



RIO+8: AN ASSESSMENT OF NATIONAL COUNCILS FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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INTRODUCTION

National Councils for Sustainable Development (NCSDs): what are they and why are they important? Created or sanctioned by national governments, NCSDs bring together members of government or both government and civil society to define sustainable development within a particular national context. The vast majority of the 70 to 80 national councils that exist today¹ were created to support implementation of national commitments made eight years ago at the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, commonly referred to as the Earth Summit. At Rio, countries agreed to adopt new policies, engage major social groups, and pursue economic reforms that would put their societies on the path to sustainable development. In other words, to increase the well-being of their citizens (social, economic, and environmental) without jeopardizing the development prospects of future generations.² Because NCSDs assumed responsibility for much of the ambitious agenda that emerged at the Earth Summit they offer a wealth of lessons about progress to date in achieving sustainable development. Unfortunately, little critical analysis of these bodies has been carried out to date.

This report attempts to fill the information gap on NCSDs and to evaluate when they are more or less effective at orchestrating social and political change supportive of sustainable development. The track record and operating environment of councils in eight countries (Bolivia, Finland, Honduras, Mongolia, the Philippines, Uganda, the United States, and the United Kingdom) were compared and analyzed. To permit such a comparison, individual case studies were completed for each council (these are available on the world wide web at www.wri.org/wri/governance/ncsd.html). These councils were chosen because they represented a variety of organizing structures, economic contexts and regional experiences. In addition, the councils selected generally had sufficiently long track records to permit a retrospective analysis.³ The comparative analysis that follows catalogues the different strategies pursued by NCSDs, areas of demonstrated achievement, and common obstacles. Where appropriate, the successes or experiences of specific councils are highlighted in boxes throughout the text.

This analysis is designed to encourage wider debate about the contribution of national councils to sustainable develop-

ment and their ability to re-orient governments and societies. It should serve as a useful reference for policymakers, members of councils, civil society, and organizations directly engaged with NCSDs.

THE EMERGENCE OF NATIONAL COUNCILS

The text of the Rio commitments (which includes *Agenda 21*, the Rio Declaration, the Declaration of Forest Principles, the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, and the UN Convention on Biological Diversity) makes no specific reference to sustainable development councils. Under *Agenda 21*, however, governments agreed to take the following actions:

- Reform decisionmaking processes to better integrate environment and development concerns (Chapter 8).
- Engage important civil society groups and stakeholders in decisionmaking processes (Chapters 2–32).
- Put in place national action plans (now commonly referred to as *Agenda 21* plans), and national coordination structures to implement the Rio commitments (Chapter 38).⁴

Table 1

Strategies Adopted by Councils

Strategy	Greater Emphasis	Less Emphasis
Multistakeholder Membership	Bolivia, Finland, Uganda, Philippines, United Kingdom, United States	Honduras, Mongolia
Articulation of a National Vision	Finland, Mongolia, Philippines, United States	Bolivia, Honduras, Uganda, United Kingdom
Links to Local or Regional Efforts	Finland, Honduras, Uganda, United States	Bolivia, Mongolia, Philippines, United Kingdom
Balance Between Environmental, Social and Economic Issues	Bolivia, Honduras, Mongolia, United Kingdom	Finland, Philippines, Uganda, United States

Countries responded to these directives in a variety of ways. Some governments created special departments to coordinate initiatives among different state agencies and with civil society, other governments assigned these responsibilities to existing government agencies, and yet others created multistakeholder councils to implement or coordinate implementation of the Rio commitments. The latter set of bodies are the focus of this paper. Of the 150 or so countries that have responded to these *Agenda 21* mandates, about half (70 to 80) chose to create councils.⁵

In March and April of 1997, governments and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) gathered at the Rio+5 Forum and the 19th United Nations General Assembly Special Session (UNGASS), respectively, to evaluate progress made since UNCED. Participants generally concluded that renewed

efforts were needed to implement *Agenda 21*. Toward this end, the United Nations General Assembly called upon all governments to adopt national sustainable development strategies by 2002 and to integrate national economic, social, and environmental objectives in transparent processes that engage all social sectors.⁶ As notable was the gathering of NCS D representatives at the Rio+5 Forum where they evaluated their own progress since 1992. They determined that the effectiveness of NCS Ds rests largely on an ability to:

- Foster ongoing dialogue across sectors and between government and civil society.
- Use consensus-building processes to reach agreement regarding national development paths.
- Provide an integrated analysis of the social, economic, and environmental

dimensions of sustainable development.

