SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND THE CONSUMER
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AND THE CONSUMER

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# Sustainable Development and the Consumer

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THE SCOTTISH CONSUMER COUNCIL

The Scottish Consumer Council (SCC) was set up by government in 1975. Our purpose is to promote the interests of consumers in Scotland, with particular regard to those people who experience disadvantage in society. While producers of goods and services are usually well-organised and articulate when protecting their own interests, individual consumers very often are not. The people whose interests we represent are consumers of all kinds: they may be patients, tenants, parents, solicitors’ clients, public transport users, or simply shoppers in a supermarket.

Consumers benefit from efficient and effective services in the public and private sectors. Service-providers benefit from discriminating consumers. A balanced partnership between the two is essential and the SCC seeks to develop this partnership by:

- carrying out research into consumer issues and concerns;
- informing key policy and decision-makers about consumer concerns and issues;
- influencing key policy and decision-making processes;
- informing and raising awareness among consumers.

The SCC is part of the National Consumer Council (NCC) and is sponsored by the Department of Trade and Industry. The SCC’s Chairman and Council members are appointed by the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry.

The SCC assesses the consumer perspective in any situation by analysing the position of consumers against a set of consumer tests. These are:

**access** - can people get the goods, services or information they need?

**choice** - can consumers affect the way goods and services are provided through the choices they make in the marketplace?

**information** - is information available, is it easy to understand, and does it help consumers to make informed choices?

**safety** - are goods produced to the highest standards of safety?

**redress** - is there a simple, cheap, quick and fair system for dealing with complaints and disputes if things go wrong?

**representation** - are consumers’ views properly represented in services where there is little or no consumer choice?

**fairness** - are consumers subject to arbitrary discrimination for reasons unconnected with their characteristics as consumers?
CHAIRMAN’S PREFACE

Environmental problems facing the world today are of such severity that even action by individual countries can have limited impact. In recent years ‘sustainable development’ has been promoted as a mechanism for countering these problems. Sustainable development seeks to improve the living standards of people today, and those in the future, by policies combining social equity and economic growth, while at the same time protecting and enhancing the environment. In the past the consumer interest has been seen as opposed to sustainable development. This has mainly come about because the consumer interest has wrongly been equated with a desire to protect irresponsible over-consumption.

The Scottish Consumer Council (SCC) recognised that policies implemented by governments and industry to promote sustainable development can have a profound impact on the lives of consumers. We set about examining the concept of sustainable development and its relevance for and impact on consumers in Scotland. The SCC embraces the concept of sustainable development and we are particularly interested in ensuring that policies to promote sustainable development do not impact disproportionately on those on low incomes and disadvantaged people in Scottish society.

This report tries to examine a difficult subject as simply as possible. It begins by establishing that a specific Scottish agenda exists. It then examines sustainable development and suggests that conflicts can arise in the pursuit of sustainable development between the short-term interests of consumers, and their longer-term interests as citizens. We examine the nature of conflicts and suggest that it is essential that these are identified and explained and that processes are set in place to resolve them. We argue that consumers are essential in ensuring successful policies that are working towards sustainable development. However, the pursuit of sustainable development will ultimately mean that most, if not all, consumers will have to alter their consumption through informed choice, or as the result of increased costs or reduced availability.
The report suggests that mechanisms available to facilitate the necessary change in consumption often, paradoxically, fail to take account of the legitimate interests of consumers, particularly those who are disadvantaged. We suggest there is a role for interpreting our seven consumer tests to take account of the implications of sustainable development for the consumer.

We set out a number of recommendations, based on our research. These recommendations are aimed at both policy-makers and consumers.

The message of this report is clear. Those implementing policies under sustainable development objectives must ensure that the voice of the consumer is heard. Without this we believe policies to promote sustainable development will fail.

I hope this report will stimulate a debate and invite you to join us as we seek to work towards sustainable development which benefits all of Scotland.

Deirdre Hutton
Chairman
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The work for this report was overseen by the Scottish Consumer Council’s Food, Diet and Environment Committee. The members of the committee were:

Andrew Raven (chair)
Martyn Evans (ex officio)
Donna Heaney (staff secretariat)
Christine Humphries
Deirdre Hutton (ex officio)
Bill Ure
Alex Wright

Thanks also go to Kirsty Aird, the Scottish Consumer Council’s Administrative Assistant who prepared the text for publication. This report was written by Donna Heaney, Martyn Evans and John Clare.
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report examines the concept of sustainable development and the implications for consumers. It notes that an underlying and unproven premise of sustainable development is that it should be possible to secure higher standards of living for people today as well as in the future, whilst at the same time safeguarding and improving the environment.

The interest shown by policy-makers in sustainable development is destined to continue in the future and the move towards sustainable development is likely to be an important component of future public policy-making in Scotland. The four main political parties in Scotland have made a commitment to this in their Manifestos, and the coalition deal by the Scottish Labour Party and Scottish Liberal Democrats confirmed sustainable development as a principle of government.

However, the report notes that the pursuit of sustainable development can lead to conflicts between the often short-term interests of consumers and the arguably longer-term interests of citizens. It is suggested that the essence of sustainable development is to attempt to resolve these conflicts in order to drive forward an agenda which promotes social equity, environmental protection and enhancement and economic growth.

The report examines these three components, and highlights the importance of addressing social equity not only for future generations, but for those in society who are already disadvantaged - the unemployed, low income groups, homeless people, people with disabilities and minority ethnic groups.

It is noted that strong links exist between social equity and environmental protection particularly in terms of the effects of environmental policies on disadvantaged groups. The pursuit of sustainable development will ultimately mean that consumers will have to alter their behaviour, to acknowledge that self-interest and environmental protection may not be fully compatible. Policy-makers and consumers must be aware of the costs to ensure that disadvantaged consumers are not further disadvantaged.
Sustainable Development and the Consumer

It is then suggested that much environmental damage and social inequity is a result of economic growth with the market failing to take into account the true costs of economic activity and that by including social and environmental costs within economic calculations, the market can be made to work more favourably for the citizen. However, this can mean higher costs for the individual.

