

Leonhard Hennen  
Thomas Petermann  
Constanze Scherz

February 2003



**TAB**

# Long-term and cross-sectional policy issues in European governments and parliaments

Summary



TAB

Working report no. 86



TAB

Office of Technology Assessment  
at the German Bundestag



---

## SUMMARY

The present status report looks at how European governments and parliaments tackle and deal with long-term and cross-cutting issues. The goal was to produce an overview of institutions and programmes which have been established to integrate long-term and cross-cutting political issue into existing structures and working procedures.

---

### INSTITUTIONS FOR PROCESSING LONG-TERM AND CROSS-CUTTING ISSUES

The political treatment of complex and long-term questions – such as identifying trends in social development or considering the long-term effects of political measures – poses a challenge for parliaments and governments which is being met by various initiatives and institutions to support political discussion and decision-making.

In an initial review a total of 77 institutions were identified in 15 European nations and the EU generally which work on long-term and cross-cutting issues and provide policy advice to parliaments and governments. These include parliamentary commissions, external consulting and research institutions working on commissions, interministerial coordination committees, exploratory research-programmes, institutions within the government dealing specifically with long-term and cross-cutting questions, advisory bodies of independent experts, consultative institutions with representatives of societal interest groups. It is striking that the overwhelming majority of these institutions are associated with the government, while only ten are exclusively linked with parliaments.

Breaking down the institutions by the primary focus of their activities, 37 – i.e. almost half – are concerned with the issue of »sustainable development« and/or »environmental protection«. Twelve institutions deal with issues which can be classified as »technology assessment«. This shows that efforts to shape politically scientific and technological development in a way which is socially and environmentally acceptable with the help of TA, together with environmental policy and efforts to implement strategies for sustainable social development have led European parliaments and governments to establish new institutions and procedures for forward-looking and interministerial analysis of problems and formulation of policies.



---

## PARLIAMENTARY TA INSTITUTIONS IN EUROPE

Since the mid-80s a number of European parliaments have created special institutions to assist parliamentary discussion of issues of scientific and technological development and their societal, ecological and economic impacts. The 12 existing parliamentary TA institutions are integrated or associated in various ways with their parliaments.

- > The TA institutions of the UK (Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, POST) and French (Office Parlementaire d’Evaluation des Choix Scientifiques et Technologiques, OPECST) parliaments are, for example, tightly integrated into the administrative structures.
- > In Denmark (Teknologi-Rådet – The Danish Board of Technology, DBT) and Germany (Büro für Technikfolgen-Abschätzung beim Deutschen Bundestag, TAB) the TA institutions are not part of the administration but are linked via a committee to the political bodies and their work.
- > The Rathenau Institute in the Netherlands is largely independent and associated with parliament without formal procedures or steering committees.

Despite the diversity of individual organisational models and the differences in priorities, all the institutions are concerned in their work with assisting parliaments in shaping policy and controlling governments and administrations, and with supporting public debate in the realm of science and technology policy.

With regard to their target audiences, we can distinguish broadly between two TA models – discursive and instrumental. The former lays the emphasis of TA on prompting public debate of technologies. This is practised primarily in Denmark and the Netherlands. The latter sees TA as analysis by experts to provide information and options for policy-makers, TA activities are primarily concerned with supporting parliament with information. The two models are not mutually exclusive – the mandate of TAB, for example, emphasises both the function of informing parliament and the responsibility for influencing public discourse on science and technology. Parliamentary TA accordingly not only serves the process of opinion building within parliament but also takes on a guiding role in communication with the population and linking public and parliamentary discourse.

---

## INSTITUTIONS OF POLICY MAKING IN THE FIELD OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Since the 90s, numerous countries have responded to environmental policy challenges, pushed debate on sustainable development, and institutionalised corresponding advisory and steering bodies. As a detailed study of the status of sustainability policy in seven European countries shows, those countries which made an early start on formulating plans, indicators and measures for sustainable development (the Netherlands and the Scandinavian countries) embed principles of sustainable development in many areas of policy making and in broad parts of their society. By contrast, the level of diffusion of sustainability principles in policy and society is low in countries which came late to formulating sustainability policy at the highest political level. There is a corresponding difference in the degree of institutionalisation of sustainability policy: where the intensity and quality of sustainability policy is relatively marked, the degree of institutionalisation is also generally relatively high.