- Complement—rather than supplant—government decisionmaking by engaging government and a spectrum of civil society (business, advocacy and interest groups, scientific and teaching institutions, etc.).⁷

The original *Agenda 21* commitments as well as evaluations of the Earth Summit at Rio+5 emphasize the importance of integrating sustainable development concepts across sectors (economic, social, and environment) and institutions (government, civil society, multilateral and international bodies, etc.). Thus, the first question that should be asked of NCS Ds is: how well have they fulfilled this integration function?

STRATEGIES ADOPTED BY COUNCILS

The structure, approach, and problem focus of national councils vary widely depending on the political and social contexts within which they operate. Nevertheless, the approaches NCS Ds have followed in their efforts to act as integrating mechanisms can generally be divided into four sets of strategic choices. (See *Table 1*). Most councils emphasize one or two of these strategies, but rarely pursue all four.

Multistakeholder Membership

Currently, about 40 percent of NCS Ds include nongovernmental representatives or members.⁸ The first country to create a national sustainable development council after Rio, the Philippines, invited a broad spectrum of civil society and *Agenda 21* groups to become council members, a multistakeholder model that many other countries have followed.

The U.S. President's Council on Sustainable Development excelled in articulating a national vision and in defining a roadmap that could help the country realize that vision. When the Council was created in mid-1993, members were organized into thematic task forces to address particular sustainable development questions. Almost immediately, traditional divisions and concerns emerged. Within the eco-efficiency task force, members representing industry called for a rethinking of the country's environmental regulatory framework. Representatives of environmental groups feared this was a thinly veiled effort to dismantle hard-won legal protection for the environment. Discussions within the population and consumption task force were also contentious and led to polarizations within the group.

What allowed the council to move beyond these divisions was a visioning exercise that took place at a "members only" retreat early in 1994. At this retreat, council members shared their personal vision of what a sustainable United States would look like in the year 2050. Concerns and hopes for the future were expressed informally in a less pressured setting. Members realized that they shared similar ideas not only about the kind of country they wanted to build but also about how to get there once short-term or narrow concerns were set aside. As a group, they were able to build a long-term vision as well as a specific roadmap for achieving that vision. This vision became the national action strategy articulated in the 1996 report called *Sustainable America: A New Consensus for Prosperity, Opportunity, and*

a Healthy Environment for the Future.

Lesson Learned: Councils can serve as neutral fora for constructive dialogue among adversarial interest groups. In the above case, the council's deliberations also shaped the outlook and thinking of key social and political leaders.

Source: Crescencia Maurer. "The U.S. President's Council on Sustainable Development: a Case Study." Case study prepared for World Resources Institute. September 1998. The full case study is available online at: www.wri.org/wri/governance/ncsd.html.

Canada's experience with national and regional round tables, which bring together civil society representatives to study sustainable development problems and make recommendations to government, was also influential. The UK Round Table on Sustainable Development, for example, has followed the Canadian model. Even among the majority of councils still dominated by government representation, a trend is underway to expand participation by non-governmental organizations. Mongolia is a case in point. Mongolia's council was composed exclusively of cabinet ministers until recently when it invited an NGO representative and the head of Mongolia's Business Council on Sustainable Development to become members. Mongolia's NCSO also created an advisory committee that includes representatives of women's groups, youth, labor unions, scientists, and business. The council made these changes in order to better engage a cross section of society,