Consumer involvement is suggested as fundamental to the success of sustainable development. This involves a change of behaviour and attitude by consumers. This report highlights three key mechanisms which policy-makers can employ to promote such a change in behaviour: education and information; economic instruments and the promotion of community action. However, the report suggests that problems exist with these approaches which need to be resolved. For example, the report suggests that education in itself will not change consumer behaviour. For this, there needs to be the provision of satisfactory information upon which consumers can make an informed choice, and acceptable alternatives to enable a change in behaviour to take place.

Similarly, the report highlights concern about the impacts of economic instruments on current consumers and therefore suggests it is important to examine what these impacts are. In addition, it notes that well-intended economic instruments may have the unintended result of causing further disadvantage to those consumers already facing disadvantage in society.

The report also suggests that the promotion of community action can fail to engage the least powerful and often most disadvantaged consumers.

The promotion of sustainable development will require difficult decisions by policy-makers and individual consumers. It is essential that the implications of such decisions are made on the basis of assessing the impacts on consumers, and particularly those who face disadvantage. This also means that the voice of the consumer must be sought in promoting sustainable development objectives.

The report suggests that public and private bodies promoting sustainable development should consider the interests of the consumer in relation to seven consumer tests, namely access, choice, information, safety, redress, representation and fairness. In doing this, however, there must be a recognition that consumers are not homogeneous and that the
Implications for different groups in society must be considered. The report acknowledges the benefits to consumers from pursuing sustainable development objectives, but recognises that negative impacts can arise. The report notes that the SCC has made a commitment to engage in the process.

Finally, the report puts forward a number of recommendations for action which will enable the consumer interest to be taken into account.

**Recommendation 1**
The Scottish Parliament must ensure that legislation and policy initiatives promoted under sustainable development objectives take account of the legitimate interests of consumers.

**Recommendation 2**
The assessment of sustainable development implications of a Bill introduced by a member of the Scottish Executive (as required by Parliamentary Standing Orders), must include an assessment of the impact on consumers, particularly the most disadvantaged.

**Recommendation 3**
The Standing Orders of the Scottish Parliament should be amended to include the provision that all Bills introduced in the Parliament by either individuals, Members or Committees should be accompanied by a written statement which includes “an assessment of the effects, if any, of the Bill on equal opportunities, human rights, island communities, local government and sustainable development”. At present only Executive Bills require this information.

**Recommendation 4**
In developing policies to promote social inclusion full account must be taken of the possible negative impact on excluded groups of policies to promote sustainable development.

**Recommendation 5**
In promoting sustainable development policies and strategies an attempt must be made to quantify and make transparent the short and long-term costs and benefits in order that consumers are able to make informed choices, both as consumers and citizens.
Recommendation 6
There is a need for enhanced public education and awareness of sustainable development issues, including the potential conflicts that can arise. This must be undertaken through formal and informal education and information initiatives.

Recommendation 7
Local government and other agencies working at the local level must take account of the interests of consumers in formulating Local Agenda 21 and strategies relating to promoting community action. For this to happen, there is a need to build consultation processes which are meaningful, transparent and which effectively represent and involve all consumers.

Recommendation 8
Policy-makers at all levels should ensure that the sustainable development debate is set out in plain language that all consumers will understand.

Recommendation 9
Consumers should recognise that they have a role to play in the sustainable development debate and should be enabled and encouraged to make choices that are compatible with the objectives of sustainable development. Consumers should commit themselves to this. However, access to meaningful information and to acceptable alternatives is essential, and government and industry should commit themselves to providing this.
SECTION 1  INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Scottish Consumer Council (SCC) aims to promote the interests of consumers in Scotland and especially the interests of people who experience disadvantage in society. This report examines the concept of sustainable development and the implications for the consumer.

1.2 There is widespread recognition that measures to promote sustainable development will have a number of effects on consumers. These can be positive or negative. For example, taxation of heating fuel might have a number of positive outcomes, such as the introduction of energy-efficient appliances in the home. However, it might also lead to those consumers on low incomes reducing their heating to below tolerable levels, or adopting a less healthy diet, in order to pay for the tax increases particularly as they are less likely to live in energy-efficient homes.

1.3 The SCC is concerned that policies to promote sustainable development will be implemented without full regard to the consumer interest, and in particular the interests of the most vulnerable consumers. This paper therefore has a number of aims:

- To examine the issues involved in sustainable development.
- To identify the relevance for consumers and in particular to examine where conflicts may arise.
- To discuss the policy approaches which the SCC believes should be taken in relation to sustainable development.
- To ensure that policies to promote sustainable development do not impact disproportionately on low income and disadvantaged people.
FORMAT OF THE REPORT

In order to pursue the aims of the report

1.4 Section 2 briefly examines the emergence of sustainable development onto the global political arena.

1.5 This is followed in Section 3 by a review of sustainable development in a Scottish context, focusing on the commitment made to working towards and promoting sustainable development by the parties within the Scottish Parliament.

1.6 Section 4 begins to explore the relevance of sustainable development for consumers and suggests that individuals in their roles as both citizen and consumer can benefit from the implementation of policies formulated under sustainable development objectives. Importantly, it suggests that the involvement of consumers is critical to the success of sustainable development. However, it also notes that laudable policies can have unforeseen and sometimes disproportionate costs to some consumers.

1.7 Section 5 of the report examines the nature of conflicts that can arise in relation to consumers as a result of policies implemented under sustainable development objectives. It focuses on the three interlinking strands of sustainable development: social equity, environmental protection and economic growth.

1.8 Section 6 explores mechanisms available to policy-makers to facilitate change in consumer behaviour. Mechanisms reviewed include the education process, economic instruments and community-based initiatives implemented under Local Agenda 21.

1.9 Section 7 argues that given that conflicts can arise, mechanisms are necessary to address, pre-empt and resolve these. It notes that the SCC uses seven tests to consider whether the consumer interest is being taken into account and advocates these as a useful way forward.

1.10 Section 8 presents the conclusions of the report and suggests recommendations which policy-makers should take on board.
SECTION 2 THE EMERGENCE OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

2.1 During the last two centuries the world has witnessed dramatic developments in science and technology that have brought fundamental changes and benefits to the way in which we live. There has also been a growing recognition over the last two decades that these benefits have been accompanied by hazards of a new order, not witnessed by nations before. Global environmental problems (such as acid rain, global temperature rise, ozone depletion, the Chernobyl accident and loss of biodiversity) that reach out with the boundaries and solutions of individual nation states have emerged. There has been an acknowledgement by national governments that the situation has now become serious enough to require joint efforts at the global level to attempt to address these problems.

