

Section 5

Summary of Progress

This chapter draws some conclusions about progress on sustainable development in New Zealand based on the review and analysis carried out in previous chapters. In addition, a summary of the report's findings against the expectations identified in section 1.2.3 is presented in table 5.1.

5.1 Maintaining the unique characteristics of New Zealand

New Zealand has many unique ecological, social and economic characteristics. New Zealanders highly value many of the qualities and range of benefits these characteristics bestow.

Fundamental to the 'strong sustainability' model of sustainable development and to what makes New Zealand unique is the protection of our ecological 'bottom lines'. Maintaining the ecological sustainability of key parts of our environment will be critical to the sustainable development of New Zealand as a whole. Intensification of our urban communities and agricultural land use is challenging the ecological sustainability of key environmental resources, particularly freshwater resources, soils and air quality. Current information indicates that impacts on these resources are and will continue to be unsustainable if we continue with business as usual. Creating sustainable urban communities will be a key challenge for the 21st century, as will finding ways of mitigating the effects of intensified agricultural land use, especially dairying.

5.2 Understanding sustainable development

Traditional linear, short-term and silo thinking are barriers to sustainable development in New Zealand. The fundamental shift in thinking that is needed to progress sustainable development has been missing in all but a few sectors. There have been failures to grasp opportunities to improve understanding of ecological principles and the importance of maintaining natural capital in order

to achieve sustainability and the quality of life that New Zealanders value. Education for sustainable living has not been supported to the extent needed to raise public awareness about sustainable development, what it means, and how it can be implemented. While some small-scale community initiatives have been successful, efforts to encourage businesses to think about the potential consequences of their choices and actions, particularly for long-term sustainability, have only recently started to get support from central government (e.g. Triple Bottom Line Reporting).

The 'strong sustainability' model has not been widely adopted in New Zealand. This model promotes social and economic development based on long-term prosperity (quality of life) and maximising natural capital, while recognising that there are ecological limits to certain types of growth. It avoids making trade-offs between economic, social and environmental goals where short-term economic or social benefits later give rise to longer-term or irreversible environmental impacts and associated costs to society. The value of operating within ecological limits and the opportunities this creates for certain types of growth (e.g., in the tourism and primary production sectors) has not been fully appreciated.

Until recently, successive governments have not followed through on commitments made in 1992 to Agenda 21. However, in the period leading up to the World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002, the Government has given an undertaking to produce a sustainable development strategy, that will include time-bound and target driven goals.

Successful implementation of sustainable development initiatives among other OECD countries has been the result of efforts to gain public support, and achieve good coordination and integrated decision making. Having the commitment and the capacity to focus efforts towards actions over long-term time frames has also been a major factor.

Key impediments to the implementation of sustainable development in New Zealand are insufficient knowledge and capacity to support its implementation. This is knowledge in its broadest sense - research, information, indicators, people and organisations with the capability to apply sustainable development principles. Case studies examined in this review indicate that there are organisations and individuals possessing the knowledge, capacity and enthusiasm to promote sustainable development. However, they are either uncoordinated or there are just not enough of them in the right places to make a significant systemic change.

Local Agenda 21 initiatives are important means by which sustainable development can be implemented at the local government level. However, leadership, support and guidance from central government needed to ensure that local authorities take up the challenge in ways that achieve global, national and local goals have been missing until recently. The Local Government Bill is an important new component in this area.

Leadership is an important driver of change and influence on progressing sustainable development. This has been demonstrated in some sectors (community groups, NGOs and business organisations) showing how environmental, social and economic benefits can be successfully and easily achieved through implementation of sustainable development principles. Such groups are 'walking the talk', one of the most effective forms of leadership given that most in society tend to be followers rather than leaders.

5.3 Measuring progress

Measuring progress towards sustainable development is complex. It involves combining measures of biophysical and ecological realities, human values and aspirations, and socio-economic trends. The challenge has been to make sustainability indicators easily understood and more meaningful than, for example, GDP which is widely, but inappropriately, accepted as a measure of prosperity.

Local authorities have been disadvantaged by the slow development of environmental indicators. This has crucially limited the amount of nationally consistent information on the environment, and the ability to ascertain whether we are making any progress towards environmental outcomes and, in particular, sustainability.

Information collected by regional councils, as required by the RMA, has not been gathered according to a nationally consistent set of standards. The Commissioner has identified fundamental barriers affecting monitoring and information systems including the availability of basic scientific information. Many national environmental databases have not been updated, while others were lost during 1990s restructuring of government research organizations and related agencies. Consequently, it is difficult to objectively judge progress in a number of areas bearing on environmental management.