and to recognize its *de facto* partnerships with NGOs.⁹

Articulation of a National Vision

All councils wrestle over the extent to which they should emphasize a broad vision at the expense of focusing on a set of specific questions or problems. Decisions of this nature are often based upon which strategy is perceived to offer the greatest opportunity for impact. For example, the UK Round Table concentrated on developing policy recommendations that would steer key sectoral reforms implemented by the British government (including privatization of transportation infrastructure, energy deregulation, agricultural programs) in the direction of sustainable development.¹⁰ By contrast, the U.S. President's Council gave priority to building a shared vision of sustainable development among participating stakeholders. (See Box 1).¹¹ When the Finnish Na-

tional Commission on Sustainable Development was created after UNCED, it translated the far-reaching vision of sustainable development already in place into a set of concrete plans for both government and civil society. (See Box 2.)¹²

Links to Local and Regional Efforts

Many councils try to achieve greater integration by strengthening their collaboration with sustainable development efforts at the local, regional, or international levels. Uganda's National Environmental Management Authority (NEMA) is an excellent example of an attempt to integrate national and local arenas. NEMA is both Uganda's environmental authority and the government entity responsible for fulfilling *Agenda 21* and other Rio commitments. It has invested considerably in devolving its authority to the appropriate local level and in engaging local power structures and com-

The Finnish National Commission on Sustainable Development (FNCSD) orchestrated a far-reaching and multisectoral effort to implement its national *Agenda 21* plan. The FNCSD first worked with government to develop an integrated work program across various sectors, including education, health, housing, and industry. This effort resulted in a government program on sustainable development that included commitments from individual ministries to carry forward specific parts of the Finnish *Agenda 21* program. Efforts to define work programs for non-state actors began at the end of 1996 when the FNCSD asked Finland's most important professional and trade associations to present proposals on how they would move toward sustainability. In re-

sponse, the Association of Finnish Local Authorities, the Confederation of Finnish Industry and Employers, and the Federation of Finnish Commerce and Trade have all presented sustainable development programs. Organized civil society, represented by a number of NGOs—with the Finnish Association for Nature Conservation acting as the coordinator—also presented a program.

In the future, the FNCSD will monitor the implementation of these plans. In the summer of 2001, government agencies will report to the FNCSD on the state of sustainable development within their respective sectors. Nongovernmental groups that prepared a sustainable development program

will also be asked to report their results to the FNCSD. The FNCSD will use this information to assess national progress and prepare a report for presentation at the Rio+10 meeting in 2002.

Lesson Learned: Councils can have a far-reaching impact when they are given a clear, prominent role in national development planning and debates.

Source: Taru Vuontisjärvi. "The Finnish National Commission on Sustainable Development." Case study prepared for World Resources Institute, September 1998. The full case study is available online at: www.wri.org/wri/governance/ncsd.html.

munities. (See Box 3).¹³ The Finnish National Commission on Sustainable Development (FNCSD) has shown a similar commitment in efforts to involve local communities. As evidence, more than one half of Finnish municipalities either have an *Agenda 21* plan in place or are developing one.¹⁴ Even more far-reaching are the FNCSD's efforts to foster links between Finnish local authorities and their counterparts in other Baltic countries¹⁵ through the Baltic Local Agenda 21 Forum (which receives support from the Finnish Environment Ministry).¹⁶ The Forum pools resources, and promotes information exchange and mutual learning among municipalities and other local authorities. The FNCSD's involvement with the United Nations Commission for Sustainable Development (CSD) has also given it an international presence. The FNCSD is responsible for evaluating and reporting on Finland's national progress to the CSD, and it forms part of the delega-

tion representing Finland at CSD meetings.¹⁷

Balancing Environment, Social and Economic Issues

Finally, the fourth integration strategy tested by councils is identifying ways to link environmental or social questions with broader concerns about economic development. Quite a few councils have focused on addressing environmental concerns. For example, Uganda's NEMA, a national environmental authority, is responsible for sustainable development questions, and it addresses these through an environmental lens. Three other councils also emphasized environmental issues: the Philippines, the United States, and Finland. In each of these councils, representatives from environmental authorities or organizations held leadership roles. Agencies or organizations dealing with other sectors such as health, labor, education, urban development, and trade and industry