2.2 Accordingly, in 1983 the United Nations (UN) established The World Commission on Environment and Development, chaired by Gro Harlem Brundtland, then Prime Minister of Norway. Its brief was to examine the environmental and developmental problems facing the world, and to formulate realistic proposals to resolve them. The Brundtland Report established the concept of sustainable development as the basis for a worldwide, integrated approach to economic and environmental policy.

2.3 This was followed by the largest conference organised by the UN - the “Earth Summit” in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. This conference produced two global conventions, one on biodiversity and the other on climate change. It also formulated Agenda 21 which set the framework for action by national governments to promote the concept of sustainable development. Importantly, at this conference the shared language of sustainable development was accepted by governments and industry.

2.4 Sustainable development is based on the fundamental premise that total resources are limited, and that within such constraints there is a complex interrelationship between the potentially conflicting aims of environmental protection and enhancement, social equity and

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economic growth. Decisions about any one of those issues can only be taken in the knowledge and recognition of the implications for the others. Importantly, it has become widely accepted that sustainable development should “...meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”\(^3\).

2.5 An underlying and unproven premise of sustainable development is that it should be possible to secure higher living standards for people today as well as in the future, whilst safeguarding and improving the environment. According to Helm (1991) “...the environment has assumed a status as the economic problem of the 1990’s”\(^4\). Socio-economic benefits and opportunities will be created through environmental protection and improvement. For example, through employment creation as a result of implementing energy efficiency measures in the home or through the direct and indirect economic benefits of ‘nature’ or ‘green’ tourism.

2.6 Sustainable development has an essentially holistic nature. Although it is accepted that risks to the natural environment are potentially life-threatening, sustainable development is not simply about coping with climate change in particular, or protecting the environment in general. It does not, for example, focus on the environment to the exclusion of the legitimate economic interests of society. Nor does it envisage subsistence living.

2.7 The UK Government declared its support for the conclusions of the Rio Summit, and was one of the first countries to articulate that support through a strategy for sustainable development, which was published in 1994 \(^5\). Since then both Conservative and Labour administrations have supported the principle of working towards sustainable development and the present administration is likely to continue this support.

\(^3\) World Commission on Environment and Development (1987) op. cit.


SECTION 3  THE SCOTTISH DIMENSION

3.1 The Scottish Parliament Manifestos of the main four political parties committed themselves to working towards sustainable development once the Scottish Parliament was established. In anticipation of this, the Secretary of State’s Advisory Group on Sustainable Development (AGSD), published a report of the main issues confronting Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs). This defined sustainable development as “the wise use of all resources within a framework in which environmental, economic and social factors are integrated”. The Group (on which the SCC had been represented) stressed that the principle of sustainable development should be adopted as the basis of all public and private policies. Its report set out ten action points for the Parliament and the Executive to enable them to work towards the vision of a sustainable Scotland. These are reproduced in Appendix 1 to this report. Several of the action points are directed at, or involve, consumers; for example increased public debate, improvements to the built environment, a strengthened planning system and education.

3.2 The AGSD recognised education as having a vital part to play in working towards sustainable development, and the Advisory Group on Education for Sustainable Development (ESDG), a sub-group of AGSD with some common membership, published its own report Scotland the Sustainable? The Learning Process. This report similarly set out ten action points for the Parliament and the Executive to enable them to pursue the parallel objective of using education in its widest sense, formal and informal, and for all sectors and ages, to change people’s understanding, attitudes and behaviour. The ESDG’s action points are reproduced in Appendix 2 to this report. Again, several are directly relevant to the interests of consumers, particularly action points promoting a wide-ranging debate, promoting education for sustainable development and ensuring improved access to information.

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3.3 In May 1999 the Joint Statement made by the Scottish Labour Party and Scottish Liberal Democrats in their coalition deal confirmed their commitment to sustainable development. One of the principles in this stated “We will integrate the principles of environmentally and socially sustainable development into all government policies”\(^9\).

3.4 This commitment has been endorsed in the Standing Orders for the Scottish Parliament which affirmed that any Bill introduced by a Minister of the Scottish Executive must be accompanied by a Policy Memorandum which sets out “an assessment of the effects, if any, of the Bill on equal opportunities, human rights, island communities, local government, sustainable development and any other matter which the Scottish Ministers consider relevant”\(^10\). Unfortunately, however, this provision does not apply to all Bills introduced in the Parliament.

3.5 The Scottish Ministers appear to be particularly keen to address a number of what have been termed ‘cross-cutting’ issues. Included in those is both sustainable development and social inclusion. Whilst social inclusion is not directly couched in terms of sustainable development, the inclusion approach would appear to be a key mechanism in working towards sustainable development, especially as a holistic approach is advocated.

3.6 The commitment made to sustainable development by MSPs and the Scottish Executive is encouraging, however as the Parliament is in its infancy, the implementation of this commitment has still to be confirmed through action.


SECTION 4  CITIZENS AND CONSUMERS

4.1 As noted at 2.3, Agenda 21 is the name given to the global programme of action for national governments to effect the transition to sustainable development, agreed in Rio in 1992. It emphasises that working towards sustainable development is a high priority - indeed, a matter of urgency - for local, national and international communities. Ideally, under Agenda 21 all policies and programmes formulated by government and public agencies, as well as by industrial and commercial organisations, should have as one of their objectives the promotion of sustainable development. Many already have the stated intention of fulfilling sustainable development criteria, but much remains to be done across all sectors.

4.2 Agenda 21 therefore highlights the constant obligation on all those who take decisions affecting the use of resources in all areas to make informed judgements which will strike an appropriate balance between the implications for society, the economy and the environment. Any decisions about scarce resources impact on people, whether at the local or national level, and people will have views on such decisions.

4.3 It is the case, however, that in considering the implications of these decisions, there is an obvious community of interest “between people acting in their role as consumers, and people acting in their role as citizens”\(^{11}\). Issues relating to the environment and social policies, such as the distribution of resources, can be expected to affect all citizens. The common factor is the motivation and patterns of human behaviour (that is the why, where and how people behave). According to Wilhelmsson (1998) “Consumers should no longer be seen merely as purchasers and users of goods and services for personal, family or group purposes but also as people concerned with the various facets of society which may affect them either directly or indirectly as consumers”\(^{12}\).

