Trade, aid, and debt relief are seen as the supporting means to overcome global poverty.

In supporting these policies, the Strategy asks European citizens to be involved in so-called cause marketing; buy FairTrade products; donate in various ways; or sponsor a specific child (European Commission, 2007, 64-66).

## Conclusions

In the light of the above given examination, it is obvious that sustainable development is no longer a theoretical model for the EU. On the contrary, it has become a deep-seated value that guides not only the EU official policies, programs, and practices but also European people's way of life. This is particularly valid since the early 2000s following the adoption of the Six Environment Action Programme and the first European Strategy for Sustainable Development. Compared to their predecessor, these documents have been more effective in making progress or difference towards sustainable development given that they are prepared in a more integrated and comprehensive way that covers all major EU policies.

Prepared basically with the same qualities, the present Renewed EU Sustainable Development Strategy deals with some additional key challenges to ensure the sustainable development. They are listed as climate change and clean energy; sustainable transport; sustainable consumption and production; conservation and management of natural resources; public health; social inclusion, demography and migration; and finally global poverty. Establishing certain goals or targets to be met usually in ten years time in relation to each challenge, the present Strategy also has a stronger stress on the need to change the behaviors and attitudes of European citizens in order to reverse the unsustainable trends. For this purpose, it makes several suggestions to be followed in the daily life of the European citizens.

Finally, the EU is also eager to work for sustainable development on a global level. In this connection, it has involved in many initiatives and actions to achieve progress towards sustainable development on the global level in cooperation with all leading international and regional players.

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