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Sustainable Development and the programme EU2020

Introduction by Prof. ir. Bernard MAZIJN, Ghent University

Mr. Chairman, Excellencies, Members of Parliament,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I shall be giving my speech, which will last about ten minutes, in Dutch, but making references to original texts and expressions that are usually in English. In the exchange of views afterwards, Dutch, French or English may be used.

Ladies and Gentlemen, since the publication in 1987 by the World Commission on Environment and Development, headed by Mrs. Gro Harlem Brundtland, and the holding in 1992 of the United Nations Conference on the same theme in Rio de Janeiro, much work has been done on putting into practice what appeared to be rather a vague concept, a concept of solidarity in time and space, in other words the concept of 'sustainable development'.

In the last 20-25 years, experts have developed tools and methodologies that can contribute to putting this vague concept into practice. Government, business and non-governmental organisations have recorded examples of good practice. But all international reports on the subject concur: it is 'too little, too late'. Not just the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment report in 2005 and the IPCC 4th Assessment Report in 2007, but successive IEA World Energy Outlooks, the UNEP Global Environmental Outlooks, the UNDP Human Development Reports, including the monitoring of the Millennium Development Goals, the Human Rights World Reports, etc.; all of these reports call for an urgent approach - in a systematic and coherent manner - to make sustainable development on Earth possible - for all present and all future generations. This is the backdrop against which I have prepared my speech today.

Ladies and Gentlemen, one of the instruments developed in the last 5 to 10 years and which has been acquiring maturity is the 'Sustainability Impact Assessment' (SIA). This instrument enables a policy proposal to be examined ex-ante, and to check whether it is consistent with sustainable development. Various national authorities in the European Union (Belgium, Germany, Ireland, the United Kingdom) have used an instrument of this kind in recent years during the decision-making about certain policy proposals. In the spring of this year, the OECD published 'Guidance on Sustainability Impact Assessment' for national administrations.

This 'guidance' was formulated on the basis of experience in Belgium and Switzerland, as well as - and perhaps most of all - in the European Commission. Please also bear in mind that within the OECD, the Sustainable Development Experts, meeting in Paris in 2009 and 2010, commissioned a consultant to subject the Innovation Strategy and the Green Growth Strategy that were in development ex-ante, or if you prefer 'ad interim', to a screening Sustainability Impact Assessment. This screening allowed on repeated occasions a determination to be made of whether the strategy was consistent with sustainable development, in other words, whether any trade-offs or rebound

effects has been included.. The results allow identification of loopholes and definition of divergences from an over-arching 'Sustainable Development Strategy', as well as formulation of recommendations. In this way, the further development of a strategy - if necessary and desired (you are well aware of the primacy of politics, a point to which I will return shortly) - can be amended or supplemented with complete transparency and - not to be overlooked - a storyline to communicate the consistency with sustainable development.

Stakeholders with a concern about sustainable development expect this too, certain in the knowledge that we shall be meeting soon in Rio de Janeiro again - in 2012 - twenty years after the previous Earth Summit, with the following objectives, and I quote: "to secure renewed political commitment to sustainable development; to assess progress towards internationally agreed goals on sustainable development and to address new and emerging challenges."

All international organisations (the United Nations and its agencies, the OECD, the European Union, …) are keen to see their recent initiatives, including the strategies that they have developed, recognised at Rio+20, the new Earth Summit, as a major contribution to sustainable development. But what does 'recognition' mean? It may remain limited to a mention in the summary in the international documents or preferably - as a result of the credibility of the initiative concerned - stakeholders can attribute a greater moral and practical value to the initiative. In the latter case, it will also be observed that the initiative has actually and effectively contributed to sustainable development.

Consequently, the question may be asked: would/will 'Europe 2020 - A European strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth' stand up to the recognition test? In order to find the beginnings of an answer, I started looking - as I prepared today's session - for the results of an ex-ante 'Sustainability Impact Assessment' - or the more familiar 'Impact Assessment' of the European Commission - and to my amazement, they are not available. If one actually examines the relevant Commission web site with the lists of all published Impact Assessments, it becomes apparent that few or none of the important EU strategies are available. Ladies and Gentlemen, please remember that other instruments (stakeholder consultation, monitoring systems, etc.) have a different purpose, and therefore do not form an alternative to a Sustainability Impact Assessment.

And yet, although the results of a SIA are supposed to hold up a mirror to us, ==more importantly than the fetish for one instrument or none, the question remains of how the primacy of politics, embodied in our European democracies by the European Parliament and the national parliaments, considers 'Sustainable Development in the Europe 2020 Strategy'.== Fortunately, for this purpose, I can refer to Chapter 1 of the 'Fourteenth Bi-annual Report: Developments in European Union Procedures and Practices Relevant to Parliamentary Scrutiny', prepared by the COSAC Secretariat.