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4.4 Sustainable development should, over time, benefit consumers and citizens, since any decision about the sustainable use of resources should take full account of the needs of society, both within and between generations. In practice, however, there is rarely a simple answer to any of the questions posed by the pursuit of sustainable development. One person’s gain is another person’s loss, particularly in the short term, and an otherwise realistic policy within a sustainable development agenda may place unforeseen and disproportionate burdens on some members of society.

4.5 For example, in October 1998 the SCC responded to the White Paper, Travel Choices For Scotland in which the SCC welcomed the aim “to reduce traffic problems caused by children being driven to school by car”. However, the SCC noted that this must be seen in the context of Placing Request legislation which allows children to register at schools outwith their local catchment area. While the SCC is in favour of individual parental choice about where their children go to school, the SCC believes that the transport issues this raises should be reviewed because local authorities have no obligation to provide transport for children when parents have made a Placing Request. This places the onus on the parents to get the children to school, leading to such concerns over increased travel by car.

4.6 Similarly, the current use of road fuel tax escalator (the raising of the fuel tax above the rate of inflation) which has been justified to reduce CO₂ emissions is an example of a policy based on sustainability objectives. This policy is having a perverse effect on a particular group of consumers in Scotland, that is those on low income living in remoter rural areas. This is due to increased fuel costs having no impact on behaviour, as there is no alternative transport mode available and therefore consumers have no option but to pay higher costs.

4.7 Citizens as consumers of resources (and producers of goods and services) and organisations representing their interests as consumers, cannot therefore ignore the implications of sustainable development. Individual citizens and communities will be encouraged to work towards sustainable development. Ideally, they should also be alert as citizens to the need to assess whether policies of public
and private organisations will work towards achieving the objectives of sustainable development, and as consumers to determine whether those policies have any adverse impact on their own interests.

4.8 The commonly-used phrase ‘Think globally, act locally’ reflects the dual role of the individual, acting as a citizen by recognising the need to pursue the wider objectives of sustainable development, and as a consumer in making choices and decisions at the local and personal level. The pursuit of sustainable development therefore gives consumers, both individually and collectively, great responsibility. This pursuit also relies on the involvement of consumers, placing them in a potentially critical position to drive change. As Selman and Parker (1997) suggest there is “a growing realisation that effective action for sustainable development is hampered less by scientific knowledge than by ‘human’ barriers of various kinds”¹³. This is exemplified in the policy change adopted by most large grocery retailers in the UK in response to objections from consumers to genetically modified (GM) food being sold in their outlets. These objections highlight the blurring of the traditional distinction between consumer and citizen, as the objections to GM food are based variously on safety, environmental or ethical grounds, but not on price.

4.9 However, individual consumers (and particularly those who already experience disadvantage in society) have a weak voice by comparison with most public sector agencies and private sector organisations. In particular, public sector organisations and consumer organisations must therefore be prepared to encourage, advise and assist the consumer to make judgements about “the wise use of resources”¹⁴. This, however, does not mean that these organisations can advise on an individual basis, but rather should be prepared to examine the policies and programmes of the public and private sectors to determine whether they strike a sensible balance between society, the economy and the environment. This means taking full account of the legitimate needs of the consumer, especially those facing disadvantage.


SECTION 5 IDENTIFYING CONFLICTS WITH THE CONSUMER INTEREST

5.1 Wilhelmsson (1998) suggests “The basic economic interest of consumers is to have goods and services available in the marketplace at a cost which they can afford”\(^{15}\). In pursuing a policy of sustainable development, conflicts will inevitably arise between the (short-term) economic and social interests of consumers, and the (long-term) environmental, economic and social interests of citizens. Such conflicts may result in the costs of sustainable development being passed on to some or all of today’s consumers.

5.2 The essence of sustainable development is the reconciliation of such conflicts, although this may be far from easy. It is, however, important that these conflicts are identified and explained and that processes are set in place to resolve them. The most appropriate approach to adopt in highlighting the fundamental interests of consumers is to deconstruct sustainable development and consider the three interlinked strands of sustainable development as discrete elements. This will assist in the identification of some conflicts that might arise. These strands are social equity, environmental protection and enhancement and economic growth and are considered below:

5.3 The strand of social equity has the explicit aim of addressing disadvantage in society. Equity is distinct from equality, which Huby (1998) suggests implies equal slices of the cake for everybody\(^ {16}\). Equity assumes fairness in the sense of equal access or equal rights, which may mean positive discrimination in favour of those who are or would otherwise be disadvantaged.

5.4 Experience suggests that disadvantage is a vicious circle, and not necessarily seen as a priority issue by decision-makers. It is similarly not confined to economic disadvantage. As Buckingham-Hatfield and Evans (1996) suggest “Those with economic and political power will tend to secure the best environments, and will usually be prepared to tolerate environmental exploitation and degradation so long as this is confined to localities which they do not need, value or frequent”\(^ {17}\).

\(^{15}\) Wilhelmsson (1998) op.cit.


5.5 Given the extent of disadvantage within Scottish society, social equity is clearly an essential aspect on which policy-makers should concentrate in setting up mechanisms to test public and private policies and programmes aimed at promoting sustainable development. However, this is the aspect over which there are likely to be least conflicts between the objectives of sustainable development and those of consumer organisations such as the SCC.

5.6 Social equity in the context of sustainable development addresses disadvantage not only for the current population but also for future generations, and attempts to strike a balance between their claims on resources. If the vision of a sustainable society is to be realised within a realistic timescale and without undue social conflict, there should be a commitment to equity or fairness between generations as well as within generations and between different interests in society. That might require the acceptance of policies and programmes that are less advantageous for today’s consumers, provided their adverse aspects are fairly distributed among different sectors of society, in the interests of protecting the equity of future generations. Clearly the policy of increased petrol pricing has this aim, but impacts unequally on rural consumers. To highlight the impact that policies may have between and within generations it is necessary to develop and undertake fairly sophisticated options analyses, but also to argue the claims of future generations alongside those of present consumers.