also played a significant but less central role. With the exception of Uganda, councils in lower-income countries (Bolivia, Honduras, and Mongolia) tended to emphasize the equity and social dimensions of sustainable development. In Bolivia, the national council is linked to and led by the Ministry for Sustainable Development and National Planning and gives priority to poverty alleviation, equitable economic growth, and the preservation of Bolivia's indigenous cultural resources.¹⁸ The partnership between the Honduran council, the Consejo Nacional de Desarrollo Sostenible (CONADES), and that country's Ministry of Justice is another case in point. CONADES concluded that decentralization, increased public participation in decisionmaking, and democratization of the political system were preconditions for sustainable development. (See Box 4).¹⁹

Uganda's National Environmental Management Authority: Decentralizing Responsibility for Environment and Sustainable Development

The National Environmental Management Authority (NEMA) is delegating responsibility to and engaging local authorities in decisionmaking by creating district and local environmental committees (DECs and LECs). The DECs are led by district environment officers, who are appointed by district governments, and LECs incorporate local authorities and traditional community leaders. Both DECs and LECs contribute to district development plans, evaluate and monitor a district's natural resource base, and engage local communities in decisionmaking (including reviewing environmental impact assessments [EIAs] and managing local environmental conflicts). Devolving authority for environmental decisions to local governments and communities by allowing them to participate in

management and decisionmaking activities has allowed NEMA to build a constituency on the ground. These lead agencies act as NEMA's monitoring network while representing their own development interests at the local level.

The linkages that DECs and LECs have with local level development planning are beginning to yield results. The first generation of district development plans now incorporates environmental screening procedures. Districts are now recruiting environmental officers (DEOs) and cementing these new institutional structures. The election of local production and environment secretaries has helped anchor this process firmly within formal local government structures. Uganda is beginning to witness more

participation of DEOs and the various committees in environmental monitoring, EIA reviews, environmental awareness, and community environmental microprojects.

Lesson Learned: Councils can build strong constituencies for sustainable development by engaging organizations and communities operating at a local level. NEMA accomplished this by creating innovative management structures.

Source: Frank Turyatunga. "Uganda Case Study: the National Environmental Management Authority." Case study prepared for World Resources Institute. July 1998. The full case study is available online at: www.wri.org/wri/governance/ncsd.html.

CONADES: Building a Foundation for Sustainable Development in Honduras

The National Council for Sustainable Development (Consejo Nacional de Desarrollo Sostenible—CONADES) in Honduras was given a broad mandate upon its creation in 1995, but devoted a considerable share of its staff and resources on an important partnership with the Ministry of Justice and Government. This ministry was spearheading structural reforms within the public sector to decentralize decisionmaking and management to regional and local levels. These very different bodies worked together through a third organization they formed jointly: the Executive Commission for Sustainable Development (COEDES in Spanish). COEDES worked to integrate sustainable development concepts into public sector reforms. One of its first endeavors was to review three draft laws under consideration by the Honduran congress: the Territorial Decentralization and Diversification

Law, the Municipal Development Law, and the Land Use and Human Settlements Law. The commission suggested modifications to political structures that would permit greater participation by stakeholders and reduce duplication or conflicts between national and local authorities.

The COEDES also piloted a local model for sustainable development in the Valle Department (a political district). The commission began by reviewing the state of governance (that is, the roles played by different private and public entities), and presenting these findings in meetings with sitting mayors and at a larger meeting of stakeholders that brought together 65 public and private organizations. These meetings resulted in a broad agreement to develop and promote a single integrated development strategy for the Valle Department that would consoli-

date and build on the principles of participatory democracy. Multistakeholder councils were formed at various levels: departmental, municipal, and community. The development plans that emerged from these councils, particularly at the municipal level, galvanized a whole set of nongovernmental groups that were previously inactive.

Lesson Learned: Councils can act as catalysts by activating and encouraging cooperation among stakeholders.

Source: René Gamero A. "Honduras' Consejo Nacional de Desarrollo Sostenible." Case study prepared for World Resources Institute. April 1998. The full case study is available online at: www.wri.org/wri/governance/ncsd.html.

