

**A SHORT STUDY OF THE FINNISH NATIONAL COMMISSION ON
SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

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I. Structure and Organization

A. Establishment of the FNCSD

Since completion of the Bruntland Commission's work in 1987 Finland has promoted sustainable development through the integration of environmental considerations in sectoral policies. As early as 1990 a Council of State report titled, "Sustainable Development and Finland" was presented to the Finnish Parliament. Nevertheless, on June 3, 1993, the Finnish Commission on Sustainable Development (FNCSD) was created to promote and coordinate on-going sustainable development efforts, many of them undertaken to meet commitments made at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992. In 1998 the Commission's mandate was renewed and its term extended to 2002. The legal status of the Commission is purely consultative.

B. Structure of the FNCSD

The Finnish Commission on Sustainable Development is made up of 45 members (in addition to their alternates) and 13 technical experts. The Commission is chaired by the Prime Minister and co-chaired by the Minister of the Environment. Other ministers represented on the FNCSD include those for Social Affairs and Health, Interior, Education, Culture, and Agriculture and Forestry. A total of 26 members are drawn from ministerial staff, government agencies, Parliament and local governments. Non-governmental members were selected in accordance with Agenda 21, and thus represent a very broad cross-section of Finnish society. NGOs on the FNCSD include the Finnish Association for Nature Conservation, Friends of the Earth Finland, the World Wildlife Fund for Nature (WWF), Finnish Women's Organizations, Finnish Youth Co-operation Alliance, Service Center for Development Co-operation, and the Finnish Committee for UNICEF. The business and productive sectors are represented by the Confederation of Finnish Industry and Employers, Central Association of Finnish Forest Industries, Central Union of Agricultural Producers and Forest Owners. Various public interest groups (Finnish Consumers' Association, Central Organization for Finnish Trade Unions, Teachers' Union), and representatives of the media also sit on the FNCSD. Finland's two national languages are given consideration, speakers of both languages are represented on the Commission, as well as members of the Finnish indigenous people, the Sami.

The entire Commission meets only two or three times a year. To ensure continued progress between meetings the FNCSD created four subcommittees (made up of members and invited experts) that carry forward work on specific issues. Subcommittees have been formed to address the following topics:

- education and training,
- changing production and consumption patterns, financial issues, and technology transfer,
- socially just development (health, employment, poverty, demographic issues), and
- local aspects of sustainable development (especially local Agenda 21 plans).

Membership on these subcommittees is flexible. Experts are permitted to change committees to ensure effective and productive teams. In each case, relevant ministries, experts and major groups are represented to ensure balanced viewpoints.

While the FNCSD independently selects topics and issues for study, they also rely on material generated by other relevant government working groups or bodies that work on issues such as trade and environment, biodiversity, climate change, international forest policies, and development cooperation.

The heads of each subcommittee, working group and committee, as well as the designated contact persons from the relevant ministries together with the Secretary General and the Secretary of the Commission form the operational secretariat of the FNCSD (about 20 persons). The Secretary General and the Secretary of the Commission come from the Ministry of the Environment. Within the Ministry of the Environment the work on sustainable development is organized into a project which reports directly to the Secretary General. In addition, each ministry is responsible for undertaking sustainable development activities within their respective administrative areas.

Financial resources for the Commissions' daily activities are provided by the Ministry of the Environment. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, and the Ministry of Education provide funds for subcommittees that work on relevant topics, such as socially just development or education and training. Additional financial support is sometimes provided for pilot projects or as seed funds to support larger future efforts.

C. Mandate of the FNCSD

Shortly after its inception in 1993, the Finnish Commission on Sustainable Development articulated a set of goals and objectives. The Commission established the following goals for its early work:

- Promote and coordinate the implementation of sustainable development in Finland—In practice this meant that the Commission gave political impetus to and guidance on these issues as well as making practical proposals for implementation; and
- Prepare Finland's positions and national reports for submission to the UN Commission on Sustainable Development and co-ordinate international co-operation in the field of sustainable development, in particular, the Rio commitments.