5.7 The second strand of sustainable development to assess is environmental protection and enhancement. There has been a growing recognition and understanding of the interdependency and links between social equity and measures to protect and enhance the environment. For example, many of the lowest income households have the worst insulated homes and the least capacity to pay for efficiency improvements. Consequently, those households are likely to be high-energy users. Not only is that in itself likely to accelerate climate change, but low income households are also likely to suffer most from crude market-based policies or economic instruments designed to reduce energy consumption.
5.8 Policy-makers must recognise the need to take account of social factors, and particularly the interests of different sectors and generations of society, when formulating policies for environmental improvement or protection. Such considerations highlight the question of whether consumers are more concerned with immediate issues, such as their short-term day-to-day living requirements, or whether they can be persuaded to accept higher costs now to enable the market to work more favourably in the interests of the environment or of future generations. A report by the National Consumer Council (NCC) in 1997 suggests that they can, noting “there is a very substantial section of the population (36 per cent in our survey) who care sufficiently about the environment to take positive steps...even though many of them believe this to be against their economic interest”\(^\text{18}\).

5.9 The Scottish Green Party received 84,024 votes in the Scottish Parliamentary elections in May 1999, leading to the election of a list MSP. This suggests that citizens do have an interest in environmental issues. However, although public attitude surveys in Scotland suggest that people are prepared to contribute to protecting the environment by paying more\(^\text{19}\), there is insufficient experience from implementing such policies to be certain that they would be acceptable in practice.

5.10 The government’s pursuit of sustainable development objectives is going to mean that most consumers will have to alter their behaviour and attitudes by acknowledging that self-interest can and should be served by a more equitable and sustainable society. However, it is essential that policy-makers and consumers fully understand the costs and benefits of changes which may result and that disadvantaged consumers are not further disadvantaged.

5.11 The third strand of sustainable development is **economic growth**. This is perhaps the most difficult component of sustainable development to address, particularly in terms of its compatibility with social equity and environmental protection. As Huby (1998) suggests “People who agree that social, environmental and economic sustainability is a worthy policy goal may be totally opposed in their view about whether growth is a solution or a cause of environmental problems”\(^\text{20}\).

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\(^{18}\) NCC (1997) Consumers and the Environment Can Consumers Save the Planet? London, September

\(^{19}\) Scottish Office Central Research Unit (1991) Public Attitudes to the Environment in Scotland, December.

\(^{20}\) Huby (1998) op.cit.
5.12 Much environmental damage and social inequity is caused by the failure of the market to take full account of the costs of economic activity. By including environmental and social costs within economic calculations, the market can be made to work more favourably. The effect will be particularly felt in the longer term, and that will inevitably mean higher costs for industry, which will be translated into higher costs for individual consumers. There is the real danger that this will impact most on particular groups or individuals, notably the disadvantaged in society. Policy-makers have to be alert to this, and seek to highlight and address these impacts.

5.13 However, it has been suggested by Satterthwaite (1997) that an expansion of economic activity is not essential to meet human needs and reduce poverty “The knowledge exists on how to develop more productive and sustainable agriculture, industrial production and settlement patterns”\(^{21}\). For example, many commercial, industrial and residential buildings and urban forms (such as out-of-town shopping centres) depend on high levels of energy use to operate, and have relied on low oil prices over the last forty years.

5.14 Satterthwaite (1997) argues that these and several other critical areas of consumption are not necessarily determined by consumer preference, but are imposed on consumers, who as individuals are locked into relatively high consumption patterns by physical infrastructure - e.g. energy, housing, transport and waste collection systems - over which they have little or no direct control. This is an area where a co-ordinated approach to sustainable development policy is appropriate.

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SECTION 6 MECHANISMS FOR WORKING TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

6.1 McLaren (1996) suggests there are “two broad categories of measures designed to bring human consumption within sustainability constraints”\textsuperscript{22}. This involves changing behaviour either to use resources more efficiently or use less resources. There are a number of broad policy mechanisms which are available to achieve this. These range from command and control type initiatives such as regulations of emissions to softer incentive-based approaches, such as public transport promotion. These approaches are not mutually exclusive, and should ideally all be used as part of a package of measures.

6.2 This report focuses on three policy mechanisms or tools available for changing behaviour and highlights conflicts with the consumer interest. These include:

- Better education and the provision of more specific information;
- Market-based policies (such as taxation or pricing policies);
- Promotion of community action.

These are examined below.

EDUCATION AND INFORMATION

6.3 As acknowledged by the ESDG, (the Advisory Group on Education for Sustainable Development) the educational process is one mechanism for promoting a change in attitude and a change in behaviour. However, changing attitude in itself is different from achieving a change in behaviour. For example, research has shown that although consumers may be aware of the impact of their transport use and be aware of its environmental impact, they may not necessarily change their behaviour, unless acceptable alternatives are available\textsuperscript{23}.


6.4 It is necessary to encourage and enable consumers to make informed decisions. Individual consumers often find it difficult to know, on a day-to-day basis, how to take account of the interests not only of the environment but also of society. Having a general interest in the principles of sustainable development at a global level is not difficult, but it is harder to be a ‘responsible’ consumer at the local level.

6.5 Wilhelmsson (1998) notes that a “common aim of both environmental and consumer law is that consumers receive sufficient and correct information so as to be able to make environmentally sound decisions”24. However, problems arise because consumers often do not have satisfactory information to make informed choices. Moreover, although there has been an increase in the amount of information available, it is often complicated and not easily understood by people who lack scientific or technical knowledge.

6.6 Even when environmental information is available for some products, it is often not passed on to consumers at the point of sale. Most consumers will therefore use other criteria (such as price) to make their choice. Consumers may not therefore act in the most sustainable way because they are not fully aware of the implications of their choices; because of the increased cost of a more sustainable option; or through lack of an acceptable, sustainable alternative.

6.7 Working towards sustainable development will rely to a large extent on individuals accepting responsibility for taking appropriate actions in their own lives, but they also need to know what those appropriate actions are, and the answer to this lies partly in education and information, including consumer education and information campaigns. As noted by Wilhelmsson (1998) “Education and information ... should be on the agendas of education and environmental authorities as well as consumer authorities and organisations"25. Additionally, consumers need to be aware of the shared language of sustainable development that industry and policy-makers use. In working towards sustainable development objectives, policies are required which aim to encourage change in consumer behaviour. This includes policies

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24 Wilhelmsson (1998) op.cit.
determined to influencing the environmental and social attitudes and behaviour of consumers, but also to focus on specific problems, such as choice and access to alternatives.