Belgium, the UK, Netherlands, Finland and Sweden are notable for a relatively advanced sustainability process, in the course of which a number of institutional and procedural innovations have been integrated into the political system. Denmark has succeeded in integrating the paradigm of sustainable development into policy without creating new and specialist institutions for this purpose. Instead, Danish sustainability policy displays markedly informal processes of societal communication and consultation.

The different levels of development of sustainability policy depend above all on the importance of environmental policy in the relevant national context. Years of experience in environmental policy and a strong position of the environmental ministry facilitate adoption of the sustainable development paradigm and implementation of corresponding measures. In addition, an open political culture with strong consultative elements seems to facilitate integration of participative forms of consultation, as required to formulate and implement sustainability goals. In countries with a strong tradition of active state action the government is more likely to initiate national sustainability processes than governments in those with a more defensive role for state policy.

Sustainability policy has given new life to the long-term orientation of policy and formulation of corresponding goals in every country. Awareness of long-term and interministerial policy formulation has been strengthened, and has led to new forms of governance. However, concrete measures for implementation are often still in their infancy. Successful integration of the paradigm into na-

tional policy is generally associated with the creation of institutions commissioned with explicit implementation of the sustainable development paradigm. This has often already been done through the formation of sustainability boards, task forces in individual ministries or special committees at state-secretary level. However, creating new institutions achieves little by itself, unless these have the corresponding competences. Otherwise, sustainability is in danger of pining away as a special responsibility of boards and commissions alongside the political daily business, rather than being mainstreamed as a cross-cutting responsibility in all areas of politics.

Further, the institutions created often lack the financial and personnel resources to develop strategies and implement corresponding measures effectively. Most countries have only made a start on establishing the long-term tasks associated with sustainable development in the awareness of important societal actors and the public as a whole. However, dissemination of the paradigm in everyday life of society is essential for the ongoing development of measures and their practical implementation in enterprises, official bodies and associations.

---

#### THE ROLE OF PARLIAMENTS IN SUSTAINABILITY POLICY

It is clear in all the countries studied that both the initiative and continuation of sustainability policy are essentially carried by the executive. At government level, sustainability policy has resulted in new administrative structures (specific controlling competence for the environmental ministry) and in the creation of new institutions (e.g. sustainability councils and task forces for sustainability in the ministries). By comparison, the role of parliaments seems to be more one of reactive monitoring and support for sustainability policy. Because of the long time horizon involved, the complexity of the problems and tasks, and the associated extensive need for societal advice and consultation, it is unlikely that parliament's potential as a forum for public debate and as an instance for supervising the executive has been fully utilised as yet. With regard to the sustainability process, parliament would have the following tasks:

- > supporting the government's work on the topic of sustainability and monitoring it in terms of its contribution towards sustainable societal development (on the basis of sustainability goals and indicators)
- > contributing on aspects of content in terms of further development and implementation of sustainability strategies (defining sustainability goals and measures, suggesting legislation with specific relevance to sustainability policy)

- > encouraging and supporting societal debate on sustainable development through prominent and public treatment of sustainability issues and embedding sustainability principles (e.g. participation and communication) in the work of parliamentary organs and bodies (committees, hearings, commissions of enquiry).

Through the work of the Enquete Commission on »Protecting humans and the environment« the German Bundestag has made an outstanding contribution towards national sustainability policy, compared to parliaments in other countries. However, a range of measures are conceivable which might be suitable for further strengthening its role in German sustainability policy. Possible options extend from e.g. greater use of the Budget Act to control government programmes and draft legislation in terms of their contribution towards promoting sustainable development, through regular plenary debates on the status of German sustainability policy, to far-reaching mainstreaming of the issue of »sustainability« in parliament by setting up a committee dealing specifically with sustainability and future issues.



The Office of Technology Assessment at the German Bundestag is an independent scientific institution created with the objective of advising the German Bundestag and its committees on matters relating to research and technology. Since 1990 TAB has been operated by the Institute for Technology Assessment and Systems Analysis (ITAS) of the Karlsruhe Institute for Technology (KIT), based on a contract with the German Bundestag



**TAB**

Office of Technology Assessment  
at the German Bundestag

Büro für Technikfolgen-Abschätzung  
beim Deutschen Bundestag  
Neue Schönhauser Str. 10 - 10178 Berlin  
Telefon: 0 30 / 28 49 10  
Telefax: 0 30 / 28 49 11 19  
e-mail: [buer@tab.fzk.de](mailto:buer@tab.fzk.de)  
Internet: [www.tab.fzk.de](http://www.tab.fzk.de)