

Chapter

# 5

**Integrating the Social Dimension**  
A Critical Milestone

*The audit work reported in this chapter was conducted in accordance with the legislative mandate, policies, and practices of the Office of the Auditor General of Canada. These policies and practices embrace the standards recommended by the Canadian Institute of Chartered Accountants.*

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# Integrating the Social Dimension

## A Critical Milestone

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### Main Points

**5.1** Sustainable development not only involves protecting the environment; it also involves improving and maintaining the quality of life for people in Canada and in other parts of the world, without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

**5.2** Sustainable development is a concept based on the integration of economic, environmental, and social concerns. Environmental protection responds to the single goal of trying to preserve environmental quality. Sustainable development, however, is more complex. It recognizes that social and cultural factors play an important role in sustainable development, in addition to economic and environmental factors. As well, it seeks to ensure quality of life over the long term.

**5.3** Our study noted five areas of consensus:

- First, while there is debate about how to define the social dimension of sustainable development, the focus should be on the interconnectedness of the three dimensions of sustainable development—economic, environmental, and social.
- Second, integrated decision making is essential. Decision makers need to consider the three dimensions of sustainable development when they make policy and enact law.
- Third, social learning and behavioural change are fundamental to achieving sustainability.
- Fourth, addressing the social dimension of sustainable development is a critical part of achieving sustainability, and incorporating the social dimension into the next round of sustainable development strategies is a priority.
- Fifth, developing measures and indicators for the social dimension of sustainable development is a challenge that needs to be addressed in the near future.

In our future work, we will use these areas of consensus as starting points for audits that include the social dimension of sustainable development.

### Background

**5.4** This study outlines current thinking about the social dimension of sustainable development and identifies areas of consensus. We conducted a review of the literature and two consultative workshops—one with consultants and academics and one with federal government departments. To

provide context, we also reviewed the first and second generations of sustainable development strategies and relevant international and domestic commitments to see if the social dimension had been addressed. In addition, we reviewed some emerging national and international indicators and performance measures for the social dimension of sustainable development.

## Introduction

**5.5** Sustainable development is not just about protecting the environment; it is about improving and maintaining the quality of life for people both in Canada and in other parts of the world, without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

**5.6** The concept of sustainable development gained prominence in the landmark document *Our Common Future*, prepared by the Brundtland Commission in 1987. It is based on the integration of economic, environmental, and social concerns. Environmental protection responds to the single goal of trying to preserve environmental quality. Sustainable development, however, is more complex. It operates from the perspective of development, with a focus on meeting people's needs, and it seeks to ensure quality of life over the long term.

**5.7** While the social sciences have a long history and are well documented through a large body of literature, the meaning of the social dimension within the context of sustainable development is less understood. However, there is increasing recognition that social and cultural factors play an important role in sustainable development. Quality of life and well-being are determined by many factors—income, the state of people's health, their level of education, cultural diversity, the vibrancy of communities, and environmental quality—and all are potentially part of the sustainable development equation. The social well-being of the human population is integral in making sustainable development a reality.

**5.8** In 1995 the federal government released a document entitled *A Guide to Green Government*. It provided initial objectives for sustainable development and a common approach to developing sustainable development strategies. The government's approach to sustainable development recognizes basic social values such as equity and the right to an adequate quality of life. Two examples that illustrate this approach are included in Exhibit 5.1.

### Focus of the study

**5.9** The objective of this study was to outline current thinking about the social dimension of sustainable development and determine if there were areas of consensus.

**5.10** We reviewed the literature that discusses current thinking about the social dimension. We held two consultative workshops. One was with consultants and academics working in the fields of social policy, sustainability, and environmental management; the other was with staff from federal government departments who are involved in preparing and implementing sustainable development strategies. To provide context, we reviewed the 1997 and 2000 sustainable development strategies to see if federal departments had addressed the social dimension in their strategies. In addition, we reviewed a number of policies, international conventions, and bilateral and multilateral

**Exhibit 5.1 The government's approach to sustainable development**

The Canadian Way recognizes that economic and social success must be pursued together. We cannot build a prosperous society in the absence of economic growth. We cannot lead in innovation and new ideas without healthy and secure citizens. We must not pursue our interests in the world without strengthening our distinct culture and values here at home.

January 2001 Speech from the Throne

The purpose of Canada's economic strategy is to provide Canadians with a high quality of life. But quality of life is not simply defined by opportunities in the market. It also requires safe communities where people wish to live and raise their families, where they can receive the health care they need, where they can live without fear of crime or violence, where they can enjoy the benefits of clean air and water and green spaces, where they can participate in amateur sport, cultural activities and the arts, and where people of diverse backgrounds and cultures participate and contribute together.

*The Canadian Way in the 21st Century*, paper released by the Prime Minister of Canada, May 2000

agreements to see whether the federal government had included the social dimension of sustainable development in its international and domestic commitments. We also looked at emerging national and international indicators and performance measures for the social dimension of sustainable development.

**5.11** Additional details can be found in About the Study at the end of the chapter.

## Observations

### Sustainable development dimensions interconnected

**5.12** Five broad areas of consensus emerged from the two workshops and our literature review. These included the following:

- The social dimension cannot be considered in isolation; it must be linked to the other two dimensions of sustainable development—economic and environmental.
- Integrated decision making is key. Decision makers need to consider the three dimensions of sustainable development when they make policy or enact law.
- Social learning and behavioural change are fundamental to achieving sustainability.
- Addressing the social dimension of sustainable development is a critical part of achieving sustainability, and incorporating the social dimension into the next round of sustainable development strategies is a priority.