ECONOMIC INSTRUMENTS

6.8 In recent years there has been a growing enthusiasm for market-based policies or economic instruments. These are intended to encourage industry and individuals to pay appropriate environmental costs now, rather than pass those costs on into the future. Economic instruments, such as taxes, provide double dividends or benefits: the Treasury gains from those paying the tax and, at the same time, this leads to a change in behaviour, by producers and consumers having the incentive to reduce consumption and save money. The externalities are internalised and environmental benefits result.

6.9 However, importantly, concern has been expressed about the impact of economic instruments on current consumers. Therefore it is essential to examine how economic instruments, implemented under sustainable development objectives, will impact on particular groups or individuals, especially the most disadvantaged in society. Without specifically examining the impact of economic instruments on these groups, the principle of equity may be difficult to achieve. An example of this is the proposal to implement road-user charges, which would have little impact on those consumers who are able to pay, such as company car drivers, but could have a significant impact on the most disadvantaged consumers, especially if the policy is implemented before alternative provision (that is, improved public transport) is developed.

6.10 The SCC noted in its response to the White Paper, Travel Choice for Scotland (October, 1998) that “There is a role for economic instruments in influencing travel behaviour [away from the private car towards public transport] such as taxing companies’ car parking provision and increasing the price of parking. The receipts from such sources could be used to improve existing transport networks and services, including for example, cycleways and footpaths.”
also noted that “Tax hypothecation may be one way forward...”. The SCC recognises that economic instruments could have substantial social and political implications and stresses that these have to be considered for the impact on consumers before they are implemented.

6.11 Economic instruments can also act as incentives for industry to pursue technological ‘fixes’, or develop improvements that are less harmful to the environment. However, in the absence of information on what technology will be able to achieve in the future, policy-makers must act on information that currently exists.

6.12 The kind of economic incentives and regulatory structures that are needed to promote sustainable development goals are relatively easy to conceive. However, well-intended economic instruments employed to implement sustainable development objectives may have the unintended result of causing further disadvantage to those already facing disadvantage in society. They may ignore the ability to pay, and may be implemented before alternative, sustainable provision is made.

PROMOTING COMMUNITY ACTION

6.13 A third mechanism for changing consumer behaviour is to engage consumers directly in the process. As suggested by Helm (1991) “Not all problems require large-scale policy intervention. Often the solutions are much more local”26. Local Agenda 21 has been established as a core policy instrument for achieving sustainable development at the local level, that is by engaging people directly. Under the Rio Declaration, Agenda 21 suggests that sustainable development is a key mechanism to enhance local democracy, equity, and community involvement in decision-making. Such involvement and the importance placed on the ‘bottom-up’ approach to sustainable development by Local Agenda 21 reflects a desire to give full weight to the needs of all in society.

6.14 In work being undertaken at local community level, with input from the Scottish Community Diet Project27 and the Scottish Accessible

26 Helm (1991) op. cit.
27 The Scottish Community Diet Project (SCDP) was formed following recommendations in the Scottish Diet Action Plan to “promote and focus food related initiatives within low income communities, and seek to bring them within a strategic framework”. The SCDP mailing list is used to distribute a quarterly newsletter Fare Choice, and currently stands at over 700 entries. Sixty per cent of those distributed go to individuals, agencies and groups operating at community level and contact is further maintained through conferences, seminars, training events and study tours.
Information Forum\textsuperscript{28}, the SCC are involved in this process. The SCC’s Network Volunteers also make a valuable contribution to this\textsuperscript{29}. In the past, the Network has played an important role, particularly by highlighting issues, such as transport, as relevant to the work of the SCC. The SCC is committed to continuing this local input in its work.

6.15 Initiatives to promote Local Agenda 21 are also being undertaken, for example by Friends of the Earth Scotland, through their Environmental Justice Campaign, and Sustainable Scotland Community Development Project; and by Community Service Volunteers, through Centre 21, the Resource Centre for Sustainable Development. Forward Scotland is promoting several similar initiatives. Many local authorities have taken steps towards achieving sustainable development through Local Agenda 21, to draw together and strengthen their commitment to the environment, and to social and economic development, through the democratic process. This is complemented by the Scottish Local Agenda 21 Co-ordinators’ Network, a forum for Officers to share experience\textsuperscript{30}.

6.16 Involving local communities and individuals is a fundamental issue which policy-makers at all levels must address. Experiments in public participation have been developing in recent years, including citizens’ juries and panels, community meetings, focus groups and planning for real exercises. However, as suggested by Macnaghten and Pinfield (1999)\textsuperscript{31} it is currently unclear as to whether these types of experiments “…involving different patterns of engagement between civic society and the polity can renew the bonds of trust that appear so fragile”. They go on to say “For many there will remain scepticism about any engagement with local authority or central government run initiatives”.

6.17 Local government and other agencies must ensure that Local Agenda 21 initiatives fully involve all consumers. It is particularly important to include the most disadvantaged: the unemployed, low income groups, homeless people, people with disabilities and minority ethnic groups. These groups are often the least powerful in society and Selman and Parker (1997) argue that “Local participatory exercises have traditionally been the preserve of the

\textsuperscript{28} The Scottish Accessible Information Forum (SAIF) was set up, by the Scottish Office in 1996, to make information more accessible to carers and people with disabilities. SAIF believes that, rather than be forced to rely on others, disabled people should receive information directly, and in their preferred format. This will help them to make informed choices and live independent lives as equal members of society.

\textsuperscript{29} The Network Volunteers are currently made up of 82 volunteers from across Scotland who inform the SCC of issues of concern at the local level.

\textsuperscript{30} See for example, Scottish Office (1999) Changed Days: Local Agenda 21 in Scotland, February.

