Towards a new pattern of strategy formation in the public sector:

First experiences with National Strategies for Sustainable Development in Europe

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Abstract

Despite lengthy debates about planning versus incrementalism, there is still no consensus on what strategy processes should look like in the public sector. In the environmental policy field, the decline of formal policy planning was nonetheless followed by a surge of National Strategies for Sustainable Development (NSSDs). After summarizing this development, this paper highlights some key characteristics, good practices and weaknesses of NSSDs regarding participation, horizontal and vertical policy integration, policy implementation and monitoring. It is shown that NSSDs go well beyond former environmental policy plans, not just in terms of their thematic scope, but foremost because they resemble evolving rather than static strategy processes. Finally, the paper explores what model of strategy formation may be adequate for the public sector in general. Based on the empirical evidence presented here and by drawing on strategic management theory, Strategic Public Management is proposed as an ideal pattern for strategy formation, which reconciles planning and incremental learning.

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1 Strategy form(ul)ation in the theoretical debate

The means and ends of strategies in the public as well as in the private sector have been the subject of intense debates for decades. Nevertheless, there is still no consensus on what strategy processes should look like. Henry Mintzberg et al (1998), for example, distinguish between 10 strategy schools. Two of these ten schools are the planning school and the learning school. Since these two schools played a prominent role in the theoretical debate and are at the forefront of application in the public sector, they are the focal point of this paper.

According to the so-called "planning school", complex organizations must plan formally (i) to coordinate their activities, (ii) to ensure that the future is taken into account in today's actions, (iii) to be rational, and (iv) to control the use of resources. Having formal plans or strategies implies that an organization ought to follow a detailed prescription of objectives or actions over a certain period. In the context of public policy, planning may also have the symbolic function of demonstrating political will to certain special interest groups. However, the planning school assumes that organizations can improve their performance when they do not rely on informal ad hoc deliberations and decisions, but streamline their activities according to a documented plan or strategy in a systematic and predictable way (Mintzberg, 1994, 6-21; Brews & Hunt, 1999; Williams, 2002). In this sense, traditional policy planning "is imbued with ideas that implementation is about getting people to do what they are told, and keeping control over a sequence of stages in a system" (Parsons, 1995, 466). Although this kind of formal top-down planning, which tries to increase predictability at the expense of empowerment and flexibility (Mintzberg, 1994, 173ff) saw its peak in the 1960s and 70s (Mintzberg et al, 1998, 353; Szulanski & Amin, 2001), it was prevalent in various policy fields into the 1990s (see section 2).

With Henry Mintzberg (1994), the counter-position to the planning school can be described as informal and emergent strategy formation, which does not necessarily imply the formulation of a document. In the context of public policy, this so-called "learning school" goes back to Charles Lindblom's (1959) notion of "incrementalism". Lindblom and Mintzberg both advocate in at least some of their writings that strategies evolve rather through informal and mutual adjustments among a variety of actors than through formalized planning procedures, conducted by distinctive planners. Against this theoretical background, Mintzberg (1994, 227-321) charges the planning school with the fallacies of predetermination, detachment and formalization. These three "fundamental fallacies" can be summarized as follows: (i) Planning builds on a predetermination of future developments and discontinuities, which are highly uncertain and therefore not predictable. (ii) Since, according to the planning school, those who have developed plans are rarely the same people that implement them, planning is detached from implementation in terms of both the time line and the key actors involved. (iii) The most fundamental fallacy of the planning school is the assumption that strategy formation can be accomplished by formalizing the process through distinct planners, who are isolated from daily routines. The impossible predetermination of uncertainties and discontinuities, the detachment of thinking and acting, and the suppression of creative thinking through formalized planning leads Mintzberg (1994) to the conclusion that "strategic planning" is an oxymoron. He asserts that strategy formation cannot be planned in the way the planning school assumes but instead emerges out of collective and incremental learning processes.

Obviously, the planning and the learning schools represent two extreme standpoints in the debate on strategy processes. The space between the two extremes is the continuum upon which the subject of this paper unfolds. National Strategies for Sustainable Development (NSSDs) are one example of a variety of "third way mixtures", which build neither solely on formal planning nor on pure incrementalism. NSSDs aim at a "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (WCED 1987, 43) in a systematic yet flexible way. This implies a close integration of economic, social and environmental policies.

In section 2, we show how this new type of strategy formation emerged out of traditional policy planning. In section 3, we describe common key characteristics and good practices of NSSD processes in Europe. Since we cover about 20 countries[1], we can only scratch the surface and give some direction for subsequent in-depth analyses. Hence, section 4 supplements this analysis by summarizing weaknesses and difficulties of NSSD processes.[2] In Section 5, we finally explore Strategic Public Management as a hybrid pattern of strategy formation.

2 From Environmental Policy Plans to Strategies for Sustainable Development

Although environmental policy planning has been an issue ever since environmental policy became an independent policy field in the early 1970s, actual policy plans did not get off the ground on a broad basis until the so-called Brundtland Report (WCED, 1988) was published in 1987 (Jänicke, 1997; Jänicke et al, 1997; Jänicke, 2000). Since that year, more than 100 countries have passed some kind of environmental planning document(s) (UNDESA, 2001a, 25f).[3] However, most environmental policy plans "have been treated at best as checklists, or as encyclopedias of ideas, to turn to whenever the occasional policy space, or financial opportunity, emerges to do something 'green'" (Dalal-Clayton & Bass, 2002, 7). In other words, environmental policy plans, both in developed and in developing countries, often ended up gathering dust on shelves, having very limited policy relevance (IIED, UNDP & UKDFID, 2002, 1; Dalal-Clayton & Bass, 2000, 20; Meadowcroft, 2000, 122; Hoering, 2001, 1).

As Hajer (1995) and Liefferink (1997) have noted, a rare exception to this rule was the Netherlands with its "Indicative Multi-year Program for the Environment" (Ministry of Housing, Physical Planning and Environment, 1985) and the subsequent National Environmental Policy Plan/NEPP (Ministry of Housing, Physical Planning and Environment, 1989). These planning efforts turned out to be a significant step in the protracted shift from a "command-and-control approach" in environmental policy to what became known as "ecological modernization" (Hajer, 1995) or "environmental policy integration"/EPI (Lenschow, 2002) in the course of the 1990s.

The next milestone on the way to NSSDs was Agenda 21. Among the numerous sets of policy actions asked for in the UNCED (1992) document is one about "Integrating Environment and Development in Decision-Making" (Chapter 8) by adopting "a national strategy for sustainable development", which "should build upon and harmonize the various sectoral economic, social, and environmental policies and plans that are operating in the country" (Chapter 8.7). By specifying the purpose of NSSDs, the next sentence clearly refers to the Brundtland Report's (WCED, 1987) classic definition of sustainable development (SD):

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[1] For a list of the countries covered and the sources of information not listed in the references (i.e. NSSD documents, surveys and interviews), go to [EPC website].

[2] Sections 3 and 4 benefited extensively from our involvement in the Workshop "Sustainable Development in an Enlarged Union – Linking National Strategies and Strengthening European Coherence" as consultants, which took place in Vienna in late April 2003. It facilitated an exchange of information among more than 70 NSSD experts from 23 European countries, most of them employed by their country's Environmental Ministry as coordinators of the country's NSSD. For a documentation of the Workshop, see Steurer & Martinuzzi (2003a, b, c).

[3] Technically, environmental policy documents developed by Western countries, such as the Dutch "National Environmental Policy Plan (Ministry of Housing, Physical Planning and Environment, 1989), have to be distinguished from those developed under the supervision of the World Bank in borrower countries, usually referred to as National Environmental Action Plans (NEAPs), and those developed under the supervision of the International Union for Nature Conservation (IUCN; now World Conservation Union), known as National Conservation Strategies (NCSs). When we speak of environmental policy plans we refer to all three types of planning processes because they share most of the features of traditional policy planning briefly outlined above.

Country-driven NSSDs should "ensure socially responsible economic development while protecting the resource base and the environment for the benefit of future generations" (UNCED, 1992, paragraph 8.7).

As Agenda 21 contains no submission date, only a few countries developed an NSSD in the subsequent years. Instead, several countries either already had or were working on an environmental policy plan and assumed that this effort was adequate. However, since most environmental plans facilitate the old pattern of more or less top-down policy planning, they do not satisfy what the UN calls for, namely "a coordinated, participatory, iterative and cyclical process of thoughts and actions to achieve economic, environmental and social objectives in a balanced and integrated manner" (UNDESA, 2001b, paragraph 4). Thus, in June 1997 the so-called Rio +5 summit agreed that "By the year 2002, the formulation and elaboration of national strategies for sustainable development that reflect the contributions and responsibilities of all interested parties should be completed in all countries" (UNGASS, 1997, paragraph 24).

Since then two major developments occurred. First, the number of NSSDs has increased considerably (for Europe, see section 3). Numerous countries developed their strategy in preparation for the 2002 World Summit for SD in Johannesburg (UNDESA, 2001a, b). Second, because the UN kept the guidelines for NSSD processes general in order to leave enough room for country specifics, many countries were struggling with the actual meaning of chapter 8 in Agenda 21. In response, together with the OECD the UN further explained the NSSD processes. All of the guidelines taken together characterize NSSDs as follows (UNCED, 1992, chapter 8A; UNDESA, 2001a, b; OECD-DAC, 2001, 18f; IIED, 2002, 33-36):

The NSSDs' content should (i) be based on sound analyses of economic and environmental data, (ii) provide a government-independent long-term vision, (iii) build upon existing policies, strategies and plans, (iv) integrate economic, social and environmental policies and (v) provide clear, achievable objectives. NSSD processes should (i) be transparent, (ii) build on trustful partnerships and "the widest possible participation" (UNCED, 1992), (iii) link national and local levels, e.g. by decentralizing detailed planning, implementation and monitoring (iv) incorporate various assessment mechanisms, (v) be flexible, (vi) be backed by adequate institutional capacities and by high-level political commitment, (vii) provide clear schedules of implementation and (viii) come up with priorities and objectives to be followed in the budgeting process.

In short, NSSDs are supposed to follow a non-linear and flexible strategic approach with a strong emphasis on policy integration, implementation and learning. Since these guidelines characterize an ambitious ideal NSSD rather than a minimalist version, it is no surprise that hardly any strategy process satisfies them all (see sections 3 and 4). However, to be counted as a NSSD we assert that a strategy process must aim at the long-term integration of economic, social and environmental policies by providing clear objectives and by facilitating one or more tangible integrative mechanisms such as inter-ministerial collaboration or cross-sectoral monitoring/evaluation. Let us now fill this theoretical framework with substance by focusing on key characteristics and good practices of NSSD processes in Europe.

3 Key characteristics and good practices of NSSD processes in Europe

Based on a survey covering 19 Western and Central European countries, about 30 telephone interviews and a 2-day workshop with NSSD coordinators from 23 European countries, this section touches on eight important characteristics of NSSD processes and related governance changes.[4] The characteristics addressed are EU context and timing, participation, NSSD content features, horizontal and vertical policy integration, and assessment mechanisms.

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[4] For information on the countries covered, NSSD documents, the survey and the interviews, go to [EPC-website].

3.1   EU context and timing

Against the international background described above, a few European countries such as Ireland, Finland and the UK had already developed their SSD in the 1990s. Between the Gothenburg European Council in June 2001, which invited "Member States to draw up their own national sustainable development strategies" (European Council, 2001, 4), and the Johannesburg WSSD in autumn 2002, a considerable number of EU member and (back then) accession countries followed suite.

At the Gothenburg European Council, the European Commission (2001a) also presented its communication "A sustainable Europe for a better world" as the proposal for "a European Union Strategy for Sustainable Development". Since some member states objected to parts of the delayed response to the request of the Helsinki European Council in December 1999, the Council members "welcomed" the draft but did not approve it as official strategy. Instead, they included 14 modestly ambitious paragraphs on SD in Europe in the Presidency Conclusions (European Council, 2001), which can be regarded as temporary EU-SSD.[5]

3.2   Strategy formulation

The typical pattern of strategy formulation can be described as follows: In most countries, the Environmental Ministry was commissioned to develop the NSSD. As the actual elaboration process was often in the hands of public servants, they decided on the details of the formulation process. Virtually all countries tried to engage the public in the elaboration process (e.g., through public dialogues or internet platforms), but most of them were disappointed by the modest public involvement. However, in most countries social partners and NGOs did participate early on, often in newly established National Councils for Sustainable Development (NCSDs). Overall, strategy coordinators emphasized that the time constraints imposed by governments were a serious restriction to public consultation and participation. Thus, the formulation of the NSSDs was often more an exclusive sprint than a marathon of the masses. Although enough time is certainly no sufficient condition for participation, the two year long development of the Slovakian NSSD suggests that, together with other factors like operational sensitivity and credibility, it is a necessary one (Steurer & Martinuzzi, 2003c, 13; see also Vallejo & Hauselmann, 2004, 6).

After the administrators in charge of the strategy formulation process sub-mitted a draft strategy to decision makers, it underwent a political adaptation process, which sometimes resulted in considerable changes. Finally, governments approved the adapted strategy as their official NSSD (for Austria, see Martinuzzi & Steurer, 2003). Countries in which governments could not decide on a draft strategy (like in the Czech Republic), or where governments changed (like in France and Hungary), had to re-start the process of strategy formulation. Yet, these countries bring out what is true for most NSSDs in Europe: They are political documents of a particular government rather than societal consensus or vision papers. Since there seems to be an insurmountable trade-off between the guidelines asking for specific and government-independent NSSDs, we suggest that a distinct societal consensus paper could serve as the basis for a govern-mental strategy (Martinuzzi & Steurer, 2003, 279f).

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[5]   Since the Gothenburg European Council assigned the General Affairs Council to coordinate the "horizontal preparation of the Sustainable Development Strategy" (European Council, 2001, 4), the emphasis is on the short-term. However, the status of the EU-SSD is contested. For an identical interpretation, see Jänicke & Jörgens (2004, 310). For a different reading, see Dalal-Clayton (2004, 14f) and European Commission (2004).

3.3   Content of NSSDs

As the European Commission's (2004, 11-14) Staff Working Document on NSSDs lines out, strategy documents differ widely in various respects. Regarding the approach taken, some documents communicate a bold vision with a few priorities on some dozen pages, while others come up with a bulk of (often vague) intentions and objectives on more than 200 pages. In order to increase policy coherence, countries clustered the issues dealt with in the strategy documents in broad categories (such as "quality of life or "living space" in Austria), around key actors (such as citizens, regions or economic actors in France), or alongside the three dimensions of SD. Regarding the aspects covered, the "old" EU members France, Belgium and the Netherlands add "governance" while the "new" members Slovakia, Slovenia, Poland and the Czech Republic add "culture" as fourth dimension of SD.

On the other hand, most NSSDs show at least some basic content similarities (which are not necessarily positive): First, although NSSDs cover all three dimensions of SD, "the interlinkage between social, economic and environmental dimensions […] is usually weak" (European Commission, 2004, 17). Second, most NSSDs address sectoral issues such as energy, transport and agriculture, cross-sectoral issues such as poverty, social cohesion, climate change and bio-diversity, and territorial issues such as spatial planning and rural development. However, strategy documents "often lack sufficient prioritisation of issues" (European Commission, 2004, 17). Third, economic, social and environmental sets of indicators, which serve as benchmarks for an obligatory monitoring of the NSSD processes (see the point on monitoring and evaluation below), are either explicitly stated in the strategies themselves or were added later on.

Overall, as experiences with environmental policy plans have shown, policy documents alone, no matter how ambitious their objectives and projected measures may be, are not sufficient for effective policies but need to be accompanied by working implementation mechanisms (Jänicke & Jörgens, 1998; IIED, 2002). Consequently, respective structures and mechanisms are the focal point of the remainder of this paper.