- The challenge of developing indicators for the social dimension of sustainable development needs to be addressed in the near future.

### The three dimensions are linked

**5.13** Sustainable development is about more than environmental protection. It also includes equity and quality-of-life issues. *Our Common Future* noted, "The environment does not exist as a sphere separate from human actions, ambitions, and needs...the 'environment' is where we all live; and 'development' is what we all do in attempting to improve our lot within that abode. The two are inseparable."

**5.14 Broad range of terms.** The range of terms associated with the social dimension is broad, and it is possible to stretch the range to include all social aspects. The challenge is how to define the social dimension of sustainable development so that it does not become so broad that it loses all utility or meaning. The debate in the literature and among academics centres on where to draw the line.

**5.15** Both our literature review and workshops revealed that one of the difficulties faced by governments and organizations is that no single definition of the social dimension's scope exists. The literature indicates that the social dimension can encompass many aspects—for example, health, education, ethics, equity, beliefs, diversity, indigenous people, safety, community building, intergenerational equity, intragenerational equity, and poverty.

**5.16** The panelists at the workshop held with consultants and academics strongly urged that, instead of trying to isolate the social dimension, we think about human well-being and environmental quality and the linkages between them. They advised that we focus on the interconnectedness of the three dimensions of sustainable development.

**5.17** A number of models were presented at the workshop. All the models we reviewed show the interconnectedness of the three dimensions of sustainable development. None confine their attention only to the economy or to the environment, and several give the three dimensions equal importance. Appendix A contains a description of the various models and summarizes the workshop.

### Integrated decision making is key

**5.18** Our study showed a broad consensus that integrated decision making is essential—that is, the three dimensions of sustainable development (economic, environmental, and social) need to be integrated into policy, planning, and decision making. *A Guide to Green Government* also states that an integrated approach to planning and decision making is needed. The three dimensions are linked, and government policy cannot focus on one component without regard to its impact on the others. The Guide outlines a range of techniques available to assist in understanding and integrating economic, environmental, and social considerations. (See *Greening Policies and Programs: Supporting Sustainable Development Decisions*, Chapter 9 of

the Commissioner's 1999 Report for a further discussion of integrated decision making.)

**5.19** Our study also found a consensus that sustainable development can be fully realized only if social issues are addressed in conjunction with environmental and economic ones. Decision makers need to consider the three dimensions of sustainable development when they make policy and enact law.

**5.20** The collapse of the Atlantic groundfish fishery, described in Exhibit 5.2, illustrates the interconnectedness of the three dimensions of sustainable development and the importance of integrated decision making. As the exhibit demonstrates, the collapse of the Atlantic groundfish fishery was the result of failing to develop a resource in a sustainable manner. In this case, an environmental problem—depletion of fish stocks—had severe economic and social consequences.

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### Exhibit 5.2 Collapse of the Atlantic groundfish fishery

The 1990s saw the collapse of the Atlantic groundfish fishery and the end of a way of life for people living in Atlantic Canada. Annual catches that amounted to two million tons in the 1960s fell to about 120,000 tons a year after the collapse. Traditional groundfish stocks were overexploited or depleted. The crisis began with the northern cod stock off the coast of Newfoundland and Labrador and then broadened to most other groundfish stocks throughout Atlantic Canada.

Environmental conditions, predator-prey relations, and excessive harvesting were identified as major factors in the groundfish decline. Fishing levels were set above conservation standards, fishers caught more than they were allocated, and some fishers used unsustainable fishing practices. These practices included unrecorded and misrecorded landings, dumping of bycatch (species not targeted by fishers or allowed by quotas), and highgrading (discarding fish to make room for more valuable fish that bring a better economic return or for which there is a need at the processing plant).

The collapse of the groundfish fishery had severe economic and social consequences. Thousands of fishers and processing plant workers were left unemployed. Groundfish workers largely lived in rural and isolated communities, where there were few alternative sources of employment. Many of those involved in the groundfish industry had low levels of education and lacked experience outside the fishery. As well, there was a deep cultural attachment to the groundfish fishery reinforced by several decades of government subsidies. These factors placed substantial pressure on the government to maintain the status quo.

The result was an over-capacity in the groundfish industry and a reduction in income available to individuals. Over the years, income from employment insurance had provided a significant and increasing portion of fisher and plantworker income. But fishers and plantworkers had to have income from fishing and processing jobs to be eligible for employment insurance. Without groundfish employment, many workers were unable to find enough work to qualify for employment insurance. When this employment opportunity was removed, fishers and plant workers had no means of accessing the benefits that were the basis for their employment insurance income.

The social and economic impacts would likely have been more severe had the federal government not intervened. A number of programs were implemented to respond to the crisis, including the Northern Cod Adjustment and Recovery Program, the Atlantic Fisheries Adjustment Program, The Atlantic Groundfish Strategy, and the Canadian Fisheries Adjustment and Restructuring Program. To address the critical problems related to the fishery that still persist, the government is moving forward with a plan for the development and approval of a sustainable fisheries framework for the Atlantic fisheries.

Additional information can be found in the 1997 Report of the Auditor General, chapters 15 and 16 and the 2000 Report, Chapter 33.

Source: Adapted from the 1997 Report of the Auditor General of Canada, Chapter 14, Fisheries and Oceans Canada—Sustainable Fisheries Framework: Atlantic Groundfish

## Social learning and behavioural change are fundamental

**5.21** The literature, the workshops, and the Atlantic groundfish case all stress that social learning and behavioural change are fundamental in achieving sustainability. This is the third area where we found broad consensus.