Upon the Commission's renewal in 1998, goals were refined and rewritten to reflect changing attitudes and the inclusion of other priority topics:

- Support implementation of sustainable development programs and strategies prepared by the government and major public and private agencies;
- Connect the work of the FNCSD more closely to the work of the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) such as preparatory seminars and workshops, to influence both international work and national activities;
- Promote the development of indicators for sustainable development as well as other concepts and instruments (socially sustainable development; new concepts for capital; human, social, natural, man-made; eco-efficiency; material flow accounting, etc);

- Support and develop Local Agenda 21 processes; and
- Review work completed by various governmental and private sectors promoting implementation of sustainable development strategies as well as preparation of the yearly CSD sessions.

II. Progress to Date

A. Defining Sustainable Development

The FNCSD began its work by forming an ad hoc group to define sustainable development in the Finnish context. Members of this group included scientists, public administrators, industry representatives, and artists. Each member represented different opinions and values related to sustainable development. The conclusions attained by the group was that sustainable development is a continuous, guided process of societal change at the global, regional and local levels, that provides present and future generations with the opportunity to lead fulfilling and productive lives. The group also identified three operational dimensions to sustainable development: an ecological dimension (closely integrated with economic sustainability), a social dimension, and a cultural dimension.

B. Dissemination of Information

Before the creation of the FNCSD, the Ministry of the Environment and the Ministry for Foreign Affairs published the Rio decisions in Finland's common language and distributed these publications free of charge to over a thousand stakeholders, including all municipalities. This effort was the work of Finland's UNCED Commission, a predecessor to the FNCSD that also had a similar composition. This early publication contained a preliminary interpretation of Agenda 21 and its implications for Finland.

A second more comprehensive report was published by the FNCSD in January 1995, "Finnish Action for Sustainable Development." The publication contained a summary of various measures to promote sustainable development already under way or in the pipeline (1995-1997), both domestically and internationally. These measures were presented under three main headings: the economy and resources, sectors with important implications for sustainable development, and prevention of environmental changes or damages. Each chapter modifies or adapts the concept of sustainable development to its more precise context, and discusses specific objectives along with a discussion of the means for their implementation. Proposed measures range from official sectoral plans and government programs to action by private sector and information campaigns by NGOs. This publication serves as a basic reference book on the subject of sustainable development.

C. Supporting the Formulation of a National Program on Sustainable Development

One of the primary contributions made by the FNCSD was its support to the Finnish government in the preparation of a national program for sustainable development (which was adopted June 4, 1998). The program analyzes different aspects (ecological, economic, social and cultural) of sustainable development in a Finnish context, and includes guidelines for sector-specific actions (e.g., production, products and consumption patterns, transport and human settlements, rural development and energy). Chapters on international cooperation, research and education as well as on the implementation and follow up of the program are included. Important government agencies within each sector were asked to prepare sustainable development programs. The overall effort was coordinated by the Ministry of the Environment. The opinions of major groups within Finnish society were incorporated by presenting the proposed government program to the FNCSD and its subcommittees for discussion. During the process the FNCSD and its subcommittees acted as an advisory body.

Late in 1996 the FNCSD asked Finland's principal industrial, entrepreneurial and trade organizations, along with agricultural producers, forest owners and local authorities to prepare individual programs for sustainable development. The Association of Finnish Local Authorities, the Confederation of Finnish Industry and Employers, and the Federation of Finnish Commerce and Trade have all completed their respective programs. Various NGOs--under the coordination of the Finnish Association for Nature Conservation--also prepared a sustainable development program. The Central Union of Agricultural Producers and Forest Owners is in the process of preparing a program. Finally, the Sami parliament, (representing the indigenous Sami people) prepared a strategy for sustainable development.