3.4   Horizontal and "cross-horizontal" policy integration

The quest for horizontal policy integration is anything but new (Peters, 1998, 295). In 1987, the Brundtland Report had already recognized that the challenges of SD are handled by institutions that tend to be "independent, fragmented and working to relatively narrow mandates with closed decision-making processes" (WCED, 1987, 310). Subsequently, the Rio +5 "Programme for the further implementation of Agenda 21" (UNGASS, 1997, 6) stated that "Achieving sustainable development cannot be done without greater integration at all policy-making levels and at operational levels, including the lowest administrative levels possible". In other words, horizontal integration requires some kind of continuous collaboration between a government's ministries, which, in turn, relies on concrete structures or mechanisms. Although the UN and OECD guidelines for NSSD processes are rather vague in this respect, experiences so far show that related governance changes materialize in both the political and in the administrative branches of government. If these two forms of horizontal integration go hand in hand (i.e. if policy integration takes place between the political and the administrative branches of government across ministries) we speak of "cross-horizontal" integration.

Political branch of government: In order to increase the coherence of major political decisions across policy fields, some sort of institutionalized collaboration is required in the political branch. So far, only a few countries have an effective structure of this kind in place. In Germany the "Committee of State Secretaries for Sustainable Development", also referred to as the "Green Cabinet", brings together high-level politicians from 10 ministries and is chaired by the Minister of State from the Federal Chancellery. In 2001, the newly-established Green Cabinet developed the SSD "Perspectives for Germany" and is now the (often overworked) driving force behind the implementation process (Steurer & Martinuzzi, 2003c, 8; Jänicke et al,

2003, 8, 16). In the UK the Ministerial Cabinet Sub-Committee of 'Green Ministers' resulted from an upgrading of an existing informal committee in the year 2001. "The committee, called ENV(G), considers the impact of Government policies on sustainable development, and seeks to improve the performance of Government departments in contributing to sustainable development" (quote from the survey, p. 53). Finally, while NCSDs in most countries are set up as advisory bodies that provide civil society a platform to participate, the equivalent organisations in Finland, Lithuania, Latvia and the Slovak Republic (all chaired either by the Prime Minister or the Deputy Prime Minister) also fulfil co-ordinating functions in the political branch of government (for general information on NCSDs, see http://www.ncsdnetwork.org/).

Although most of the inter-ministerial bodies described above emerged in the course of NSSD processes, the latter are not the only link in the causal chain. Especially the two examples of "Green Cabinets" in Germany and the UK suggest that the single most important condition for high-level political co-ordination is political will and commitment. In this respect, the interviews showed that the NSSD coordinators of Germany and the UK are rare examples of administrators who are satisfied with their government's commitment to SD (see also section 4).

Administrative branch of government: While horizontal integration mechanisms are rare in the political branch of government, most EU members have put one in place in the administrative branch – again typically in the course of their NSSD process. According to NSSD coordinators, the inter-ministerial administrative co-ordination turned out to be one of the most important benefits of the strategy processes so far. As NSSDs go well beyond the environmental policy field, already their formulation requires inter-ministerial collaboration. In a way, the formulation processes established new pathways across ministerial interfaces, which are ready to use in the strategy cycles to come.

The organisational achievements in horizontal policy integration described above are one reason for why some coordinators explicitly emphasize that such strategy processes are important, no matter how well their explicit objectives are met. This experience is perfectly in line with strategic management theory. Henry Mintzberg (1994, 352), for example, stresses that communication and coordination are not side effects of strategic management and planning, "but the essential reasons to engage in it".

How horizontal policy integration depends on tangible governance structures can be illustrated with the Greek NSSD experience. As one of the few countries with no formal mechanism of horizontal integration in place, its strategy coordinator indicated "insufficient co-ordination among Ministries" as one of three major obstacles and "integration has not advanced sufficiently" as one of three key lessons learned in the course of the Greek NSSD process (quotes from the survey, p 24).

Since only a few countries (for example the UK and Finland) have effective structures of horizontal integration in place in the political as well as administrative branches, most governments apparently assume that one such mechanism is sufficient. However, as both the political and the administrative branches of government play a vital role in policy-making (Hansen & Ejersbo, 2002; Page, 2003), integrative mechanisms in just one of the two branches are hardly able to substitute for the lack of collaboration in the other. The first experiences with NSSD processes in Europe suggest that inter-ministerial collaboration ought to go hand-in-hand in both the political and the administrative branches of government in order to be effective. In other words, horizontal integration always ought to be cross-horizontal.

3.5   Vertical policy integration

The concept of SD transcends not only the competencies of ministries or departments within a government, but also different levels of jurisdictions, from the European Commission to city halls. No matter how centralized a country is organized, certain issues of SD (like spatial planning or transportation) always cut across vertical layers of government. Thus, some kind of a formal collaboration ought to be in place not only (cross-)horizontally, but also vertically. How-ever, in the interviews as well as in the survey we found

that while horizontal integration is well on its way (at least in the administrative branch of government), vertical integration is often either weak or nonexistent. Asked about what worked well in a country's NSSD process, 7 out of 18 respondents of the survey indicated horizontal collaboration and only one (Switzerland) indicated vertical collaboration as one of three points. This of course does not mean that the concept of SD is ignored by regional or municipal authorities. The lack of vertical policy integration implies that these activities are not systematically synchronized with the targets and activities of higher political authorities. Consequently, they are also not effectively coordinated with each other.[6]