**5.22** Social learning refers to the understanding and learning that individuals and societies need to make the changes required for moving toward sustainability. This includes a better understanding of the future consequences of actions taken today. The 1999 United States National Research Council report, *Our Common Journey: A Transition to Sustainability*, states:

. . . the pathways of a transition to sustainability cannot be charted fully in advance. Instead, they will have to be navigated adaptively at many scales and in many places. Intelligent adjustments . . . can be made through the process of social learning. Such learning requires some clearly articulated goals for the journey toward sustainability, better understanding of the past and persistent trends of social and environmental change, improved tools for looking along alternative pathways, and clearer understanding of the possible environmental, and social threats and opportunities ahead.

**5.23** The greening of the government's physical operations provides a tangible example of the need to understand and employ the concept of social learning. In *A Guide to Green Government*, the federal government states that it will lead by example in greening government operations. To achieve this result, the government faces an enormous challenge in social learning. It must change the behaviour of hundreds of thousands of public servants across the country. As government departments struggle with greening their operations, it becomes apparent that, like turning an ocean liner, there is more involved than just deciding to change direction. (See Chapter 2 of the Commissioner's 2000 Report for our audit report on greening government operations.)

**5.24** Social learning also involves building co-operative, collaborative relationships. To integrate the social dimension, there is a need to overcome resistance to change and to develop positive responses to change. This can be accomplished by carrying out education and research to raise awareness, building relationships, developing new skills, and embracing and adapting to change. With regard to greening government operations, the government is pursuing many of these avenues, such as interdepartmental working groups, training in the concepts of environmental management systems, and the use of performance measurement.

## Social dimension emerging in strategies

**5.25** *A Guide to Green Government* sets out an approach for departments to follow in preparing sustainable development strategies. One critical requirement of this approach is that departments carry out an issue scan, assessing their activities for the impact on sustainable development. The

Guide also lists five primary objectives for sustainable development; each has a social component, as shown in Exhibit 5.3.

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**Exhibit 5.3** *A Guide to Green Government—Social component of its objectives*

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**Sustaining our natural resources—Sustainable jobs, communities, and industries.**

Many Canadians are dependent on the natural resource sector to earn a living. It is important to make proper use of renewable and non-renewable resources.

**Protecting the health of Canadians and of ecosystems.** Human activities can have a negative impact on the environment and an effort must be made to minimize the impact in order to preserve human health.

**Meeting our international obligations.** Meeting our international obligations for sustainable development is affirmed as key to becoming a more sustainable society.

**Promoting equity.** The need to promote intergenerational and intragenerational equity is affirmed. The distribution of costs and benefits must be shared between current and future generations and between the poor and the more affluent.

**Improving our quality of life and well-being.** People depend on the environment and the economy to meet their basic human needs. Policy must be set to ensure that basic needs are met while also promoting sustainable development.

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Source: Adapted from *A Guide to Green Government*, 1995

**5.26** By December 1997, 28 federal departments and agencies had tabled their first sustainable development strategies outlining their objectives and plans for furthering sustainable development. In February 2001, these organizations tabled their second strategies in the House of Commons; in addition, the Parks Canada Agency, created as a separate entity in 1998, tabled its strategy.

**5.27** In our review of the sustainable development strategies, we found that some departments had started to address the social dimension of sustainable development in their first strategies. Some had also identified social or cultural goals and activities as integral to their mandates. The social dimension continued to emerge in the second sustainable development strategies. For example, some departments identified social goals and objectives such as the following: to contribute to a better understanding of the social and cultural dimensions of sustainable development; to maintain and enhance sustainable communities; to develop a sustainable development strategy for the North; and to promote and support population health and safety. As well, some departments are working toward developing performance measures and targets. Appendix B provides some examples of social themes and targets that departments included in their second strategies.

### Social and cultural sustainable development working group formed

**5.28** Federal departments with social mandates or activities have formed a Social and Cultural Sustainable Development Working Group. Human Resources Development Canada is leading this group. In its second strategy, the Department states that its efforts, along with other social departments,

will ensure that critical research and thinking on the social and cultural dimensions will be undertaken in advance of the next round of sustainable development strategies. Participating departments include Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, Department of Canadian Heritage, Citizenship and Immigration Canada, Environment Canada, Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, Health Canada, Human Resources Development Canada, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, Department of Justice, Royal Canadian Mounted Police, and Solicitor General Canada.

### Workshop held with departments

**5.29** In November 2000, the Commissioner hosted a workshop on the social dimension of sustainable development with staff from federal departments involved in preparing and implementing sustainable development strategies. The workshop focussed on how departments are approaching the social dimension and identifying any constraints that prevent the social dimension from being fully integrated into their strategies. Appendix C presents a summary of the workshop.

### Incorporating the social dimension is a priority

**5.30** In addition to other areas of consensus, a fourth area of consensus emerged at the workshop with departments. Participants recognized that addressing the social dimension is a critical part of achieving sustainability and that incorporating the social dimension into the next round of sustainable development strategies, due in 2003, is a priority. Departments are at different stages of the journey toward sustainable development. Many are at an early stage; others appear better positioned to respond to the challenges of integrating the social dimension of sustainable development. Some participants felt that there should be a shared understanding of the boundaries around the social dimension; others did not see the need. However, participants did not identify constraints that would stop them from moving ahead and integrating the social dimension on a department-by-department basis.

**5.31** In our future audit work, we expect to see that departments, especially those whose issue scan identifies major social impacts of their mandates and activities, have included the social dimension in the goals, objectives, and targets of their next strategies, focussing on areas where they can have the greatest impact.