In September 1996, the Philippine Council for Sustainable Development (PCSD) issued *The Philippine Agenda 21: A National Agenda for Sustainable Development for the 21st Century (PA 21)*. This national sustainable development plan was drafted after 14 months of consultations with various sectors across the country and represents the PCSD's most important accomplishment to date. The PA 21 fundamentally changed national planning by:

- institutionalizing the multistakeholder approach to planning and decision-making;
- integrating sustainable development concerns into decisionmaking structures and processes; and
- organizing planning and action within an ecosystem and territorial framework (that is forests/upland, lowland/agricultural, urban, coastal/marine, and freshwater ecosystems).

The PCSD was also able to integrate PA 21 into the macroplanning process of the national government. The Philippine National Development Plan for the 21st Century (Plan 21) uses PA 21 as its guiding framework. Plan 21 describes the country's broad development directions and will serve as the basis for the detailed plans of sector agencies. PA 21 will also guide the revision of the government's 5-year medium-term Philippine Development Plan, which the new administration of President Joseph Estrada is undertaking. This integration process is also taking place in a number of other areas:

- the PCSD's committee on socioeconomic concerns is developing a framework to help integrate sustainable development principles and parameters into the budgetary process;

- a section on sustainable development and the environment is being incorporated into the national civil service exam; and
- sustainable development objectives were incorporated into the research and development agenda of the Philippine Council for Agriculture, Forestry, and Natural Resource Development.

Lesson Learned: With sufficient political support, councils can transform sectoral and closed decisionmaking processes.

Source: Ester C. Isberto. "The Philippine Council for Sustainable Development: Like Cooking Rice Cakes." Case study prepared for World Resources Institute. September 1998. The full case study is available online at: www.wri.org/wri/governance/ncsd.html.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS TO DATE

To what extent have the above strategies enabled councils to achieve change and to act as effective integrating mechanisms? Some preliminary answers emerge from this review of NCS D experiences. In general, councils have proven to be excellent fora for constructive ideas and proposals for change. The multistakeholder nature of these bodies as well as their focus on consensus-building supports thoughtful discussion, analysis, and negotiation. In addition to this overarching accomplishment, a number of councils have a record of achievement in the following areas:

Redefinition of Development Frameworks

Four of the councils (Finland, Mongolia, Philippines, and the United States) articu-

lated new development strategies; some have won political support for implementing these strategies. The Philippines council provides a good example of the latter. (See Box 5).²⁰ Many NCS Ds are particularly adept at these kinds of strategic planning exercises because their members usually include leaders: cabinet ministers, industrial and business representatives, and members of key social and political interest groups. These leaders are adept at developing and executing broad strategies within their respective fields. Not surprisingly, NCS Ds have taken advantage of these skills.

Supplying Sound Policy Advice

Councils that contribute to or undertake policy analysis often take advantage of domestic reform processes or policy debates. The UK Round Table on Sustainable Development experienced some

success at influencing national policy debates and reforms in the transportation arena. (See Box 6.) NCS Ds are excellent fora for the development and exchange of new policy ideas because they usually gather a cross-section of experts and practitioners who bring both intellectual power and on-the-ground experience to bear on particular policy issues. In addition, councils permit members to think more creatively and long-term because they can work outside the constraints of day-to-day policymaking.

Support for Local Innovation and Experimentation

A good number of the NCS Ds showed an ability to collaborate with local governments, community organizations, and advocacy groups. A kind of synergy appears to evolve from such cooperation.

The UK Round Table on Sustainable Development (UKRT) focuses on strategic issues or problems where it can make a significant intellectual contribution and where opportunity exists to influence government policy. The UKRT has studied a wide range of issues (freshwater resources, energy, environmental policy tools, rural development, and agricultural reform) but for a number of years it placed great emphasis on one particular issue: transport. The UKRT explored the challenge of moving transport infrastructure and policy in a more sustainable direction from a number of analytical perspectives: land-use and urban space, commercial freight requirements, consumer needs, and public versus private roles in managing transport infrastructure. Within each of these subissues, members of the

UKRT working groups identified ways to enhance social equity and minimize negative environmental consequences.