However, such a lack of vertical integration is not true for all countries: Austria, Finland, Germany (Jänicke et al, 2003, 17, 25), and the UK, for example, established some sort of collaboration between the federal government and sub-national authorities. Switzerland goes even further with the so-called Sustainable Development Forum, a network made up by the Swiss Federal Government, all Cantons, and larger cities. The Forum was established in 2001 in order to support SD at the cantonal and municipal level in line with the Federal Council's NSSD. In addition to an exchange of information and of good practices, it works towards the adoption of common targets and the coordination of common projects. The unique feature of the Forum is the mutual, non-hierarchical leadership by the Conference of Cantonal Governments and the Swiss Towns Association (Steurer & Martinuzzi, 2003c, 14). As the example shows, vertical integration structures can further the cause of coherence not just regarding particular targets and actions. According to the Swiss NSSD coordinator, a couple of very active Cantons and cities who wanted to share their experiences drove the founding of the Forum. Together with the Confederation, these advocates of SD were able to generate a kind of supply-push vigour, which finally forced less active Cantons and cities to participate as well. Consequently, the latter saw themselves confronted with an agenda set mainly by the active members of the Forum (Steurer & Martinuzzi, 2003c, 14). In other words, because vertical (and perhaps also horizontal) integration mechanisms provide a stage for the most active entrepreneurs, they can also lead to a stronger political will and commitment. Again, the mechanisms of vertical integration described here were established in the early phases of the countries' strategy processes.

3.6   Implementation mechanisms

As briefly mentioned in the introduction, according to Mintzberg (1994, 254-293) one of the three fallacies of traditional policy planning is the detachment of strategy formulation and implementation, the separation of thinking and action. Whereas for most NSSD processes this detachment is true in chronological terms, it is not necessarily true regarding the responsible actors. As we have shown for Austria in detail (Martinuzzi & Steurer, 2003), public servants play a key role in both the formulation and the implementation of a strategy. This finding is in line with Hansen and Ejersbo's (2002, 734) "Dichotomy-Duality-Model", which summarizes the relationship between politicians and administrators: "Administrators are to a very large extent involved in the formulation of visions and objectives at the political level. Their involvement is not limited to choosing means but also involves ends. In other words, administrators play an active role at the political level" (see also Page, 2003).

Since strategy processes often show a close involvement of administrators in the ideal-type "politicians' sphere" of strategy and policy making, the challenge of implementation is not that formulators and implementers are detached from each other. Instead, the key challenge is that politicians and administrators rep-resent two detached groups, dealing both with the formulation and the implementation of policies in distinct ways (see also Page, 2003, 673). Irrespective of their actual working relationship, according to Hansen and Ejersbo (2002, 738ff) they are detached at least in terms of the rationale they employ. Politicians on the one hand approach particular issues case-by-case and focus on competing

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[6]   Although, for example, urban planning is a municipal competency and collaboration mechanisms between the federal government and municipalities are generally weak, some NSSDs nevertheless state a reduction in soil sealing as target. If this target is meant to be more than symbolic, some sort of effective vertical coordination between the two levels of political authority is inevitable.

interests involved. By utilizing such an "inductive logic of action", they at times ignore not only existing strategies but also personal commitments or treaties. Administrators on the other hand prefer to deal with particular issues deductively by referring to general laws or guidelines. In the context of NSSD processes, this "Logic of Disharmony" (Hansen & Ejersbo, 2002) between politicians and administrators implies that while administrators regard NSSDs as important guidance for policy making, politicians let them proceed accordingly within their considerable yet limited scope, but will probably not care much about the strategy documents themselves.

In this sense, cross-horizontal policy integration as defined above is not only about cross-sectoral policy integration, but also about managing the "Logic of Disharmony". This sets the stage for answering the question of why administrators agree that concrete implementation mechanisms are key elements of effective strategy processes. Innovations in this respect can be found in the UK and in Austria. In the UK, the Sustainable Development Unit (SDU) of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs' (Defra) established a close collaboration with the HM Treasury (the UK Finance Ministry). In 2002, Defra's SDU worked for the first time with HM Treasury to make SD a key theme of the bi-annual spending round by requiring other Departments to submit and discuss reports in which they explained how their policy objectives relate to SD (OECD, 2001, 109; Steurer & Martinuzzi, 2003c, 16). In other countries, this type of "cross-portfolio budgeting" (Cabinet Office, 2000, 50, 81f) is often not an option because, according to NSSD coordinators, Finance Ministries are among the most reluctant Ministries when it comes to SD (see also section 4).

In Austria, the NSSD itself specifies that its implementation has to be organized in work program cycles. The purpose of the work programs is to systematically break down the rather general objectives of the strategy into concrete measures. The creation of the work programs is a continuous process, in which the members of the inter-ministerial Committee for Sustainable Development are encouraged to file into a database projects and measures in line with the NSSD's objectives. At the end of each cycle, the Committee derives the consolidated work program from the database and submits it to the Council of Ministers for approval. The cyclical programs not only make up for the lack of target and measure details in the Austrian SSD itself, but they also help to organize the implementation process cross-horizontally (Martinuzzi & Steurer, 2003; Steurer & Martinuzzi, 2003c, 6).