### Measuring progress of social dimension

**5.32** Sustainable development is a complex and global issue that requires a multidisciplinary approach and co-ordinated resources to tackle. For the government to track, assess, and communicate its progress toward a sustainable society, it needs to be able to measure its progress on implementing national and international commitments and toward sustainable development. As the keynote speaker at the March 2001 National Conference on Sustainable Development Indicators, Minister of the

Environment the Honourable David Anderson stated, "We can only manage what we can measure."

### Promises to Canadians and the world

**5.33** For over a decade, the federal government has made commitments to sustainable development an integral part of its goals and values. In order to understand whether the social dimension is an integral part of these commitments, we looked at some of the government's commitments to Canadians and to the world, including a number of domestic and international policies, international conventions, and bilateral and multilateral agreements.

**5.34** We found that nationally, the federal government has focussed its efforts toward sustainable development through a number of policies, programs, and commitments. The social dimension is an integral part of these commitments. Exhibit 5.4 illustrates some federal commitments that highlight the social dimension.

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#### **Exhibit 5.4 Some federal commitments that highlight the social dimension**

- Action Plan on Health and the Environment, 1992–1997
  - Arctic Environmental Strategy, 1991
  - Toxic Substances Management Policy, 1995
  - Pollution Prevention: A Federal Strategy for Action, 1995
  - Federal Water Policy, 1987
  - Setting the Stage for the Next Century: The Federal Plan for Gender Equality, 1995
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**5.35** Internationally, Canada has made commitments to a number of important conventions and agreements, as well as attended meetings and conferences that include the social dimension of sustainable development. Exhibit 5.5 lists a selection of international conventions and agreements, as well as meetings and conferences attended in the last two decades that include the social dimension.

**5.36** Some of these agreements—for example, Agenda 21—are landmark documents. The Agenda addresses the complex social problems that face humanity and defines ways to deal with them. Problems addressed in the Agenda relate to the following subjects: poverty, demographic dynamics and sustainability, human health, human settlements, integration of environment and development in decision making, women, children and youth, and indigenous people. The Agenda stresses that these social concerns are key to sustainable development and are as important as economic and environmental issues.

**Exhibit 5.5 International commitments that include the social dimension**

<b>1987</b>	Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer
<b>1989</b>	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
<b>1991</b>	Declaration on the Protection of the Arctic Environment and the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy
<b>1992</b>	Agenda 21—United Nations Conference on Environment and Development
<b>1992</b>	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
<b>1992</b>	United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity
<b>1994</b>	“Programme of Action”—United Nations International Conference on Population and Development
<b>1995</b>	Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development
<b>1995</b>	United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women

**Global efforts to measure progress**

**5.37** There have been worldwide efforts to develop indicators to measure progress toward integrating the social dimension of sustainable development at the local, national, and international levels. The literature concludes that indicators should be relevant to a situation and culture, accessible, timely, and well accepted. Appendix D identifies some contributors to the work being undertaken to develop social indicators, the criteria for developing indicators, and some of the major indicators. Some of the initiatives are described below.

**5.38 International initiatives.** The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) developed the Human Development Index (HDI). It is a measure of the development of a country in economic and social terms. This index incorporates measures of life expectancy, literacy, and standard of living. These factors are combined to rank a country on a scale between zero and one, with one being the highest. Each year since 1990, the UNDP issues a Human Development Report, which includes a ranking of the world’s nations.

**5.39** The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development is developing a set of core indicators for use at the global level. These indicators are being developed with the United Nations and the World Bank to track progress on sustainable development issues. They will be used to adjust programs and initiatives to make them more effective. The indicators themselves will also be adjusted to meet changing needs and to incorporate new sources of data.

**5.40 National initiatives.** The Interagency Working Group on Sustainable Development Indicators (SDI Group) in the United States was given the task of developing indicators for sustainable development. The Group collaborates

with non-government organizations and the private sector to develop indicators to guide the government's progress. It has developed a proposed list of economic, environmental, and social indicators.

**5.41** In 1999 the government of the United Kingdom published a sustainable development strategy, including a set of 15 headline indicators that give a broad overview of trends. It also published a national set of about 150 detailed indicators that focus on specific issues and identify areas for action. This set of indicators covers the economic, environmental, and social dimensions of sustainable development and is central to monitoring and reporting on progress toward sustainable development.

### Canadian efforts to measure progress

**5.42** There have been numerous approaches to developing indicators in Canada. The need for indicators has been recognized at many levels. For example, GPI Atlantic is a non-profit research group that is developing an index of sustainable development and well-being—the Genuine Progress Index for Atlantic Canada. Other projects to develop indicators include efforts by the Pembina Institute to develop the Alberta Genuine Progress Indicators and the Federation of Canadian Municipalities project on Quality of Life Indicators. The Canadian Policy Research Networks has also developed quality-of-life indicators. In addition, the Fraser Basin Council has developed a draft set of sustainability indicators for the Fraser Basin.

**5.43** The National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy has undertaken a three-year project to develop a set of environment and sustainable development indicators for Canada. The project stemmed from the observation that traditional indicators, such as the gross domestic product, do not reflect the long-term sustainability of an economy, and newer, more comprehensive ones are needed.

**5.44** At the federal government-wide level, the President of the Treasury Board tables an annual report *Managing for Results*, which includes a set of 16 societal indicators. The report states that they could serve as a foundation for building an overview of Canada's performance from the perspective of quality of life of Canadians. As well, departments are required to report annually on an individual basis to Parliament on indicators or measures they use to gauge progress toward the commitments set out in their sustainable development strategies. Chapter 3 of this Report deals with departmental performance reporting on sustainable development.

### Developing performance indicators remains a challenge

**5.45** At the workshop with government departments, officials told us that developing performance measures and indicators to gauge progress on the social dimension of sustainable development is challenging. However, a fifth area of consensus emerged. Departments largely agreed that this is a challenge that needs to be addressed in the near future. They also acknowledged that the responsibility to develop performance measures rests



with individual departments and each department needs to develop its own approach.

**5.46 Parliament needs information to fulfil its oversight responsibilities.**

Parliamentarians need an overall picture of how well the federal government is meeting its national and international obligations and its sustainable development commitments: where it has been successful; what gaps remain; and what lessons have been learned. To allow Parliament to fulfil its oversight responsibilities in this area, federal departments need to provide Parliament with adequate information on the implementation of national and international commitments, and all the dimensions of sustainable development—economic, environmental, and social—and the interplay among them.

**5.47** Worldwide efforts have shown that social phenomena can be measured. To measure its progress toward sustainable development, the federal government needs accessible, relevant, timely, and well-accepted indicators. Without them, its ability to track, assess, and communicate progress toward sustainable development—a crucial part of its accountability—will be hindered.

**5.48** In our future audit work, we expect to see that departments with implementing responsibilities are reporting to Parliament on the implementation of, and compliance with, domestic and international environmental and sustainable development commitments.

**5.49** We also expect to see that departments have described their approach for measuring the social dimension of sustainable development, and have developed indicators that are relevant, complete, time-bound, and linked to targets and to departmental and government-wide commitments. As well, we expect to see that departments are reporting results, using these indicators.

## Conclusion

**5.50** We concluded that there were five areas of consensus concerning the social dimension of sustainable development.

- First, while there is debate about how to define the social dimension of sustainable development, the focus should be on the interconnectedness of the three dimensions of sustainable development—economic, environmental, and social.
- Second, integrated decision-making is essential. Decision makers need to consider the three areas of sustainable development when they make policy and enact law.
- Third, social learning and behavioural change are fundamental to achieving sustainability.
- Fourth, addressing the social dimension of sustainable development is a critical part of achieving sustainability, and incorporating the social

dimension into the next round of sustainable development strategies is a priority.

- Fifth, developing measures and indicators for the social dimension of sustainable development is a challenge that needs to be addressed in the near future.

In our future work, we will use these areas of consensus as starting points for audits that include the social dimension of sustainable development.

**5.51** In our view, the management of the social dimension of sustainable development is an essential, complex, and enduring component of the broader challenge of managing for sustainable development. It requires all departments and agencies to develop co-operative and collaborative relationships that allow them to work together to make progress toward sustainable development.

## About the Study

### Objective

The objective of this study was to outline current thinking about the social dimension of sustainable development and determine if there were areas of consensus.

### Scope and approach

We reviewed the literature that discusses current thinking about the social dimension, including definitions, emerging models, and the importance of social learning. We also held two consultative workshops. One was with consultants and academics working in the fields of social policy, sustainability, and environmental management; the other was with staff from federal government departments who are involved in preparing and implementing sustainable development strategies. We did not attempt to define the social dimension of sustainable development or favour one definition or model over another. Nor did we draw conclusions about the strengths and weaknesses of the various models.

To provide context, we looked at the 1997 and 2000 sustainable development strategies to see if federal departments are addressing the social dimension in their strategies. We did not do audit work or any qualitative assessment of the strategies. This may form part of our work in upcoming years.

We also reviewed whether the federal government had included the social dimension of sustainable development in its international and domestic commitments. We reviewed a number of policies, international conventions, and bilateral and multilateral agreements. Chapter 2 of the Commissioner's 1998 Report reported on Canada's international environmental commitments. As part of that study, the Commissioner's group created a database of Canada's international environmental agreements. From that database, we reviewed a number of international conventions and bilateral and multilateral agreements and identified some that included a social component. We made this identification by drawing from the broad range of terms associated with the social dimension (described in paragraph 5.15 of this chapter). We also looked at the emerging indicators and performance measures for the social dimension of sustainable development. We offer a sampling of approaches and initiatives to develop social indicators but do not comment on the full extent of efforts to measure progress.

### Study team

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## Appendix A—Summary of workshop with consultants and academics

### Context

On 5 July 2000, the Acting Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development met with consultants and academics to obtain their views and advice on addressing the social dimension of sustainable development.

We asked them the following questions:

- With respect to the social dimension of sustainable development, do you use a definition, metaphor, or a model? What is it? What are its strengths and weaknesses? How much of it is a value statement? What is (or should be) the relationship of the social dimension to sustainable development and its other dimensions (economic, environmental)?
- What are the potential pitfalls to avoid in addressing and increasing awareness of the social dimension? What emerging or past situations best illustrate the problems and opportunities in addressing the social dimension of sustainable development?
- Where should the focus of the Commissioner lie? What path should we take? What should our longer-term agenda and work plan look like?

Based on the insightful responses received, we organized a workshop comprising three panels to discuss these issues.

### Defining the social dimension of sustainable development

**Interconnected dimensions.** The first panel dealt with the question, "What do we mean by the social dimension of sustainable development?" One of the main messages was that rather than trying to isolate the social dimension, we should go back to basics and think about human well-being and environmental quality and the linkages between them. An interesting comment was that the economic and social dimensions are closely linked, and a person's view of an issue can strongly influence how it is characterized.

Panelists noted that it is important to remember that there is a link to the environment. It doesn't need to be exclusive, but it is an essential part of the underpinnings. A lot of the interest in sustainable development flows back to concerns about basic needs and also to the environmental dimension. Therefore, a key focus, at least in the short term, should be on the interactions among the economic, environmental, and social dimensions.