In the summer of 2001 different government sectors will report to the FNCSD on the state of sustainable development in their respective arenas, along with progress in the implementation of the government program. Along with the governmental sectors, other actors that have prepared a program on sustainable development will be asked to report to the FNCSD on their progress and the results achieved. Following the reports of individual sectors, an overall report evaluating national progress in the implementation of different programs as well as the state of sustainable development in Finland will be drafted for the Earth Summit +10 meeting in Rio (2002).

D. National Sustainable Development Indicators

The FNCSD agreed to test the sustainable development indicators developed by the CSD, and also committed itself to developing a set of national indicators. Testing of the CSD indicators began in January 1997 when the Indicator Network, created by the FNCSD for this purpose, met for the first time. The Indicator Network consists of representatives from different ministries, research institutions (including Statistics Finland), and the Finnish Association of Local Authorities. The network began evaluating all 134 CSD indicators. The next step is to conduct in-depth studies with the purpose of selecting a core set of national indicators that are harmonious with the national priorities set out in the government's sustainable development program. Some of the indicators will be taken from the CSD list, but new indicators will also be introduced.

E. Education and Outreach Efforts

The FNCSD has organized various discussions and seminars for different stakeholders, decision-makers and media representatives. The themes of the seminars and discussions have included changing production and consumption patterns, climate change, sustainable forestry, trade and environment, environmental education, human settlements (Habitat II), indicators for sustainable development, socially just development, Local Agenda 21 plans, the UN General Assembly Special Session on Sustainable Development 1997 (UNGASS 1997), and environmental economics.

The FNCSD publishes a quarterly bulletin called Rio Nyt(t) (Rio Now/News), on current topics regarding the work of the CSD, the Finnish Commission, and other relevant organizations. The newsletter is free of charge and the target audience includes journalists, NGOs and interested individuals. The newsletter is also available through the Internet (<http://www.vyh.fi/poltavo/keke/keke.htm>). The subcommittee on education also publishes a quarterly magazine on environmental education.

F. International and Regional Cooperation

The Commission is actively following actions related to sustainable development at the international level. The Commission acts as an advisory body on issues related to the UN, with special attention given to the CSD. The FNCSD prepares Finland's national reports and position papers to the CSD and also organizes seminars and workshops in accordance with yearly topics under discussion in the CSD. In addition, the FNCSD covers the travel expenses of two NGO representatives to annual CSD sessions.

The FNCSD prepared the Finnish country profile for the Earth Summit +5 (UNGASS 1997) as well as a report to present at the Rio+5 and regional meetings organized by the Earth Council. The Commission also follows the work of the Arctic Council (an international forum which focuses on the protection of the Arctic environment and sustainable development (<http://www.nrc.ca/arctic>), and participates in the meetings of the European Environmental Advisory Councils (cooperation of a number of European Environmental Councils, established in 1993 (<http://www.eur-focalpt.org>) cooperating in the Baltic Sea Region.

Finland has actively participated in preparing the Baltic Agenda 21, adopted in June 1998 (<http://www.ee./baltic21>). Representatives from all the other coastal states of the Baltic Sea (Russia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Germany, Denmark and Sweden) as well as from Norway, Iceland and the European Commission have participated in the process. In addition, some inter-governmental organizations, international development banks and NGOs have participated in the preparations. Along with its sectoral responsibilities (forests and tourism), Finland has also actively promoted sustainable development at local levels. In the Baltic Sea Region, the FNCSD initiated the creation of an informal network of local authorities: the Baltic Local Agenda 21 Forum. The Forum serves as a complementary initiative to the Baltic Agenda 21, by supporting implementation at the local level. The FNCSD's subcommittee on local aspects of sustainable development has contributed to the preparations of the Baltic Agenda 21 and supports the Baltic Sea Local Agenda 21 Forum.