\textsuperscript{31} Macnaghten, P and Pinfield, G (1999) op.cit.
articulate and influential groups, neglecting youth and the disadvantaged sectors”\(^ {32} \). Moreover, local participatory exercises are frequently viewed with some cynicism by local people, as a formal process to be gone through before decisions made elsewhere, and to a different agenda, can be confirmed. The SCC therefore is concerned that local participatory exercises need to ensure that the process is transparent and that consumers are effectively represented and involved. The SCC has prepared a training pack *Stronger Voice*\(^ {33} \), which aims to enable consumers to be effective representatives, which can assist in this.

6.18 Activities undertaken as part of the Local Agenda 21 process have the potential to be effective catalysts to achieving sustainable development. However, this approach needs to be in conjunction with other policy mechanisms, such as economic instruments and complemented with the provision of education and information.

\(^ {32} \) Selman, P and Parker, J (1997) op.cit.

\(^ {33} \) Enquiries to Peter Stewart, National Consumer Council, 20 Grosvenor Gardens, London, SW1W 0DH, tel. 0171 730 3469.
SECTION 7 ADDRESSING CONFLICTS AND IMPACTS

7.1 Policies and programmes implemented in the pursuit of sustainable development objectives will require difficult decisions to be made by both policy-makers and consumers. The SCC suggests that there is a pressing requirement to devise a mechanism to examine how measures to achieve sustainable development will impact on particular groups or individual consumers in society and, in particular, attempt to identify and start to address how to resolve conflicts which will inevitably arise in working towards sustainable development.

7.2 It is suggested that such a mechanism should reinterpret seven basic consumer tests to take account of the implications of sustainable development. These tests are used by consumer organisations including the SCC to determine whether the policies and practice of both public sector organisations and the private sector are taking the consumer perspective into account. These are:

- **Access**: can consumers get the information, goods and services they need to be able to contribute to sustainable development, and at a price they can afford? Is access on an equitable basis?

- **Choice**: are sustainable alternatives available and identifiable?

- **Information**: is information available about the social, environmental and economic implications of consumer options, is it easy to understand and does it help consumers to make informed choices?

- **Safety**: are there demonstrable benefits for the safety of current and future generations, and the environment?

- **Redress**: is there a simple, cheap, quick and fair system for dealing with complaints and disputes about the sustainable development criteria applied to specific goods and services?

- **Representation**: are consumers’ views effectively represented?

- **Fairness**: does social equity result?
7.3 In considering the rights and interests of consumers, it is vital to recognise that consumers are not a homogeneous group and the impact of policies needs to be assessed to take this into account. Factors to consider include the implications that policies will have on differences that exist in terms of levels of mobility; gender differences; age differences; differences in ethnicity; educational ability; income levels; and perspectives from diverse geographical locations.

7.4 In May 1999 the Council of the SCC recognised that the pursuit of sustainable development can have significant impacts on consumers in Scotland, particularly those facing disadvantage. It agreed that if the SCC were to remain an effective advocate of the consumer interest, then the SCC had a key contribution to make. It acknowledged that, in particular, the SCC should recognise, highlight and seek to resolve conflicts which may arise, especially when they affect disadvantaged consumers. Council agreed that the capacity of the SCC in relation to sustainable development should be that of a skilled advisor in the consumer interest, and accordingly resources were committed to further this end.
SECTION 8    CONCLUSION

8.1 This report began by reviewing the significance of the environmental hazards facing nations today, and the response by governments to begin to tackle these. It noted that sustainable development has been promoted as a way of addressing these problems and that the objective of sustainable development is to reconcile the conflicts that exist between economic, social and environmental goals to ensure that the needs of both current and future generations are met.

8.2 Political support exists for sustainable development at a global and UK level, and a specific Scottish agenda can be seen, particularly in the progressing of the Scottish Parliament. Work by the AGSD prior to the establishment of the Scottish Parliament stressed the importance of the integration of policy agendas, and that the principle of sustainable development should be adopted at the heart of policy-making and as the basis of all public and private sector policies.

8.3 The governing parties in the Scottish Parliament have subsequently embraced sustainable development, noting that they will seek to integrate sustainable development principles into all government policies. The success of this, however, remains to be seen.

8.4 What can therefore be seen is that the interest shown by policy-makers in sustainable development is destined to continue in the future and the move towards sustainable development is likely to be a major component of future public policy-making in Scotland.

8.5 Pursuing sustainable development objectives is clearly about the allocation of scarce resources and as such will have impacts on different groups in society. However, crucial to this debate is that people may recognise the overall benefits of promoting sustainable development as citizens, but as consumers may be individually and possibly negatively affected by such a policy approach. The oft-quoted phrase ‘Think globally, act locally’ reflects this dual role of the individual.
8.6 Consumers are therefore critical in contributing to sustainable development, but often their voice is weak in comparison with both public and private sector agencies. This means that the voice of the consumer must be sought in order to promote sustainable development objectives.

8.7 The pursuit of sustainable development can therefore lead to conflicts between the often short-term interests of consumers and the arguably longer-term interests of citizens and it is argued that the essence of sustainable development is to attempt to resolve these conflicts in order to drive forward an agenda which promotes social equity, environmental protection and enhancement and economic growth.

8.8 It is therefore argued that in order to work towards sustainable development these three aspects must be addressed. It is firstly important to address social equity not only for future generations but for those in society who are already disadvantaged - the unemployed, low income groups, homeless people, people with disabilities and minority ethnic groups.

8.9 Secondly, there are strong links between social equity and environmental protection particularly in terms of the effects of environmental policies on disadvantaged groups. It is the case that the pursuit of sustainable development will ultimately mean that consumers will have to alter their behaviour, to acknowledge that self-interest and environmental protection may not be fully compatible. Both policy-makers and consumers must be aware of the costs to ensure that disadvantaged consumers are not further disadvantaged.

8.10 Thirdly, it is argued that much environmental damage and social inequity is a result of economic growth with the market failing to take into account the true costs of economic activity and that by including social and environmental costs within economic calculations, the market can be made to work more favourably for the citizen. However this can mean higher costs for the individual. Again, such costs must be closely considered, particularly in terms of the impact on disadvantaged consumers.
8.11 Behavioural change is suggested as fundamental to the success of sustainable development and this report highlights three key tools which policy-makers can employ to bring about a change in behaviour: education and information; economic instruments and the promotion of community action.