**Integrated decision making.** Panelists agreed that to achieve sustainability in the decision-making process of the federal government, and at other levels of government, the culture and process of decision making needs to be changed. One panelist felt that the country is characterized by deep divisions in terms of gender, language, and geography and also among sectors—the research community, governments, and business. The divisions also exist within organizations. These divisions result in fragmented jurisdictional conflicts, and piecemeal and unco-ordinated policies.

The panel demonstrated that there is uncertainty about how to successfully address the social dimension. It is important to remember that this is a journey. If the social dimension is to be addressed successfully, it is essential that governments and citizens understand the interactions between environmental events and the social causes and impacts, as well as the behaviour changes that are necessary for improvement. A fundamental objective is to focus on integrated decision making.

**Models.** Various models were discussed, including the "three-legged stool" (economic, environmental, and social dimensions) and embedded circles. The latter looks at economics as a social construct—all within the largest circle, the natural environment.

Perhaps the easiest model to understand is a triangle that links each dimension of sustainable development to the other. A healthy economy can promote a healthy society; a clean environment can lead to a strengthened economy; and so on. Each dimension can provide positive or negative feedback to the others. One expert uses this triangle to describe the relation of each dimension in the context of a means to an end. He sees economic factors as a means of creating well-being for humans and the ecosystem.

Another model, a Venn-type diagram of three interlocking circles, shows how the three dimensions are related to one another. Whether a particular topic is economic, environmental, or social is often a grey area, because real-world

problems are usually complex. The problem of poverty illustrates this point. It is not merely an economic, environmental, or social problem, as each of these dimensions may play a role in its cause. This model acknowledges the dilemma, showing that the interrelation among dimensions exists, as opposed to the triangle model, which treats each dimension as separate.

A more complex circle diagram relates to the capital-theory approach to sustainable development put forth by the World Bank. It shows the biosphere as the outer layer within which both society and the economy are contained. The layers are labelled as forms of capital—natural, economic, social, and human.

Another model describes sustainable development as an egg. The inner yolk represents the economic and social dimensions, while the surrounding white is the environmental dimension. In order for the whole system to be healthy, both the yolk and the white must be healthy and sustainable. This model again shows the interconnectedness of the different dimensions, but combines the economic and social dimensions into one unit. Some argue that since the economy is a human construct, it should be considered a social dimension, while others think it is such a large concern that it demands a separate status.

A variation of the egg model shows three circles—economic, social, and ecological—as part of the larger "human systems" yolk that is surrounded by the "natural systems" white.

There is also a model that combines the three circles and the egg models. The three circles representing economic, social, and ecological aspects are part of a larger human systems grouping (the yolk), which in turn is surrounded by a natural system (the white).

These models present varying perspectives on how society fits into the overall picture of sustainable development. How important society is viewed as in the overall picture may depend on the individual. For example, an environmentalist may pay less attention to this aspect, while a psychologist may see it as a key concern.

**Social capital.** Discussion on social capital reflected several perspectives. The consensus was that social capital does relate to human capital. Panelists recognized that human capital is part of the social dimension debate. Social capital is a useful concept for communicating to particular audiences such as government, industry, and the business community. Panelists also noted that we must consider other important social concepts such as equity.

**Equity.** Panelists agreed that sustainable development must imply some element of equity—incorporating the notion of basic needs today and those of future generations. They concurred that a long-term lens (50 years plus) should be used to deal with the issues surrounding sustainable development. This means examining the social legacy—the kind of society that will follow from our action or inaction. That in turn means projecting policy implications over a long period, and adopting preventive principles. We need to invest in the future for our children.

**Tools.** Panelists noted the importance of education and communication in increasing awareness and bringing about behavioural change. Both communities and institutions will need to develop tools for education and for increasing awareness.

**Other issues.** Panelists also discussed a number of substantive aspects of the social dimension of sustainable development. They talked about ecojustice, which addresses the distributional aspects of environmental risk and of actions taken to deal with that risk. There was also discussion about property rights, poverty, and the gap between rich and poor in developed and less developed countries and within developed countries. They also talked about the impacts of poverty and affluence on environmental quality and on children's health. Panelists offered several perspectives on the impact of economic, environmental, and social issues on First Nations people and their traditional culture.

### Potential pitfalls and opportunities in addressing the social dimension

The second panel focussed on the potential pitfalls that should be avoided in addressing the social dimension. Some panelists said the biggest pitfall was in defining the social dimension of sustainable development too broadly at the outset. They suggested that we start narrow and then go broad—in other words, “get our feet wet” on some of the issues that involve all the elements of sustainable development.

Panelists encouraged the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development to promote discourse on social development without trying to limit it, but to remain a focal point for ongoing practical discussions. They felt it was important for the Commissioner to promote and identify equity issues so that the discussion about equity could be more transparent and trade-offs more clearly identified.

Several panelists spoke about the importance of getting federal government departments to identify the social aspects of their activities and performance in their sustainable development strategies. Others said that departments should be encouraged to talk about well-being rather than social aspects, because the government's actions focus on this area. They argued that departments should identify the environmental impacts of social programs in their strategies because, while they may be achieving valuable social goals, they can't ignore the environmental implications. Getting the federal government talking about a "Government of Canada" perspective of sustainable development would be useful as well.

The panel emphasized the importance of participation and emphasized that the public be involved in decision making. This is a key element—the need for public participation and citizen engagement. One panelist noted that there are increasing concerns about loss of agency and loss of confidence in government, and in institutions generally. He noted that there is a range of understanding that guides actions, and thus there is a need for extensive deliberations to build consensus on actions that restrain human activity with environmental impacts.

Another panelist expressed that we need to "feel" these issues—not just think about them. He said the key is in the process of building relationships and letting the people affected participate in identifying the problem and in designing and implementing the solution.

### **Focus of the Commissioner's work**

The third panel looked at how the Commissioner should focus attention on the social dimension of sustainable development.

Panelists recommended that the Commissioner choose areas that are integrative and touch the key elements of sustainable development (economic, environmental, and social). They noted that the role is to question and assess. By exploring the social dimension, the Commissioner has the opportunity to broaden the understanding of sustainable development and has a capacity-building opportunity as well. The Commissioner can encourage debate, promote the application of good tools to promote learning in government, and encourage a more sectoral and government-wide perspective on sustainable development. Getting departments talking about sustainable development and the social perspective would be useful. In addition, panelists encouraged the Commissioner to keep in mind the broader issue of environmental governance.

Panelists suggested a number of possible case studies. There was discussion in this context about indicators, measurement reporting, and the role of the Commissioner in this area.

## Appendix B—Examples of social themes and targets from the second strategies

### Contributing to a better understanding of the social and cultural dimensions of sustainable development

By 2003, participate in at least two interdepartmental exploratory projects to improve understanding of the Department's role in supporting the social and cultural dimensions of sustainable development.

Department of Canadian Heritage

Sponsor with other SCSD [Social and Cultural Sustainable Development Working Group] members a workshop with interested participants to discuss the social and cultural dimensions of SD [sustainable development] and the potential research and policy implications for federal departments by December 31, 2002.

Human Resources Development Canada

### Maintaining and enhancing sustainable communities

[Promote] sustainable development principles through Sustainable Communities Initiatives in Cape Breton and the Annapolis Valley.

Department of Justice

Enhance the health of communities and their capacity to take action on health and healthy environments in all six Health Canada Regions by the end of March 2004.

Health Canada

### Promoting and supporting population health and safety

Promote better practices leading to practical solutions to key issues of child development to at least ten organizations of health professionals by the end of March 2004.

Health Canada

Support and contribute to Health Canada's focus on SD [sustainable development] and healthy Canadians, and especially with respect to child-related health and well-being.

Human Resources Development Canada

### Knowledge and information provided to Canadians to make better decisions promoting sustainable development

On an ongoing basis, [the Department] will communicate or consult with Canadians to better inform them on the production of Canadian food and to identify and address their concerns related to intensive agricultural production.

Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada

By 2003, provide up to 14 on-line services on the natural resources sector, as part of Government On-Line, including a Canadian Natural Resources Knowledge Gateway.

Natural Resources Canada

### Promoting equity, reducing poverty, and providing basic human needs

Develop and implement, in consultation with partners, the Agency's four action plans in support of CIDA's *Social Development Priorities: A Framework for Action* (health and nutrition, basic education, HIV/AIDS, and child protection).

Canadian International Development Agency

Update and implement CIDA's poverty-reduction strategy in light of both ODA [official development assistance] and CIT [country in transition] priorities.

Canadian International Development Agency

### Sustainable development strategy for the North

By 2001, in partnership with other government departments, participate in the development of an action plan as part of a Federal Northern Sustainable Development Strategy.

Natural Resources Canada

Implementation of obligations pursuant to agreements with Aboriginal peoples and territorial governments (ongoing).

Indian and Northern Affairs Canada

## Appendix C—Summary of workshop with federal government departments

### Context

On 28 November 2000, Johanne G  linas, the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development, hosted a workshop on the social dimension of sustainable development. The Commissioner and her staff wanted to learn how departments are currently approaching the social dimension of sustainable development, and to identify any constraints that prevent the social dimension from being fully integrated into sustainable development strategies and their implementation.

We asked each participant department to address the following questions:

- How are you currently addressing the social dimension of sustainable development? (We expected participants to point to examples from current draft strategies, programs, and plans.)
- Do these examples reflect your preferred approach? Is there more that should be done, or less—for example, would a tighter focus be preferable?
- What are the constraints, including constraints of knowledge and resources, that have an impact on federal departments' capacity to fully incorporate the social dimension of sustainable development into decision making?

We asked participants to provide us with a short, point-form, written response to these questions before the workshop.

We advised departments that this was a study, not an audit. The workshop was designed to help departments and us think about some aspects of the social dimension of sustainable development. In the chapter, we would not quote for attribution from the responses. We intended to use them to help us identify examples of the social dimension in the published sustainable development strategies, and to help us think about constraints and barriers. As well, anything said in the workshop was not for attribution, but was designed to help us all think about and exchange views on these issues.

### How departments are currently addressing the social dimension

- Participants expressed strong interest in discussing the social dimension of sustainable development. They recognized that including the social dimension is a critical part of managing for sustainable development and is important in balancing its various dimensions (economic, environmental, and social). Participants mentioned integrated decision making as a key challenge.
- Issues related to the social dimension of sustainable development reflected the diversity among departments' mandates. For example, participants mentioned that the social dimension addresses issues of community, cultural sensitivity, quality of life, behavioural change, partnerships, Aboriginal peoples, redistribution, and equity.
- Participants recognized that incorporating the social dimension into the next round of sustainable development strategies, due in 2003, is an important priority.

