

Section 1

Introduction

The Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment outlined his interest in the concept of sustainability in his strategic focus for the years 1997 to 2000 (PCE, 1997a, Future directions: strategic focus for the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment 1997-2001). The Commissioner identified priority areas for the investment of his resources, drawing attention to his concerns that:

The linkages between social, economic and environmental policy have not been well developed. The strategic importance of environmental management for ensuring that the New Zealand economy continues to be sustainable should be recognised in the future...Because of the strong physical environmental focus of the RMA [Resource Management Act], it is unclear to what extent social effects and effects on communities, including economic effects, will be considered and addressed by this legislation or whether other means will have to be used...New Zealand's image as a 'clean and green' place will have to be earned in the future (Ibid: 22-23).

The United Nations World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) is being held in Johannesburg in August/September 2002. The lead up to the summit and the Government's preparations for it presented the Commissioner with an opportunity to 'stocktake' New Zealand's achievements in sustainable development, particularly the environmental dimension of it, in the ten years since the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. It was also a chance to analyse some of the key driving forces that are leading us towards or away from sustainability, and to look ahead at opportunities to implement sustainable development principles in the future.

This report has primarily been written for New Zealanders, however, it may also be of interest to international readers. For international readers,

less familiar with New Zealand, two matters of 'context' are important. The first is that the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment is independent of Government, empowered under the Environment Act 1986 to act as New Zealand's environmental watchdog or ombudsman (see www.pce.govt.nz for more information). The second is that this report is aimed at galvanising New Zealand's will to stride out down the sustainability road. To some readers it may seem overly critical of progress to date. From an international perspective New Zealand may be considered to be clean and green. However, as many New Zealanders know, this is a fragile image, one that owes more to our low population density than to New Zealand doing things very differently from other nations. New Zealand can and will make the transition to a more sustainable pathway.

This report focuses mainly on the environmental dimension of sustainable development and New Zealand's performance in this area. However, it also acknowledges that progress towards sustainable development relies heavily on decision making that recognises environmental, economic and social interrelationships and consequences.

1.1 Background

The Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 was a significant event that marked the beginning of the formal acceptance of sustainable development and the 27 principles that constitute 'Agenda 21'¹ (see appendix 1). The conference recognised that:

integration of environment and development concerns and greater attention to them will lead to the fulfilment of basic needs, improved living standards for all, better protected and managed ecosystems and a safer, more prosperous future.

It emphasised the importance of having 'a global partnership for sustainable development'.

Agenda 21 attempted to address the pressing problems of the time and aimed at preparing the world for the challenges of the 21st century. It

was considered to be a 'dynamic programme', to be carried out by the various actors according to the different situations, capacities and priorities of countries and in full respect of all the principles contained in the Rio Declaration. It was recognised that Agenda 21 could evolve over time in the light of changing needs and circumstances.

Agenda 21 primarily focuses on developing or strengthening processes that encourage integrating the needs of environment and development with decision making based on sustainable development. This focus on processes covers a range of areas and activities. These include:

- policy-making
- development of management systems
- provision of resources
- capacity and capability
- information gathering and dissemination
- public participation in decision making.

New Zealand adopted Agenda 21 as part of its undertakings at the 1992 Earth Summit. The United Nations Commission for Sustainable Development (UNCSD) has stressed that the 2002 summit will not be an opportunity to renegotiate Agenda 21, but that it should constitute the framework within which progress is reviewed and new challenges are addressed. All countries participating in the WSSD, including New Zealand, are obliged to submit an updated 'country profile' to the UN Commission for Sustainable Development.

Parallel to this process, but independent of it, the Commissioner has prepared this report as an evidence-based, independent (of Government) review of New Zealand's progress in implementing sustainable development (based on Agenda 21 principles) since 1992, and a look ahead at environmental management challenges and opportunities, in the context of sustainable development, facing New Zealand in the future.

1.2 Terms of reference

1.2.1 Objectives of the study

The study set out to:

- review progress on sustainable development in New Zealand, with particular reference to New Zealand's environmental management performance, since the Earth Summit in 1992
- interview and ascertain the views of a wide range of influential individuals and groups, in both the public and private sectors, whose various opinions on sustainable development we wished to explore
- determine future prospects for progressing sustainable development in New Zealand, with a focus on environmental sustainability.²

1.2.2 Methodology

The approach taken included:

- identifying subject areas (see below) relevant to Agenda 21, which have been investigated by the Commissioner in accordance with his statutory functions³
- reviewing a number of reports, on issues relevant to Agenda 21, published by the Commissioner since 1992
- analysing the concept of sustainable development and its relevance to New Zealand
- reviewing various reports that have commented on sustainable development in New Zealand
- highlighting examples of sustainable development initiatives in other countries
- interviewing a wide range of groups and individuals to discover their views on sustainable development, and to gain insights into various initiatives that have been undertaken to promote and implement sustainable development in New Zealand (see appendix 3)
- analysing future challenges and opportunities for progressing sustainable development in New Zealand, focusing primarily on environmental sustainability.