Linked to inadequate information is the equally crucial need to have appropriate research initiatives underway to support sustainable development programmes. The Commissioner has commented on research shortcomings (e.g. urban systems). Without adequate research, linked to better information, New Zealand will be hampered in getting the vital feedback and signals necessary to adjust and adapt environmental management to future needs.

5.4 The role of the Resource Management Act 1991

There was an optimistic start to the post-Earth Summit decade. It appeared that New Zealand, with the passage of the Resource Management Act (RMA), had not only rationalised resource management statutes, but had also established an efficient, economically rational regime for managing natural resources. Although the RMA does not explicitly deal with sustainable development, it addresses one aspect of it - the sustainable management of natural and physical

resources. This is the environmental management component of sustainable development.

The RMA has been of mixed benefit to tangata whenua. It recognises the importance of the many relationships between the culture and traditions of tangata whenua and the land. There is more awareness of the practical benefits of more effective involvement of tangata whenua, and the RMA gives recognition to consultation and the ongoing duties of kaitiakitanga. However, many iwi have lacked the capacity to participate effectively in RMA processes and the responses from central and local government agencies to their responsibilities in relation to the Treaty of Waitangi and the interests of tangata whenua have been variable.

The extensive criticisms of the RMA have largely been about process, rather than the substance of the Act, and the broader goal of advancing the country towards sustainability has largely been forgotten in disputes over detail within the RMA. The RMA was a farsighted piece of legislation. However other mechanisms are also needed to advance sustainable development.

5.5 Stocktake of PCE investigations

A stocktake of PCE investigations over the last decade (see appendix 2) has highlighted a number of problems exacerbated by silo thinking, of focusing only on narrow goals and failing to recognise and take into account the linkages between economic, social and environmental interests:

- poor integrated decision making
- inadequate cooperation and communication between sectors and agencies
- lack of structural and management incentives to work towards a more collective public good.

Another point emerging from the stocktake relates to the sequencing of strategies and legislation that affect sustainable development. While the major environmental management Act (the RMA) was in place by 1991 a number of substantial and

important initiatives to develop strategies relating to sustainable development have been initiated only within the last few years. This indicates that policy initiatives were more likely to be driven by reactive responses to relatively smaller issues, rather than by broader policy (sustainability) needs.

Some PCE investigations have shown that consultation mechanisms and practices have improved over the decade, while in other instances we need a wider range of mechanisms and opportunities to effectively engage in meaningful and constructive debate on sustainable development issues.

5.6 Key points

- New Zealand could have been a leading light on sustainable development, given its relatively low population density, overall environmental quality, and its predominantly agriculture-based economy. Instead, sustainable development has not progressed in New Zealand in a coordinated and meaningful fashion over the past ten years. Throughout the 1990s successive governments largely ignored the Agenda 21 commitments made back in 1992, and did not provide the leadership necessary to support and guide sustainable development in New Zealand.
- A substantial impediment that existed for much of the past decade was an ideological commitment to let market solutions and non-intervention by government, leaving a wide range of environmental decisions to be resolved on a case-by-case basis (within the RMA framework). ‘Enabling’ measures were preferred over regulations, and little effort was made to develop other policy alternatives. Market failures were not adequately factored into policies. This had the effect of inhibiting initiatives that could have provided broader strategic visions and directions over environmental management. For example, coherent management of our extensive ocean resources was not addressed from a perspective of sustainable development.
- Other sectors, including individual local authorities, business organisations and community groups have made progress with their own initiatives. They have endeavoured to incorporate sustainable development principles into their policies and activities, and have encouraged others to do likewise.
- It is only in recent years that central government has begun to develop various strategies related to sustainable development, and started work on a New Zealand strategy on sustainable development. In retrospect, there is no reason why the process of developing such a strategy could not have commenced soon after the Earth Summit. However, a sustainable development strategy is important but it is only a first step. As a framework for action, it is not evidence of action. That said, the development of a strategy for sustainable development and other strategies that incorporate sustainability shows great promise for the future in New Zealand.
- It is time now to look ahead for opportunities to convert strategies into actions and make genuine progress towards sustainability for the benefit of society, the environment and the economy.