### Defining the social dimension of sustainable development

- The approaches and views of participants varied considerably on the definition of sustainable development and how the social dimension fit into that definition.
- One participant questioned whether there could be a single definition across government. Another felt that defining the social dimension for the whole federal government was not advisable. Another participant suggested that a single definition was not needed but that boundaries needed to be set.
- One participant noted that defining social aspects is tied to a department's mandate—how a department operates has an impact on other people. Some felt that departments have the right to define their own universe.
- Participants provided examples of social dimension issues, including sustainable communities, children's health, workplace health and safety, healthy societies, social development, social impacts, poverty reduction, governance, green citizenship, the need for knowledge and capacity building, green employment, full cost accounting, and security.
- Some voiced concern about looking at the social dimension solely through an environmental lens.



- Many felt it is important to look at the social dimension in the context of integrated decision making—that is, considering all dimensions together.
- Some expressed that the challenge for the sustainable development strategies is to balance all elements to achieve sustainability. However, several questioned whether the departmental sustainable development strategy is the right vehicle to address social aspects, as the social dimension cuts across all of a department's programs.
- As well, departments need knowledge, tools, and frameworks for a more integrated approach. One participant noted that when common tools and analytical frameworks have been developed, tested, and implemented, the next round of strategies will be more meaningful.

### **Mandate as the starting point**

- Many participants noted that the departmental mandate is often used as a starting point for addressing sustainable development issues. Some noted that it is up to each department to determine whether social aspects are relevant.
- Some participants voiced the concern that given the legislated mandate of their departments, it is sometimes difficult to reconcile consideration of all three dimensions of sustainable development when implementing program decisions.

### **Departments are at different points**

- Participants recognized that looking at the social dimension of sustainable development is a journey, or a learning curve. Departments are at different stages; many are at a very early stage. Some expressed that, given the increased complexity of dealing with the social dimension, they may be several years away from dealing with it adequately.

### **The importance of central leadership**

- Some participants noted that strong central leadership is a prerequisite to making progress. Several voiced the view that an absence of leadership has slowed progress. Many participants said that, to make common progress, commitment from senior levels of government together with capacity building and shared approaches were needed.
- A participant also commented that sustainability is not the only horizontal issue that the government must deal with. It was suggested that the government should set the overall context and integrate mechanisms into governmental policies.

### **Measurability and performance indicators**

- Considerable discussion centred on measurability and performance indicators. Several attendees pointed out that currently there are no indicators that examine the linkages among economic, environmental, and social factors. Some noted that without appropriate analytic tools, measures, and baseline data, departments lack the ability to track and monitor progress toward sustainable development. Others stated that many aspects of sustainable development are difficult to measure, especially in the short term. Some participants said that identifying models or best practices on how to approach the integration of all three aspects into decision making would be helpful. However, participants largely agreed that this is a challenge that needs to be addressed as they plan the third generation of strategies.

### **The role of the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development**

- There was discussion on the different roles of the Commissioner—both capacity building and audit. Some felt that departments needed some assurance that the Commissioner would not be critical of departments' initial or innovative attempts to include the social dimension. There was also discussion about whether the Commissioner should be critical of departments that choose not to specifically address the social dimension in their sustainable development strategies. For example, a department with a primarily operational mandate may decide not to engineer social outcomes.
- It was pointed out that the Commissioner's expectations for the second round of strategies had been articulated in *Moving Up the Learning Curve: The Second Generation of Sustainable Development Strategies* issued in the fall of 1999.

- Some attendees noted the role of the Commissioner as a facilitator and capacity builder—for example, in helping departments make progress in greening operations and in developing some common performance measures through membership on an interdepartmental committee. Some participants see value in the Commissioner’s continuing in a capacity-building role.
- The Commissioner acknowledged the challenges that departments face in addressing the social dimension. She recognized the challenges in establishing definitions and measures and in gaining senior level commitment.
- She invited departments to innovate in their work and assured them that she will try to ensure that the right people understand the right message.

## Appendix D—Some emerging social indicators of sustainable development

Some contributors to the development of social sustainable development indicators:

### Canada

- National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy (environment and sustainable development indicators)
- GPI Atlantic (Genuine Progress Index for Atlantic Canada)
- Pembina Institute (Alberta Genuine Progress Indicators)
- Canadian Policy Research Networks (Quality of Life Indicators)
- Fraser Basin Council (sustainability indicators)
- Federation of Canadian Municipalities (Quality of Life Indicators)

### International

- United Kingdom (sustainable development indicators)
- Interagency Working Group on Sustainable Development Indicators, United States (sustainable development indicators)
- Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, Joint project with United Nations and World Bank (sustainable development indicators)
- United Nations Development Programme (Human Development Index)

Criteria identified to develop effective indicators:

- Available—data are available and easily accessible
- Understandable—data are easily understood by various audiences
- Credible—data are supported by valid, reliable information
- Temporal—data can highlight trends over time and show progress toward goals
- Relevant—data and indicators reflect community values
- Comparable—data can be compared across regions
- Integrative—data demonstrate connections among key dimensions of sustainability

Source: Fraser Basin Council

Indicators used in projects:

- |                                 |   |
|---------------------------------|---|
| • Literacy rate                 | • Child poverty and malnutrition                  |
| • Infant mortality rate         | • Crime rate                                      |
| • Population                    | • Education levels                                |
| • Population growth rate        | • Income levels                                   |
| • Fertility rate                | • Health care access                              |
| • Gross national product        | • Social investment                               |
| • Life expectancy               | • Death rates from cancer, suicide, and accidents |
| • Access to safe drinking water | • Health inequalities                             |
| • Access to sanitation          | • Gender inequalities                             |
| • Urban population              |   |
| • Poverty                       |   |

Source: Compiled from information provided at the workshops



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