The UKRT worked on transport-related issues at the same time that the UK Government was formulating a green paper on sustainable transport. Members of the Round Table met with “Green Ministers” (ministers who took the lead on environmental questions), briefed members of parliament, reviewed official government responses to their recommendations, and tried to introduce the Round Table’s ideas into the final white paper on transport. The UKRT’s numerous and comprehensive reports on transport-related issues, in combination with its sustained outreach to relevant public sector officials, were cumulatively able

to influence the government’s thinking. Not surprisingly, many of the policy measures championed by the UKRT made their way into the Sustainable Transportation Policy adopted in August 1998.

Lesson Learned: Councils can serve as excellent sources of policy ideas and advice that provide a long-term perspective and take into account multiple political and social dimensions.

Source: Crescencia Maurer. “The UK Round Table on Sustainable Development: a Case Study.” Case study prepared for World Resources Institute, September 1998. The full case study is available online at: www.wri.org/wri/governance/ncsd.html.

National councils supply technical, financial, and institutional support to local governments and grass roots organizations. In exchange, local governments and groups bring their knowledge of what works locally to the national level. Finland, Honduras and Uganda were particularly successful at developing productive relationships with local communities and governments.

Formation of New Social and Political Alliances

Another positive outcome of the work carried out by councils is the constructive relationships established among unlikely social and economic interests. The Honduran and Mongolian councils provide examples of how NCSDs can encourage engagement across sectors. The Honduras council entered into an ongoing collaboration with the Ministry of Justice. The council and the ministry formed a body, the COEDES, which

provided support to local sustainable development councils and jointly reviewed pending legislation on public sector reforms.²¹ The Mongolian council, initially a body made up exclusively of cabinet heads, has opened gradually but steadily to NGOs and *Agenda 21* groups. This expansion is a significant development given the fact that Mongolia’s social and economic system has long been dominated by the state.²² In a few cases, the alliances created among councils members go beyond the confines of the council itself. For example, some members of the U.S. national council from the northwestern United States joined forces to create a Pacific Northwest Regional Council.²³

Raising Awareness and Reaching Key Audiences

Moving toward sustainable development requires a commitment to change by virtually every member of society. In es-

sence, a shift in how problems are understood and perceived is required to achieve the societal reorganization necessary for sustainable development. A number of councils have played an important role in translating and communicating the relevance of sustainable development to key national audiences. Bolivia’s national council exemplifies how councils can amplify the message of sustainable development at the national level. Bolivia’s NCSD did extensive consultations on the political reforms needed to support sustainable development, engaged civil society in a discussion of what sustainable development means for Bolivia, and communicated the relevance of sustainable development to Bolivian business groups, policymakers, and regional governments.²⁴

BARRIERS FACING COUNCILS

The accomplishments outlined above are substantial, but they represent only a partial fulfillment of the changes required to move sustainable development to the center of social, economic, and political systems. At the heart of the problem are several barriers that have hampered councils' abilities to produce systemic changes.

Limited Political Will

Many of the councils reviewed for this study began with significant support and interest from civil society and political administrations. For example, the Philippine Council and the U.S. President's Council began early in the life of the political administrations that created them (1992 and 1993, respectively) and immediately after the Earth Summit when national and international interest in sustainable development was high. Since 1992, the emergence of new national and international debates and issues has generally diminished the prominence of and interest in sustainable development although the problems it encompasses remain current. The decline in political will is often experienced most acutely with a change in political administration. For example, Bolivia's council was inactive for more than one year after a new political administration took office in 1997.²⁵ In other cases, a council is deemed to have reached the limit of its useful contribution, and its mandate is not extended. For example, the U.S. President's Council was dissolved in June 1999 after devising a national action plan, providing the executive branch with policy advice, and organizing a national conference on sustainable development.²⁶ In almost all cases, coun-

cils face the challenge of maintaining political and public interest in their endeavors.