Agenda 21-related subject areas investigated by the Commissioner since 1992 consist of:

- resource management
- sustainable land management
- tangata whenua
- waste
- energy
- marine environment
- biodiversity and biosecurity
- tourism.

1.2.3 Expectations

In the absence of any benchmark, targets or other objective means of measuring progress on sustainable development in New Zealand, the following expectations were drawn up at the outset of this study as matters that we would have expected successive New Zealand governments to have addressed since the Earth Summit in 1992. These expectations were to be the basis for some of the findings of this report.

1. A national strategy (or equivalent policy instrument) for sustainable development has been established, including clear goals, objectives and targets. Such a strategy places sustainable development in a New Zealand context and outlines the manner in which the principles of Agenda 21 are applied in New Zealand.
2. Appropriate legislative and institutional arrangements have been put in place to give effect to Agenda 21 principles and sustainable development.
3. Evidence exists that sustainable development has been widely adopted and relevant programmes have been implemented by central and local government agencies, and that other sectors have also embraced the concept.
4. A framework of sustainable development indicators and associated monitoring systems has been established to assess progress towards sustainable development.
5. Barriers to achieving sustainable development goals and objectives have been identified and are being addressed.
6. Sustainable development concepts influence social, economic and environmental policy-making.

7. Public awareness programmes and other initiatives have been introduced to promote sustainable development.

1.2.4 What this report does not cover

Sustainable development is, potentially, a vast and all-encompassing topic of investigation. It has not been possible to cover it in entirety. Choices have been made on the basis of the mandate of the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment, a mandate that is grounded in environmental management.

It is beyond the mandate and resources of the Commissioner to undertake a comprehensive analysis of how well the social and economic dimensions of sustainable development have been developed and managed over the past decade. Consequently, this report does not attempt to review New Zealand's performance in these particular areas. The Commissioner, however, does recognise that progressing all three dimensions - environmental, social and economic - is essential to achieve sustainable development goals. The report does comment on the social and economic dimensions where they affect, or are influenced by, environmental factors.

This report does not attempt to review New Zealand's performance with respect to all subject areas covered by Agenda 21. As discussed on section 1.2.2, it focuses on those subject areas that have been previously investigated by the Commissioner and those issues raised by people interviewed as part of the investigation. The report also does not report on or review New Zealand's contribution to sustainable development internationally. It focuses on our domestic situation. Throughout this report there are examples of sustainable development initiatives undertaken by business, iwi and community groups. These are examples only. Their use in this report does not necessarily mean that they have been endorsed by the Commissioner.

In its review of aspects of environmental management relative to sustainable development,

this report does not attempt to be a comprehensive analysis of environmental management in New Zealand. That is a different task and one that is undertaken from time to time by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) environmental performance reviews of member countries (OECD, 1996). Also, since the major PCE investigations invariably originate from a perspective that there may have been an adverse impact on the environment⁴, the PCE reports referred to in this review do not necessarily identify all the positive developments in environmental management (relative to sustainable development) that have occurred over the last decade. It should not be assumed that the absence of a particular issue indicates an absence of concern. It may indicate that the Commissioner has not investigated that issue so far, for reasons of resourcing, priority or timing.

¹ A major achievement of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) was Agenda 21, a thorough and broad-ranging programme of actions demanding new ways of investing in our future to reach global sustainable development in the 21st century. Its recommendations ranged from new ways to educate, to new ways to care for natural resources, and new ways to participate in designing a sustainable economy. The overall ambition of Agenda 21 was breathtaking, for its goal was nothing less than to make a safe and just world in which all life has dignity and is celebrated. (United Nations web site on the Johannesburg Summit 2002: http://www.johannesburgsummit.org/html/basic_info/agenda21.html).

² In the context of this report 'environmental sustainability' includes 'ecological sustainability' (see section 2.2 for further explanation).

³ See section 16 of the Environment Act 1986.

⁴ The Environment Act 1986 empowers the Commissioner to, among other matters, "investigate any matter in respect of which, in the Commissioner's opinion, the environment may be or has been adversely affected". (Section 16(c)(i)).