III. The Seeds of Success

The FNCSD has been most effective in generating partnerships and fostering awareness. One effective mechanism has been the broad, multi-stakeholder composition of the Commission. The FNCSD has acted as a network for sharing information and good practices. It has also integrated various sectors and groups of Finnish society in a national learning process.

The leadership of the Prime Minister as well as the presence of various other ministers have given the work of the Commission political weight and this has also motivated different sectors and groups of Finnish Society to participate in the preparation sustainable development programs.

The Commission, through its subcommittee on local aspects of sustainable development, has contributed to the promotion of Local Agenda 21 plans in the Baltic Sea Region, and also supported the preparation of Agenda 21 planning processes in Finnish municipalities.

A. Stimulating a Continuing Learning Process and Fostering Awareness

The Commission has been central in providing the means of participation for all major groups of Finnish society and in forming new contracts and networks between different actors. It represents the first effort to engage all the different actors important to sustainable development. Because of the FNCSD's multi-stakeholder composition a wide variety of opinions have found an opportunity for public discussion. The FNCSD's broad composition also reflects an understanding that sustainable development is everybody's concern, and future success requires everyone's engagement.

The Commission has provided a regular opportunity for various NGOs to speak directly with political decision-makers. One of the merits of the Commission is that it brings environmental organizations as well as industry to the same table. These actors are willing to come to the table because the Commission is chaired by the Prime Minister, and this creates the necessary political impetus.

Furthermore, the FNCSD's multi-stakeholder composition has kept the process of sustainable development in motion. The Commission has contributed to awareness of sustainable development not only by providing a discussion forum for different members of the society but also by its other activities (initiating sustainable development programs and organizing various discussions and seminars). For example, with the aid of its network the Commission has been able to bring new themes and concepts into broad discussion within Finnish Society. These themes and concepts include socially sustainable development, new concepts for capital (human, social, natural, and constructed), eco-efficiency, environmental space and material flow accounts.

“The Finnish Action for Sustainable Development,” containing a summary of various measures to promote sustainable development, the quarterly bulletin called Rio Nyt(t) (Rio Now/News), and quarterly magazine on environmental education published by the sub-committee on education is in its part fostering awareness along with media briefings on current topics of interest.

The FNCSD has also worked as an important channel in delivering information from the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development sessions such as recent decisions made in this forum as well as giving feedback in the form of national reports and position papers.

B. Political Leadership Acts as a Catalyst for Action

The creation of a commission with high-level political leadership as well as broad composition underlines the centrality of sustainable development in Finnish society. The Commission with its high-level political representation has motivated different sectors and groups of Finnish society (both in government and outside government) to prepare and commit to specific sustainable development programs. The process has raised the interest of the media, and engaged a broad cross-section of social and economic groups. This process has also promoted better integration among the participating actors. The next step is to initiate dialogue between the government's various sectoral programs and the civil society programs initiated by the FNCSD at the end of 1996. The aim is to organize seminars and discussions to facilitate the implementation process and seek practical cooperation between the actors.

C. Support to Sub-Regional and Local Efforts

An important part of the FNCSD's support of local efforts was the establishment of a specific subcommittee on local aspects of sustainable development in December 1996. The subcommittee followed and contributed to the process of preparing the Baltic Agenda 21. Furthermore, the subcommittee supports the work of the Baltic Local Agenda 21 Forum and advised it in its preparation of a work program.

The Baltic Local Agenda 21 Forum is an informal network of local authorities around the Baltic Sea that is responsible for the coordination and promotion of Local Agenda 21 activities. The initiative to create such a Forum was first taken in September 1997. The purpose of this Forum is to pool and network the sustainable development programs and Local Agenda 21 efforts of different Baltic Sea Countries. In that way, the countries and areas which are just starting their process for Local Agenda 21, or have no activities at all in this field, could benefit from the experiences of those countries at a more advanced level in their preparation process.

The other tasks of this subcommittee of the FNCSD include supporting the on-going project of the Association of Finnish Local Authorities to advance the planning and implementation of local Agenda 21s in fifty municipalities. The project is designed to develop methods for preparing local agendas in municipalities, and to identify obstacles hindering sustainable development at the local level. The Association of Finnish Local Authorities has also organized training for municipalities on sustainable development and the preparation of local agendas, and published a Local Agenda 21 guidebook as well as other material concerning the subject.

In 1997 the subcommittee presented a statement to the FNCSD stating its support for the proposal made by the Association of Finnish Local Authorities, the Finnish Association for Nature Conservation, Nature and Environment (the Swedish speaking population's NGO), and the Finland 21 Campaign (a cooperative project involving a broad base of NGOs) requesting financial

support for the preparation of Local Agenda 21 plans. In addition, the subcommittee is supporting another initiative to improve cooperation between ministries and groups receiving financial support to carry out sustainable development projects at the local level, especially the preparation of Local Agenda 21 plans. The subcommittee also disseminates information through its networks, and acts as an expert body on the matters concerning local aspects of sustainable development. The members include representatives from the national government, regional and local administrations, and NGOs.

The Commission has organized a seminar on sustainable development at the local level (participants included representatives from municipalities, regional councils, regional environment centres and different organizations) as well as supported the Ministry of the Environment in organizing a two-day education and information sharing event on the role of regional environment centers in promoting sustainable development and activities related to the preparation and implementation of local agendas. Participants in this event included representatives from regional environment centres, regional councils, municipalities, NGOs as well as from the government sector.

At present, 245 municipalities out of a total of 452 have started to prepare their own agendas. Approximately 80 per cent of Finland's population lives in municipalities preparing Local Agenda 21 plans. Efforts have been made to integrate the local people, NGOs and different interest groups into the preparation of these plans.

IV. Future Challenges

The divergent values and interests of different sectors of society do not offer an easy starting point for the definition of coherent sustainable development path. In addition, a general tendency to give priority to economic growth has increased since the period of economic depression and rising unemployment Finland recently went through. The emphasis given to the economy has sometimes made it difficult to adequately consider the ecological dimensions of sustainable development. Furthermore, there is still a tendency by many different actors to define the scope of environmental policy narrowly. Although connections between the functioning of society and environmental problems are beginning to be recognized, the environment is far too often considered a field separate from the economy and other decision-making processes.

Even though the significance of the Commission as a forum for information sharing and a meeting point of different groups is recognized by most of the actors involved, many still consider it an upper-level administrative structure that deals with a rather abstract message, and believe that real decisions are made in other forums. This problem is related to the Commission's legal status as a consultative body with only a limited capacity to make binding decisions.

The future challenge of the Commission seems to be to further deepen and solidify its vision and at the same time find the means to better integrate this vision with the interests and views of different groups of society. A way to do that could be to concentrate more than before on the socio-economic and cultural dimensions of sustainable development. In addition, local levels need to emphasize other aspects of sustainable development along with the ecological one as well as to formulate these concepts more concretely so in a manner that will better integrate different groups

and citizens. Many NGOs have also pointed out the fact that in general, they have relatively modest resources for effective participation in different forums.

A positive development that might help to make sustainable development a real and concrete issue is the formulation and testing of a set of national indicators. These indicators will be an important tool when assessing the commitment and progress towards sustainable development in the context of different programs. Furthermore, they will allow complicated information to be conveyed in a way accessible to both decision-makers and the general public.

One of the most important challenges facing the Commission is finding a way to integrate sectoral interests and programs. The Commission should link the different programs of the major groups with the corresponding elements of the government's program (e.g. the program of the Association of Finnish Local Authorities with the chapter concerning transport and human settlements; the program of the Confederation of Finnish Industries and Employers with the chapter concerning production, products and consumption patterns etc.) as well as to initiate cooperative action and projects between the different actors implementing their respective strategies or plans.

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