3.7   Participation in implementation

Participation of some kind is not only widespread in the strategy-formulation phase, but also in the implementation phase. In accordance with UN and OECD recommendations, all EU members established an NCSD or an equivalent institution, which typically brings together business leaders, academics, and NGO representatives.[7] Except for some Eastern European countries in which NCSDs also serve as horizontal integration bodies on the governmental level, most councils fulfil a commentary or advisory role only. In some countries, it is also up to the NCSD to monitor or evaluate the NSSD process on a regular basis (see below). As some of the councils or equivalent institutions were established years ago, they can be regarded as neither a result of NSSD processes nor a new form of governance for SD. However, with its National Sustainability Partnership "Comhar", Ireland, for example, tries to go beyond conventional participation. The Irish partnership is lead by an independent chairperson and consists of 25 members, representing a variety of state and non-state stakeholders. Like other NCSDs, the partnership gives advice to Ministers and comments on critical issues of SD. What distinguishes "Comhar" from most other NCSDs is that its five working groups are encouraged to reach agreements and policy decisions regarding specific programs, policies and policy instruments (Steurer & Martinuzzi, 2003c, 10). Although "Comhar" often fails to actually reach agreements and decisions,[8] it nevertheless leads the way to a new form of governance

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[7]   For an overview on NCSDs in Europe, see http://www.ncsdnetwork.org/ncsddbm/ncsd_europe.cfm.

[8]   Interview with Maurice Coughlan, Irish Department of the Environment and Local Government, 3/13/03.

(often referred to as "New Governance"), emphasizing the importance of networks that transcend the boundaries of the state (Kooiman, 1993/1994; Pierre, 2000).

3.8   Assessments

Monitoring mechanisms and evaluations provide the basis for coherent and self-reflective policy making in a knowledge-based society. While monitoring is often restricted to performance and output description, evaluations go further by providing analytical conclusions and recommendations. As with participation, virtually all European NSSD processes, even the temporary process on the EU level (European Commission, 2001, 13), feature some sort of monitoring and/or evaluation mechanism. Most NSSDs ask for annual or bi-annual progress reports, which are conducted by ministerial bodies or by NCSDs. Unlike the monitoring which occurred in the past, these progress reports build on sets of indicators often already specified in the NSSDs themselves. Although the sets of indicators are country-specific in quantitative as well as qualitative terms (for example, whereas Germany monitors its progress towards SD with 21 "headline indicators", Italy uses about 150 indicators), most of them are comprised of economic, social and environmental indicators like GDP per capita, R&D expenditures or CO_2 emissions. Only a few countries (such as Ireland and Italy) also consider aggregated indicators like Green GDP or Ecological Footprint. While most countries conduct their progress reports internally, Austria and Belgium have gone further and scheduled external evaluations of their strategy process (Belgium bi-annually and Austria for 2006). Recently "peer-reviews", in which countries review each other's strategy processes, came into use.

4 NSSD challenges from the administrators' perspective

Before we synthesize some of the good practices described above into a consistent pattern of strategy formation we refer to as Strategic Public Management, this section summarizes related challenges as perceived by NSSD coordinators according to the survey and the interviews conducted (Steurer & Martinuzzi, 2003a).[9] Besides providing some further insights into the status quo of European NSSD processes in a problem-oriented way, another purpose for this section is to facilitate what the American Academy of Management refers to as "actionable knowledge". As the Academy recognizes critically, "Our research questions tend to be guided by prior research and theory, and not sufficiently driven by current issues being faced in today's organizations" (http://meetings.aomonline.org/2004/theme.htm).

The four key challenges of NSSDs explored here are participation, high-level political commitment, balancing the three dimensions of SD, and limits of policy integration.

4.1   Participation

As mentioned in section 3, participation is a common feature of NSSD pro-cesses, but it does not meet expectations in many countries. Many interviewees explained this disappointing experience with a lack of awareness and knowledge regarding SD in civil society. The perceived challenges are to increase the public's awareness and knowledge regarding SD and to establish a rewarding culture of participation, taking into account the fact that participation is highly volatile.

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[9]   Since we neither question the accuracy of the administrators' perceptions nor discuss the causes of the challenges summarized, we want to point out that the explanatory scope of this section is limited.

4.2 High-level political commitment

As mentioned above, NSSDs seem to play different roles for administrators on the one hand and for politicians on the other. While the former tend to regard formal guidelines and strategies as valuable tools for their role in the policy-making process, the latter prefer to follow an inductive logic, which weighs involved interests case-by-case. In fact, our interviews with administrators have confirmed this "Logic of Disharmony" (Hansen & Ejersbo, 2002) for most strategy processes. With the exception of Germany and the UK, most NSSD coordinators see their scope limited by a rather weak high-level political commitment regarding the objectives stated in NSSDs. A key concern for them is how to effectively deal with this lack of political will.

4.3 Balancing the three dimensions of SD

The key purpose of NSSDs is to better integrate the three dimensions of SD. While conflicts and trade-offs between economic, social and environmental policies are suppressed in most strategy documents, administrators readily acknowledge to be struggling when these problems become visible later on (especially in times of weak economic growth). Thus, their key concern in this context is how to deal and cope with such conflicts, both in implementation and in future strategy documents, e.g. through changes in patterns and cultures of governance and policy-making.

4.4 Limits of policy integration

As described above, mechanisms of horizontal integration are not only widespread (at least in the administrative branch of government), but are also regarded as one of the most successful outcomes of the strategy processes overall. Nevertheless, numerous NSSD coordinators are not satisfied with the progress made so far in two respects. First, some criticize that collaboration in the administrative branch is often not complemented by parallel mechanisms in the political branch, resulting in a lack of cross-horizontal policy integration. Second, some ministries or departments are said to be very reluctant when it comes to SD. Unfortunately, one of the most reluctant ministries is one of the most powerful ones: the Finance Ministry. This means not only tight budgets for NSSD processes, but foremost that SD principles are rarely built into budgetary decisions. A key concern for NSSD coordinators in this context is how much of a difference leadership structures (such as chancellery-driven versus environmentally-driven NSSD processes) can make. When it comes to vertical policy integration, administrators struggle in very basic ways.

