

House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee Inquiry on ‘The Government’s Approach to Sustainable Development’ – Response from the STEPS Centre

1. The STEPS (Social, Technological and Environmental Pathways to Sustainability) Centre thanks the committee for the opportunity to respond to its first inquiry of this parliament. The STEPS Centre is an international research and policy engagement hub based at SPRU – Science Policy Research Unit and the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Sussex.
 2. Our work addresses two vital global challenges: linking environmental sustainability with better livelihoods and health for poor people; and helping science and technology work for poverty reduction and social justice. We work with partners in Asia, Africa, the Americas and Europe and are funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council. Further details are available at: www.steps-centre.org
 3. We see the co-ordination of sustainable development across government as one of the greatest challenges facing the UK, and believe that decisions made in the coming months and years are crucial to addressing this challenge.
 4. In drawing up our response we have consulted other colleagues at both SPRU and IDS. We now address the committee’s questions in turn.
- What key policies are needed over the course of this Parliament to adequately protect the environment, promote growth in the low carbon sector and improve wellbeing?
5. Specific policies across all the relevant government departments are too numerous and complex to cover in detail in this response. In the areas of (renewable) energy, agriculture and industrial sectors, government should adopt *strong but flexible regulations* to steer development towards more sustainable pathways.
 6. At a more general level, we recommend that the government should focus more attention on supporting *diverse forms of innovation* that can contribute to sustainable development at local, national and global levels.¹ Government policy should foster *directions of innovation* that explicitly address specific sustainability objectives.² The Department of Business, Innovation and Skills plays a central role here through support for research and translation, as well as key industrial sectors within the UK economy.
 7. Beyond technological innovation and the functions of BIS described above, government can play a role in fostering diverse forms of social and cultural change, and nurture grassroots movements that engage with sustainable development at community level.³ We advise that this is particularly important when addressing entrenched patterns of unsustainable consumption.
 8. Democratic, consultative and participatory processes are vitally important in defining the concept of sustainable development and setting associated priorities.⁴ For example, government has a clear democratic mandate to support renewable energy, as demonstrated by recent research which confirms that “support for renewable energy has been consistently high during the tracker, fluctuating around 75-82%”⁵.

¹ Leach, M., J. Rockström, Raskin, P., Scoones, I., Stirling, A., Smith, A., Thompson, J., Millstone, E., Ely, A., Arond, E., Folke, C., Olsson, P. (2012) "Transforming Innovation for Sustainability" *Ecology and Society* 17(2)

² STEPS Centre (2010) *Innovation, Sustainability, Development: A New Manifesto*, Brighton: STEPS Centre

³ Smith, A. and Ely, A. (2015) *Green transformations from below*, in Scoones, I., P. Newell, and M. Leach (Eds.) *The Politics of Green Transformations*, Abingdon, Routledge

⁴ Scoones, I., P. Newell, and M. Leach (Eds.)(2015) *The Politics of Green Transformations*, Abingdon, Routledge

⁵ DECC (2015) *Public Attitudes Tracker – Wave 14 (August 2015)*, accessed from https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/450674/PAT_Summary_Wave_14.pdf

- