



SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT BRIEFING NOTE

Federal Commitments to Freshwater: Three Generations of Sustainable Development Strategies

Highlights

- Integrated water resource management (IWRM) principles are being broadly integrated in the government’s thinking.
- In the area of water, broader environmental commitments are taking precedence over greening government operations.
- A significant shift in the third generation of sustainable development strategies (SDS) demonstrates the impact of co-ordinated, specific guidance.

Background

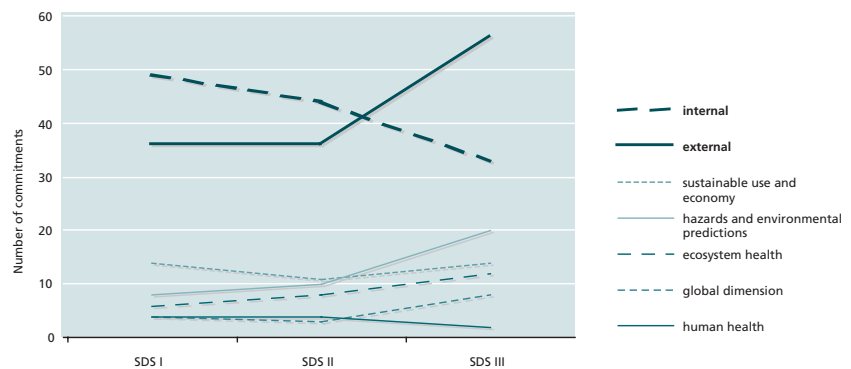
Through amendments to the *Auditor General Act* in 1995, most federal departments and agencies were required to prepare SDSs and to update them at least every three years. The first SDSs were tabled in the House of Commons December 1997, with updates in February 2001 and 2004.

Monitoring and reporting to Parliament and Canadians on progress in implementing departmental SDSs is the responsibility of the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development (CESD). Consequently, recommendations from the CESD influence the preparation of subsequent departmental SDSs.

The sustainable development strategies present what departments/agencies will do to build a sustainable development platform in their policies, programs, and operations. The SDSs are not to contain initiatives that would proceed independently of the SDSs, nor those that are either well in hand or are proceeding along their own track. Therefore, the SDSs are not statements of business as usual but, rather, they drive change and outline the federal approach in handling sustainable development issues.

An examination of the three generations of SDSs tabled in Parliament to date paints a general picture of how the federal approach to freshwater has evolved over the last seven years, and allows an exploration of some of the drivers behind federal freshwater commitments. The study reveals the importance of centralized guidance in the establishment of water-related commitments in the departmental strategies.

FIGURE 1
Water-Related Commitments by Type in the Three Generations of SDSs¹



¹ The external commitments are divided into the five categories used by the framework document developed by the Interdepartmental Water ADMs Committee (IWAC).

Freshwater-Related Policies and International Commitments with Potential to Impact Departmental SDSs

The SDSs evolve with each subsequent generation, as departments/agencies gain a better understanding of the concept of sustainable development in the context of their mandate. Departments/agencies have gradually started to use the SDS process to outline how new and existing departmental policies and programs will adjust to advance sustainable development, rather than simply casting business-as-usual plans in a sustainable development light. In addition, federal sectoral policies are evolving and increasingly include sustainable development considerations as reflected in and perhaps influenced by the SDSs. The question, however, is whether the pace of the evolution of SDSs and their policy impact is satisfactory.

The Federal Water Policy (FWP) dates from 1987²; although there have been attempts to revise or update it, notably in 1998, the 1987 text still stands. However, some have argued that the FWP has not been vigorously pursued in federal water-related commitments, including those presented in the SDSs.

The Walkerton tragedy of 2000 was a major driver for the water file in several departments. It led to the preparation of a document reviewing the then-current federal activities in freshwater and describing potential priorities, emphasizing safe drinking water. The Department of Justice established the Water Issues Network, comprising legal counsels from 17 federal departments, which examined the extent of federal jurisdiction in freshwater management. This study sought to clarify departmental water-related mandates.

The 2002 Johannesburg Plan of Implementation agreed to at the World Summit on Sustainable Development provided impetus for further developments of federal freshwater policies, as it includes a commitment to the development of national integrated water resources management strategies and water efficiency plans by 2005. Departmental SDSs, however, do not articulate clearly whether their freshwater commitments stem from international water-related commitments.

The summer 2003 formation of the Interdepartmental Water ADMs Committee (IWAC) under the joint leadership of Environment Canada and Health Canada bodes well for increased interdepartmental co-ordination, and for raising the profile of water issues within the federal government. The IWAC has developed a framework for the federal government's freshwater activities, and priorities are being identified.

The Evolution of Freshwater in the SDSs

In 1995, *A Guide to Green Government* presented a framework for federal departments and agencies in the preparation of their first SDSs. Appendices elaborated on specific opportunities and best practices, including water use. Many of the ideas and principles in that document, however, proved to be difficult for departments/agencies to integrate in their policies and programs. Therefore, the 1997 generation of SDSs did not generally present clear and measurable commitments.

In 2001, stemming from the audit of the federal role in protecting and preserving the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence River basin, the CESD urged the federal government to:

- revisit its priorities in the area of freshwater management and identify those of greatest importance;
- clearly define the roles and responsibilities of the federal departments/agencies involved in water issues; and
- establish funding and programming to take action on the identified priorities.

In 2002, the CESD recommended that the Privy Council Office (PCO) provide leadership for the preparation of the third generation of SDSs. The PCO assigned the leadership role to the Deputy Ministers' Environment and Sustainable Development Coordinating Committee (ESDCC). In 2003, Natural Resources Canada led the preparation of a document meant to provide guidance to departments/agencies as they prepared their third SDSs. A short list of key priorities, including freshwater, was proposed, and it was

² The Federal Water Policy of 1987 includes five strategies for protecting and enhancing the quality of the water resource, and promoting the wise and efficient management and use of water.

distributed in the fall of 2003 to the deputy ministers of all departments/agencies that prepare SDSs. Unfortunately this was too late in the cycle to influence some departmental SDSs, but the analysis below suggests that this guidance document influenced many departmental strategies.

The Commissioner highlighted different general concerns about each generation of SDSs, which also apply to the water-related commitments in the SDSs:

- Many departments/agencies have difficulty establishing meaningful and measurable targets, limiting reporting of progress and implying that some departments/agencies treat it as a paper exercise.
- There is a lack of interdepartmental co-ordination in preparing and implementing SDSs.
- Adequate management systems have not been put in place to implement the SDSs.
- There is no “Government of Canada” perspective on sustainable development, leading to a lack of senior management leadership.

One of the greatest difficulties in analyzing the SDSs is the variability in magnitude of what is considered and presented by the departments/agencies as a “target”. For example, one Natural Resources Canada target in its third SDS was the preparation of a chapter of an Environment Canada document on threats to water availability in Canada. This larger document was not considered a separate target in the Environment Canada report, but rather as a part of a larger target. In effect, this Environment Canada target was two orders of magnitude larger than the corresponding Natural Resources Canada target. Such disparities in the magnitude of targets presented may explain why Environment Canada, having the federal lead on most aspects of freshwater and therefore generally the largest water-related targets, has fewer external water-related targets over the three generations of SDSs than Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, Natural Resources Canada, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, or Health Canada. It may also be that because water is part of Environment Canada’s usual business to a greater extent than other departments/agencies, it was not included in the SDS, which is not intended to present business-as-usual activities.

Departmental Water-Related Commitments in the Three Generations of SDSs

Water still does not appear in the SDSs as an interdepartmentally co-ordinated issue, although there are encouraging signs. While the current institutional governance of water leads to fragmentation of the issue between many federal departments and agencies with various mandates regarding water, the IWAC is well positioned to provide guidance and specify government-wide priorities in regard to freshwater.

The guidance document provided to the Interdepartmental Network on Sustainable Development Strategies by the ESDCC co-chairs before tabling the third SDSs did have an impact on how a number of departments/agencies approached their SDSs and set priorities. Three priorities were suggested for departments/agencies: greening operations, water, and meeting the World Summit on Sustainable Development goals. Based on a review of the departmental water-related commitments in the three generations of SDSs³:

- The total number of water-related commitments is highest in the third generation of SDSs – 89 commitments (SDS I – 85, SDS II – 80).
- The number of departments/agencies that made external (beyond departmental operations) water-related commitments is highest in the third generation of SDSs – 11 departments/agencies (SDS I – 9, SDS II – 8).
- The number of external water-related commitments increased significantly in the third generation of SDSs (Figure 1).
- There has been a reduction in the number of internal water-related commitments (greening operations) (Figure 1). This most likely reflects a broader perspective and the advances already made in this area, rather than any decreased commitment to greening government operations in the area of water.

3 A complete listing of water-related commitments by department/agency in all three generations of SDSs can be found in a companion document to this Briefing Note, available on the PRI web site <www.policyresearch.gc.ca/doclib/SD_BN_Federal_tables_e.pdf>.

Despite the occurrence of the Walkerton and North Battleford tragedies, human health-related commitments appear to have declined in the third generation (from 5% of the total water-related commitments in the first two generations of SDSs to 2% in the third generation), while ecosystem health-related commitments have increased (7% in SDS I, 10% in SDS II, and 15% in SDS III). This may reflect an increased uptake of the principles of IWRM, under which protecting source-water quality is understood to be key to protecting human health. It may also reflect the fact that there are human health and environment initiatives already underway and that, therefore, their inclusion in the SDSs would not be considered strategic.

Overall, the number of water-related commitments remains limited in comparison with the total number of commitments made in the SDSs. Water-related commitments increased slightly from approximately 3% in the first two generations to approximately 4% of the total in the third generation of SDSs.

Conclusions

Several departments that have a role in the environment (beyond the impact of their own operations) have clearly adopted a more outward-looking view of sustainable development. The continued activities of the IWAC can be expected to yield significant benefits in the near future. In particular, the priority list for freshwater being developed by the IWAC should serve as a basis for co-ordinating departmental activities on freshwater through the fourth generation of SDSs, and through other means.

The SDSs appear to be starting to fulfill their intended role of influencing policy, at least with regards to water.

Further reading

Additional information, including data tables, can be found on the PRI web site at <www.policyresearch.gc.ca/doclib/SD_BN_Federal_tables_e.pdf>.

CESD annual reports to Parliament discussing issues related to freshwater and to overall content of the SDSs, precisely, the reports from 2001, 2002, 2003, which can be found at <www.oag-bvg.gc.ca/domino/other.nsf/html/99repm_e.html>.

Departmental Sustainable Development Strategies <www.oag-bvg.gc.ca/domino/cesd_cedd.nsf/html/deptsd_e.html>. Accessed February 16, 2005.