5 Strategic Public Management as an ideal type of strategy formation

Obviously, NSSDs go well beyond former environmental policy plans, not just in terms of their broader thematic scope. While the latter generally resulted in single planning documents aiming at some unspecified implementation (often never to happen), NSSDs already succeeded in introducing new forms and tools of governance as solid cornerstones in evolving strategy processes. However, since the good NSSD practices described in section 3 are scattered throughout Europe and since many of them are (at least partially) counterbalanced by the challenges outlined in section 4, we regard them cautiously as promising first steps in protracted strategy processes, which have to prove their effectiveness in the upcoming years.

Building on the empirical evidence presented in this paper we finally explore what approach to strategy formation may be adequate for the public sector overall and we propose Strategic Public Management as an ideal model that represents a middle way between planning and incrementalism. Since SPM not only synthesizes the good NSSD practices described in section 3 but also draws on the guidelines summarized in section 2 as well as on expertise from private sector strategic management theory, it is descriptive and prescriptive at the same time.

5.1   Neither policy planning nor incrementalism …

In recent years, several policy as well as strategy scholars have pointed out "the emergence of a new strategic paradigm that differs markedly from traditional models" (Williams, 2002, 202). In the beginning of this paper, the "traditional models" have been referred to as "policy planning", which is clearly in line with the planning school of strategic management (Mintzberg, 1994; 1998, 47-80; see also Table 1). Since neither environmental problems nor policy-making processes themselves are as rational and linear as planners would like them to be (Montanari et al, 1989, 304), it is no surprise that the planning school, highly regarded in the 1960s and 70s, failed to meet expectations and thus lost ground (Mintzberg et al, 1998, 353; Bonn & Christodoulou, 1996). Yet does this imply that incrementalism succeeded over planning?

Since strategic management can be defined as "the central integrative process that gives the organization a sense of direction and ensures a concerted effort to achieve strategic goals and objectives" (Poister & Streib, 1999, 323), neither the private nor the public sector can thrive without some sort of deliberate, and to a certain degree formalized, strategy. This is particularly true for the policies in the field of SD: "The achievement of sustainability in national development requires a strategic approach, which is both long-term in its perspective and integrated or 'joined-up' linking various development processes so that they are as sophisticated as the challenges are complex" (IIED, 2002, 6). As Schick (1999, 2) puts it, "Strategy without opportunity cannot advance the cause of reform very far. [...] On the other hand, opportunity without strategy is likely to exhaust itself in faddism, drifting from one fashionable innovation to the next, without leaving a lasting imprint." According to Montanari et al (1989, 314), 20 years after his initial account of incrementalism in public policy, even Lindblom (1979) has emphasized that "there is very little meaningful 'incrementalism' without some type of 'strategic assessment'" (see also Meadowcroft, 1997).

5.2   … but a hybrid pattern of strategy formation

Since both planning and incrementalism fail in supporting organisations to work effectively, a balanced middle path is the most promising way out of this controversy. In fact, strategic management scholars are attempting to amalgam-ate elements of various schools (including the two extreme positions) into a hybrid strategic management theory sometimes referred to as the configuration school (Mintzberg et al, 1998, 301-348). Although the details of the hybrid concept of strategic management differ from author to author, it can be characterized with the following six widely shared assumptions (Montanari et al, 1989; Mintzberg, 1994; Taylor, 1997; Mintzberg et al, 1998; Poister & Streib, 1999; Szulanski & Amin, 2001; Brock & Barry, 2003): (i) Strategic management "involves purposeful thought, choice, and action that is designed to enable the organization to achieve its desired future state" (Wechsler, 1989, 355). (ii) Strategic management is not restricted to a planning unit, but involves the entire organization. (iii) The implementation of a strategy is regarded as an integral part of the strategy process. This implies that a strategy is not finished with the formulation of an "intended strategy", i.e. a strategy document, but is seen as an open, circular process: "Formulation [...] may precede implementation. But even so, there has to be 'implementation as evolution' [...] because prior thought can never specify all subsequent action" (Mintzberg, 1994, 289). (iv) Such an open strategy process is flexible regarding changing circumstances and objectives (many of which may be due to implementation efforts). That is, it turns intended strategies into a subject of learning. (v) The understanding of the strategy process as an adaptive learning process implies that the outcome, i.e. the

"realized strategy", depends not only on intended strategies, but also on "emerging strategies" as the flexible counterpart. (vi) Despite this emphasis on flexibility and learning, formal plans are not rejected as outdated, but they are embraced as valuable strategic devices. "Thus, strategy is not the consequence of planning but the opposite: its starting point. Planning helps to translate in-tended strategies into realized ones, by taking the first step that can lead to effective implementation" (Mintzberg, 1994, 333).

To sum up, this new strategic paradigm is aiming at "a synthesis of the rational synoptic and incremental perspectives of strategy development" (Montanari et al, 1989, 306), acknowledging that various strategy approaches (even the planning school) can provide valuable tools in different environments, as long as they are considered part of an encompassing and flexible strategy process. Thus, the decline of the planning school was not accompanied by a complete shift towards incrementalism, but by a shift of the centre of gravity towards strategies as learning processes (Mintzberg et al, 1998, 352f).