8.12 The education process in its widest sense is a key mechanism, including ensuring consumers have adequate information to make informed decisions. At present, however, this is often not available. A variety of economic instruments, such as taxation, are also important mechanisms in working towards sustainable development objectives. However, there is a real concern that such instruments must be assessed for negative impacts on disadvantaged groups. Community action, and Local Agenda 21 in particular, is the third key mechanism identified. This important approach involves engaging people directly in sustainable development at the local level and there is a range of initiatives taking place throughout Scotland. This report emphasises the real need to ensure the involvement of all groups in society in such exercises and suggests this will often require a rebuilding of trust in participation and local democracy.

8.13 Finally, it is concluded that the promotion of sustainable development will require difficult decisions by policy-makers and individual consumers. It is essential that the implications of such decisions are made on the basis of assessing the impacts on consumers, and particularly those who face disadvantage.

8.14 It is therefore suggested that in promoting sustainable development, public and private bodies should consider the interests of the consumer in relation to seven consumer tests, namely access, choice, information, safety, redress, representation and fairness. In doing this, however, there must be a recognition that consumers are not homogeneous and that the implications for different groups in society must be considered.
RECOMMENDATIONS

A number of recommendations are therefore suggested:

Recommendation 1
The Scottish Parliament must ensure that legislation and policy initiatives promoted under sustainable development objectives take account of the legitimate interests of consumers.

Recommendation 2
The assessment of sustainable development implications of a Bill introduced by a member of the Scottish Executive (as required by Parliamentary Standing Orders), must include an assessment of the impact on consumers, particularly the most disadvantaged.

Recommendation 3
The Standing Orders of the Scottish Parliament should be amended to include the provision that all Bills introduced in the Parliament by either individuals, Members or Committees should be accompanied by a written statement which includes “an assessment of the effects, if any, of the Bill on equal opportunities, human rights, island communities, local government and sustainable development”. At present only Executive Bills require this information.

Recommendation 4
In developing policies to promote social inclusion full account must be taken of the possible negative impact on excluded groups of policies to promote sustainable development.

Recommendation 5
In promoting sustainable development policies and strategies an attempt must be made to quantify and make transparent the short and long-term costs and benefits in order that consumers are able to make informed choices, both as consumers and citizens.

Recommendation 6
There is a need for enhanced public education and awareness of sustainable development issues, including the potential conflicts that can arise. This must be undertaken through formal and informal education and information initiatives.
**Recommendation 7**
Local government and other agencies working at the local level must take account of the interests of consumers in formulating Local Agenda 21 and strategies relating to promoting community action. For this to happen, there is a need to build consultation processes which are meaningful, transparent and which effectively represent and involve all consumers.

**Recommendation 8**
Policy-makers at all levels should ensure that the sustainable development debate is set out in plain language that all consumers will understand.

**Recommendation 9**
Consumers should recognise that they have a role to play in the sustainable development debate and should be enabled and encouraged to make choices that are compatible with the objectives of sustainable development. Consumers should commit themselves to this. However, access to meaningful information and to acceptable alternatives is essential, and government and industry should commit themselves to providing this.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


APPENDIX 1  *Scotland the Sustainable?* - 10 action points for the Scottish Parliament

Extract from the final report of the Advisory Group on Sustainable Development

1 **Committed leadership**: The Parliament and Scottish Executive should demonstrate committed leadership by putting sustainable development at the heart of their policy-making, to ensure the social inclusion of all Scots, and to ensure economic vitality and environmental responsibility.

2 **Sustainable Development Commission**: The Scottish Executive should set up a statutory ‘Sustainable Development Commission’ to focus sustainable development activity, which would work with a wide range of partners in the private, voluntary and public sectors.

3 **Public debate**: The Scottish Executive should initiate a ‘raising the debate’ strategy, bringing to the table business leaders, representatives of local government, NGOs and academics. The strategy should also draw in the media and ensure that the wider community knows about successes and experiments.

4 **Education**: The Scottish Executive should ensure that education in all its manifestations - formal and informal, and for all sectors and ages - is incorporated in all aspects of sustainable development. Equally, sustainable development should be embedded in the education system.

5 **International dimension**: Scotland should contribute to thinking and activities that go well beyond its own boundaries. Decisions made in Scotland on natural resource use have an impact on the life and environment of other communities in all parts of the world.

6 **Aims, objectives, targets and timescales**: Sustainable development indicators should become as regular a part of public monitoring information as the unemployment figures.

7 **Proactive approach to the built environment**: The Scottish Executive should make a significant difference to the health of the nation, to energy savings and fuel poverty by requiring energy ratings for all Scottish homes and businesses within a ten-year period.
8 **Priority action**: The Scottish Executive should identify early action programmes that would improve sustainability in both geographical and policy areas.

9 **Strengthen the planning system**: The Scottish Executive should build on the sound foundations for sustainable development offered by the National Planning Policy Guidance (NPPG) system, which should be consistently applied.

10 **Support innovation**: The Scottish Executive, in consultation with the voluntary and private sectors, should encourage new ideas and experiments in sustainable development that could lead to mainstream implementation.
APPENDIX 2      The Learning Process - 10 action points for the Scottish Parliament

Extract from the final report of the Advisory Group on Education for Sustainable Development

1 Leadership: The Parliament and Scottish Executive should establish a leadership programme on sustainable development.

2 Integration: Education should be integrated into the structures set up by the Parliament and Executive to promote sustainable development.

3 Departmental responsibility: The Department of the Executive dealing with education should be given explicit responsibilities for promoting education for sustainable development within education and more widely.

4 Partnership: The Executive should establish a voluntary partnership of major public education bodies to promote complementary action on education for sustainable development within the education sector.

5 Debate: The Parliament and Executive should promote a wide-ranging debate on the role and purposes of education for the future, as part of a wider debate on sustainable development.

6 Working links: The Parliament and Executive should build effective working links within the UK and internationally to learn, and share experience, about education for sustainable development.

7 Policy directions: The Executive should use its powers and opportunities of policy direction, formal guidance and setting conditions of public funding to promote education for sustainable development.

8 Improved access to information: The Executive should ensure improved access to information and examples of good practice on education for sustainable development.

9 Good practice: The Executive should initiate a programme of projects and initiatives to build a body of documented good practice on education for sustainable development.

10 Local Agenda 21: The Executive should ensure that education is included in the development of Local Agenda 21.