Unclear Institutional Mandates

Many councils begin with ambiguous mandates both with regard to purpose and the role they should play in larger decisionmaking processes. This means that councils either dilute their efforts in an attempt to meet multiple objectives, or expend considerable energy defining a role for themselves. In many such cases, a council simply piggybacks or takes advantage of domestic debates and developments. (The UK Round Table on Sustainable Development and the Honduran CONADES both pursued such a strategy). The same lack of clarity is true for NCSDs at the international level. Although countries created NCSDs to support implementation of the Rio commitments, no formal mechanism or role exists for NCSDs to implement, monitor or evaluate fulfillment of these commitments in the context of the negotiating processes or conventions that were created after Rio.

Deficits in Financial and Human Resources

A number of councils, especially those in developing countries, face severe resource constraints. Council members often serve on a voluntary basis without the basic resources needed for effective operation, such as trained staff, budgets, and equipment. Bolivia's council, for example, functioned during its first three years without a secretariat; the council's sole source of financial support was a small grant from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).²⁷ In fact, all the councils in developing coun-

tries evaluated for this report depended heavily on bilateral or multilateral aid to cover their basic operating budgets. In the case of developed country councils, this problem usually manifested itself as erratic budgetary support or insufficient staff.

ASSESSING COUNCILS

Why were some councils able to produce more systemic changes than other councils? To answer this question, the strategic choices and enabling conditions of each council were evaluated. For seven separate categories, a council's experience was rated as strong, average, or weak relative to other councils in this group. (See Table 2.) These ratings are based on a review of individual case studies and the author's qualitative judgment. Although imprecise and subjective, this exercise indicates that two enabling conditions and two strategic choices may be important determinants of a council's performance.

The two most important enabling conditions were level of political support and the existence of a clear institutional mandate. The two councils that possessed the strongest enabling conditions (Finland's FNCSD and Uganda's NEMA) were generally the most effective among the group. These two bodies benefitted from being tightly integrated into government structures and from playing a prominent role in national and international fora. The FNCSD played a leadership role in defining a government program, advanced commitments by civil society, and represented Finland at the UN's Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD). Uganda's NEMA is not strictly a council, but a multi-stakeholder government body. NEMA's pow-

Table 2

Comparative Evaluation of Strategic Approaches and Enabling Conditions

Council	Strategies Employed				Enabling Conditions		
	Multi-stakeholder Membership	Development of a National Vision	Links with Local and Regional Efforts	Balance Between Environment & Other Issues	High Level Political Support	Sufficient Financial and Human Resources	Clear Institutional Mandate or Role
Bolivian National Council for Sustainable Development	strong	weak	average	strong	average	weak	weak
Finnish National Commission on Sustainable Development	strong	average	strong	average	strong	strong	strong
Honduran National Council for Sustainable Development	average	weak	strong	strong	average	weak	average
Mongolian National Council for Sustainable Development	weak	average	strong	average	strong	average	weak
Philippine Council for Sustainable Development	strong	strong	average	average	strong	average	average
Uganda's National Environmental Management Authority	strong	weak	strong	weak	strong	average	strong
UK Round Table on Sustainable Development	strong	weak	weak	average	average	average	average
U.S. President's Council on Sustainable Development	strong	strong	average	average	average	strong	average

Key: Effectiveness relative to other councils in the group: strong average weak

ers as a government authority allowed it to influence national planning and to create new management structures. These new structures are starting to give legitimacy to environment and sustainable development questions at local levels.

Two strategic choices, multistakeholder membership and linkages with regional and local efforts, also appear to provide a competitive advantage to some councils. These councils use their multistakeholder composition and linkages with local and regional groups to reach an array of decisionmakers and actors both inside and outside government, and

to demonstrate the value of sustainable development in practice. For example, when the Honduran COEDES supported multistakeholder planning in a particular locality, it generated regional interest in the council's work and participatory decisionmaking. In a number of cases, although councils emphasized a multistakeholder approach and estab-

lished strong links with local or regional efforts, the absence of high level political support and clear institutional mandates resulted in more discrete successes. For example, the UK Round Table on Sustainable Development influenced a number of sectoral policy reforms; the United States, Mongolian, and Philippine councils articulated plans for sustainable development; and Bolivia's council engaged national elites in debates on sustainable development.