5.3   Strategic Public Management as a hybrid pattern of strategy formation

What does this development in strategic management theory signify for the public sector? Based on the evidence (both theoretical and empirical) discussed in this paper, we conclude that a hybrid approach which seeks to combine the strengths of formal plans with those of incremental learning processes is also the most promising approach for the public sector. Since this approach strongly builds on strategic management theory, we refer to it as Strategic Public Management (SPM).[10] Let's briefly explore the characteristics of SPM as summarized in Table 1 by reviewing some of the good NSSD practices described above.

NSSDs are often conceptualized as strategy processes that go well beyond the document itself, employing various integrative structures and mechanisms. A good example of an integrative structure is the Green Cabinet in Germany, and a good example of an integrative mechanism is the cross-portfolio budgeting approach in the UK. Furthermore, most NSSDs were (co-)developed by those who are in charge of the subsequent implementation process, i.e. by administrators of Environment Ministries in co-operation with other ministries and civil society representatives. The NSSD formulation in the Slovak Republic is a good example of how to involve the public effectively. The fact that the process of strategy development was liberated from planning units probably helped in turning implementation from an appendage to policy plans into an integral part of strategy processes. A good combination of flexible processes and formal plans can be found in Austria. Regarding incremental learning, most countries have some kind of monitoring or review mechanism and a few (e.g. Belgium) also an evaluation mechanism in place. Regarding key skills, NSSDs aspire to transcend the linear thinking of policy planning and the ad-hoc approach of incrementalism to non-linear strategic thinking, facilitating the orchestration of different modes of governance and the activation of various actors. The "joined-up government" initiatives in the UK are good examples of this reorientation (Cabinet Office, 2000).

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[10]   Another reason why we speak of Strategic Public Management and not, as most scholars do, of "Strategic Management in the Public Sector" (see, e.g., Cunningham, 1989; Montanari et al, 1989; Poister & Streib, 1999), is that we welcome a closer integration of strategic management theory and public administration studies.

Table 1: Characteristics of Strategic Public Management, in comparison with policy planning and incrementalism[11]

	Policy Planning	Incrementalism	Strategic Public Management
Strategy school	"Planning school"	"Learning school"	"Configuration school"
General approach	Formal, inflexible comprehensive plans	Informal and flexible strategy and learning process	Formal strategy documents are complemented by flexible strategy process (embracing formal and informal mechanisms)
Plan/strategy formulation	Plans are developed by professional "planners"	Formal strategies are rejected as detached from reality, thus no formulation necessary	Strategies and plans are developed by those responsible for implementation (ideally by involving external stakeholders)
Policy integration	Plans usually focus on a single policy domain	No systematic approach ("muddling through")	To be achieved by cross-sectoral strategies, structures (e.g. networks) and mechanisms (e.g. evaluations)
Formulation and implementation	Implementation is beyond the scope of planners	Unguided incremental processes	Implementation is integral part of strategy process, taken into account in strategy documents and supported by cyclical mechanisms
Participation	None, thus weak ownership beyond planning unit	To be decided ad hoc	Multi-stakeholder approach facilitates acceptance and ownership of strategy process
Assessment and feedback	Most often neither nor	Everything that supports learning is welcome	Monitoring, progress reports, external evaluations and peer-reviews support learning in strategy process
Key skills	Linear thinking and compliance	Ad-hoc decision making	Non-linear strategic thinking, orchestration of different governance modes and activation of actors

Overall, the scattered good NSSD practices are good examples of SPM. This implies that the emergence of actual SPM practices is strongly driven by a common understanding of how SD should be pursued. According to the IIED's (2002, 29) "Resource Book", NSSDs "move from developing and implementing a fixed plan, which gets increasingly out of date […] towards operating an adaptive system that can continuously improve". Thus, NSSDs open a policy window to better integrate strategic management throughout the public sector, i.e. to enhance SPM. This window of opportunity finds its verbal expression in phrases like "strategic policy" (Bouder & Fink, 2002, 256) or "strategic state" (Paquet, 2001).

Since many of the good NSSD practices described here combine hierarchical steering with collaboration in networks, SPM is obviously not only about pursuing a hybrid strategy approach, but also about employing different modes of governance (also hybrid ones) in a problem-driven way. In this sense, SPM is also a constructive answer to the challenge that "no governing structure works for all services in all conditions" (Rhodes, 2000, 81; see also Meuleman, 2003). However, since this perspective of governance leads us too far away from SPM as a strategy process it is explored elsewhere (Steurer, 2004).

In 1989, Shapek and Richardson (1989, 236) noted that, although the application of private-sector strategic management in the public sector has significant potential, "Public-sector strategic management has not even begun." In 1998, Jänicke and Jörgens (1998, 28) were right that "there is as yet no uniform model of strategic environmental planning". As this paper shows, this is about to change, both in practice and

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[11]   This table draws on Williams (2002, 202); Dalal-Clayton & Bass (2002, 5); Montanari et al (1989); Mintzberg (1994); Mintzberg et al (1998) and Poister & Streib (1999).

regarding theoretical foundations.[12] All in all, the observed signs of transition from grand planning schemes to flexible strategy processes, accompanied by a transition from clear-cut sectoral authorities to cross-cutting competencies, from pure hierarchies to an amalgamation of hierarchies and networks, from top-down control to process and policy assessments, and from knowing to learning are encouraging steps toward a hybrid pattern of both strategy formation and governance.

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[12]   A "uniform" strategic approach may not be desirable in the first place because it seems to imply little room for diversity and flexibility. However, since diversity and flexibility are at the core of SPM, the coherence (rather than the uniformity) of this hybrid pattern of strategy formation is that it applies non-linear strategic thinking to different situations.

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