Reading the report, in particular the first chapter, reveals that approximately one-third of the parliaments were unable to answer the questions because the integration of 'sustainable development' in was not on the agenda in the discussions about Europe 2020 or because discussions in the parliament were still ongoing. Furthermore, it can also be observed that the remarks that the various parliaments make in their answers - which is hardly surprising - are characterised in one way or another by or are in line with the position of their country in the European discussions, for example in the Council. The question which then arises is "How should one interpret the synthesis of the positions of the various parliaments which answered the questions against a background of democratic decision-making in the European Union?" Or to put it rather more bluntly: "From the viewpoint of that democratic decision-making, would it not be interesting to compare the answers, whether or not in summary form, with the answers from the European Parliament?" The composition of the European Parliament can be considered as representative of the European Parliament. So that is what I did. What follows is the summarised answers to the questions,

compared with the answers from the European Parliament, which were shown *in extenso* in the Annex of the COSAC report.

Europe 2020 Strategy

There is an overwhelming majority of national parliaments - the ones that responded - which considers that the Europe 2020 Strategy forms a well-integrated whole, albeit with the formulation of a few (nationally inspired) assumptions/conditions. The European Parliament, on the other hand, makes critical comments, including that "the headline targets … should be formulated in the framework of a consistent and coherent sustainable development strategy combining the economic, social and environmental policy agendas."

With regard to the economic and social developments in the rest of the world, half of the parliaments argue that Europe 2020 takes sufficient account of them, although a number of potential pitfalls are mentioned. The European Parliament does not agree with that, and advocates "a broader and more comprehensive approach in its external action, in line with the EU concept of policy coherence for development."

About taking account of the social and environmental consequences and respect for human rights, one can read in the summary that the majority of the parliaments feel that this is treated properly; a number of parliaments do express reservations about the degree to which social aspects are taken into account. Albeit with a few critical comments, the European Parliament does appear to be satisfied with the way in which the social aspects have been incorporated into the Europe 2020 Strategy, unlike the environmental aspects, where the Parliament has been very critical about weaknesses. As regards human rights, it advocates using trade as a weapon to enforce compliance.

Europe 2020 Strategy and European Union Sustainable Development Strategy

A large majority of the parliaments that sent in an answer have a positive evaluation about the integration of the EU-SDS into the Europe 2020 Strategy. Various parliaments make specific observations about some of the challenges formulated in the EU-SDS. The European Parliament goes into detail about each of those challenges. It would take too long to go into such detail here; In summary, it can be stated that the EP is insisting on going further and being more specific in the actions than what is currently formulated in the strategy.

The national parliaments state that there are adequate instruments to monitor the Europe 2020 Strategy, in particular the challenges set out in the EU-SDS. However, it does appear that the European Parliament - which stated in its first resolution in March 2010 that "The Commission therefore urgently needs to come forward with more detailed plans to clarify how these initiatives will be implemented successfully, and to present such plans to Parliament" - has still not its wishes met so far.

Europe 2020 Strategy and National Parliaments

The answer given on this point by national parliaments and the European Parliament is rather sketchy, and gives a very disparate picture. Although the parliamentary 'Committees on European Affairs' are supposed to play a role, the institutional architecture in the various parliaments is very diverse ... and limited.

Mr. Chairman, Members of Parliament and, Ladies and Gentlemen,

There appears to be a difference of opinion between all the national parliaments and the European Parliament. There was not enough time to go into this in detail. But it would be instructive for me too

to find out what you think of the summarised answers to the questionnaire, the observation that I made and the pros and cons of carrying out an SIA for Rio+20 so as to be able to tell the storyline to the international community, with or without some fine-tuning.

Reaction on elements of the debate

First and foremost, it has to be stated that the debate about the links between the Europe 2020 Strategy and 'Sustainable Development' has been a rich discussion. It also showed the complexity involved: it deals with many very diverse aspects. It is striking that the various speakers also place their emphasis differently. This brings to the fore every dimension of sustainable development. Some people refer to the economic aspects, others to the environmental aspects and yet others to the social aspects, expressly drawing attention to the poverty issue. The 'external dimension' received little or no attention.

In relation to the objectives, it was argued that they should not be too numerous, but not too few either, that they must be realistic yet ambitious. In my opinion, it shows what I referred to in my introduction - raising the question of whether the objectives should be tested by means of an SIA or monitored using indicators, and the trade-offs and rebound effects investigated.

The debate illustrates the areas of tension between the short-term objectives (usually associated with the financial and economic crisis) and the long-term objectives. This also makes me think about what was said about the evaluation of the Lisbon Strategy within the European Commission itself about that area of tension.

In this regard, it is probably appropriate to make a critical observation about the concepts of 'competition' and 'competitiveness', which were referred to in various contributions. If we look 20 years back in time, the period of the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, who would have dared think that the sector of ICT, communication, mobile telephony and so on would have boomed to the extent that they have And who can predict which sectors will be at the top in another 20 years? It occurs to me that - if we have a discussion about 'decoupling' - we will not have too much to worry about provided that we seek new technologies and innovation at an early stage, thus avoiding 'lock-in investments'.

What is striking in the debate is that there definitely needs to be a multi-level approach. The role of the European level as compared with that of Member States, the nation states, needs further clarification. In that regard, the role of national parliaments also needs to be borne in mind in the budget/spending discussions.