Almost eight years after UNCED, only a few councils have managed to transform national decisionmaking and development. The majority have made only discrete contributions or experienced isolated successes. Nevertheless, NCSDs have also proven that they can be extremely effective integrators and agents of change when:

- a clear institutional mandate and a defined role in national policymaking and planning processes are in place;
- consistent political support exists at the highest levels that draws important constituencies into a council's work, and increases the probability that its recommendations will be implemented; and
- a broad constituency supports sustainable development, including a wide range of stakeholders and social interests at a national level (horizontal integration) and strong partners at local and regional levels (vertical integration).

RECOMMENDATIONS

This review sheds some light on the challenges councils face and the factors that influence their ability to be effective agents of national change. In general, councils enjoyed successes, but the ma-

majority worked outside the mainstream of domestic debates or decisionmaking fora. Consequently, NCSDs need to be better integrated into decisionmaking processes at various levels. Specific recommendations on how particular actors, including councils, might support such mainstreaming follow.

NCSDs. Internally, members and leaders of councils must define what they want to accomplish and outline a path for getting there. Establishing a common internal compass improves a council's chances of weathering bureaucratic and political pressures. In a domestic context, councils should establish strategic alliances with groups working at national and local levels to build a strong constituency for their work. Finally, NCSDs as a group need to advocate for their inclusion in multilateral United Nations processes that support implementation and negotiation of Rio commitments and other sustainable development programs.

National Governments. The success of councils often depends upon the type and level of interaction they have with national authorities, because it is largely governments that create councils and define their mandate. It is incumbent on national authorities to clearly define the mandate of their council, ensure it has a specific, ongoing role to play in national development planning or initiatives, and provide the necessary resources. Governments should resist creating councils with the sole purpose of catalyzing interesting multistakeholder exchanges. Rather, political, social, and economic leaders should weigh their willingness to apply recommendations that would emerge from a council before venturing to create one.

Civil Society. Civil society groups play important roles both inside and outside of NCSDs. Internally, civil society groups are important critical lenses through which to evaluate sustainable development. They are also knowledgeable about the interests of particular constituencies and activities occurring at the local and grassroots levels. For these reasons, civil society groups are usually the first to test the ideas that emerge from councils. Outside of councils, civil society should monitor the work of NCSDs, and encourage them to address tough development questions.

United Nations. Currently, NCSDs have no formal role in the work programs of relevant UN agencies and bodies, particularly the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD). However, NCSDs could be asked to lead national discussions and analyze thematic problems or questions identified as priorities in CSD work programs. Conversely, the CSD could ask countries to report on their council's activities and their role in advancing sustainable development nationally. Finally, the agreement by countries at the 19th UNGASS to define and put into place sustainable development strategies by 2002 represents another opportunity for NCSDs. The United Nations could call on countries to engage or consult NCSDs in the development of these strategies.

Other Multilateral Organizations. A number of ongoing or new efforts within key multilateral organizations could benefit from the participation of NCSDs. For example, the World Bank's president is proposing a reorientation of technical assistance and lending activities to developing countries around "comprehensive development frame-

works.”²⁸ In concrete terms this means that the Bank engages different stakeholders in a country (donors, government, civil society, business) to develop a matrix that specifies macro-economic, social, and physical development objectives and each of these stakeholder’s role in meeting these objectives. NCSDs could play a part in the development of national matrices. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) is another case in point. It is supporting OECD and non-OECD countries in their implementation of sustainable development strategies.²⁹ NCSDs would be natural liaisons or focal points for OECD’s technical assistance efforts.

The upcoming Rio+10 evaluation in 2002 offers a window of opportunity to evaluate NCSDs more broadly and to consider the role they should play in international sustainable development efforts. This analysis, hopefully, provides the foundation for such an evaluation and presents concrete ideas on how interested stakeholders might put NCSDs on the agenda of Rio+10 and other relevant national or international fora.

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NOTES

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