Table 5.1: Findings of This Study Against the Expectations Set Out in Section 1.2.3

Expectations	Findings
<p>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.</p>	<p>Proposals to develop a New Zealand Sustainable Development Strategy (NZSDS) were not announced until August 2001. The strategy is likely to be completed in August 2002 in time for presentation at the World Summit on Sustainable Development. This is an important step that should formally establish New Zealand's position on sustainable development. However, it should have been adopted soon after the Earth Summit in 1992, as was the case in Australia (see section 2.2). The Government has already decided that elements of the NZSDS are to include initiatives already underway, including the development of waste, energy, biodiversity and oceans strategies, together with a set of key principles. Logically, the NZSDS should have been developed first and provided the framework for the various strategic initiatives currently underway, linking them and establishing priorities for progressing sustainable development.</p>
<p>2. Appropriate legislative and institutional arrangements have been put in place to give effect to Agenda 21 principles and sustainable development.</p>	<p>Statutes enacted or under consideration (eg the Local Government Bill) that include provisions that refer to sustainable development concepts are generally those that deal with the management of natural resources or local authority responsibilities. Statutes that directly affect social and economic issues do not incorporate equivalent principles of sustainability, implying that sustainable development is seen primarily as an environmental or resource management issue (see section 4.1.1).</p> <p>No single agency or group of agencies has the responsibility for co-ordinating or overseeing the implementation of sustainable development in New Zealand. An unstructured approach to sustainable development can give rise to gaps or overlaps and lead to ineffective and inconsistent implementation. A number of government and non-government organisations play an active role in promoting sustainable development, but not in any way that is formal, integrated or co-ordinated. An exception to this has been the recent process to develop a New Zealand Strategy on Sustainable Development, which was co-ordinated by the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (see section 4.1.3).</p>
<p>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.</p>	<p>Since 1992, successive governments have failed to adopt and implement broad-based sustainable development policies or programmes. The current proposal to prepare a NZSDS is the first attempt at producing a comprehensive strategy. It is encouraging to note that funding from the Foundation for Research, Science and Technology is being made available for research into sustainable development (see section 4.1.6). Among local authorities the implementation of sustainable development is variable. Some local authorities have wholeheartedly incorporated sustainable development into their policies and practices, while others regard it as outside their core statutory responsibilities and have, therefore, disregarded it. There has been no attempt to co-ordinate a nation-wide Local Agenda 21 programme. A number of community groups have embraced the concept of sustainable development and initiated local actions (see section 4.1.8 and case studies). Some businesses and business organisations have also recognised the benefits associated with a more sustainable approach to consumption and production (see case studies).</p>

Table 5.1: Findings of This Study Against the Expectations Set Out in Section 1.2.3 *continued*

Expectations	Findings
4. A framework of sustainable development indicators and associated monitoring systems has been established to assess progress towards sustainable development.	Successive New Zealand governments since the Earth Summit in 1992 have not been active in developing indicators of sustainable development. New Zealand is, therefore, not in a position to measure and accurately assess the country's progress towards sustainability. However, work is currently underway to develop a set of sustainability measures that are intended to combine socio-economic indicators with environmental performance indicators (see section 4.1.4).
5. Barriers to achieving sustainable development goals and objectives have been identified and are being addressed.	A number of barriers (or impediments) to sustainable development have been identified in this report (see section 3.4). They include issues such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • various, conflicting and confusing interpretations of the term 'sustainable development' • 'silo-thinking', particularly among agencies in the public sector • inertia or complacency arising from perceptions that New Zealand is clean and green, and will remain so • the emphasis on economic growth as the first step towards sustainability, with little regard for ecological concerns and social values • lack of leadership to promote sustainable development in all sectors • the scale of some sustainable development issues make them too difficult to deal with • lack of opportunities to publicly debate issues around sustainable development • generally a low awareness of the linkages between economic, social and environmental considerations, and the need for people to take responsibility for avoiding adverse consequences of their actions on the environment.
6. Agenda 21 principles influence social, economic and environmental policy-making.	So far, there is little evidence of Agenda 21 principles having influenced integrated social, economic and environmental policy-making. The various government strategies that have been developed, or are under development, show that they have not necessarily been directly influenced by Agenda 21 or linked under a sustainable development framework (see chapter 4). When the Government announced in August 2001 that it intended to produce a NZSDS, it did so on the basis that the principles of sustainable development should underpin all of the Government's economic, social and environmental policies. The success or otherwise of this goal cannot be assessed until the NZSDS is completed and put into effect.
7. Public awareness programmes and other initiatives have been introduced to promote sustainable development.	The Ministry for the Environment has undertaken a number of initiatives to promote sustainable development (eg see sections 4.1.5 – triple bottom line reporting, 3.1.2 – Rio+10 community programme, and 3.2.3 – New Zealand's environmental education strategy), as has the New Zealand Business Council for Sustainable Development and a number of other businesses, local authorities and community organisations (see section 3.4.4). These have been important in raising public awareness about sustainable development. However, there are opportunities for other agencies in the social and economic spheres to become involved and support the concept of sustainable development among their constituents.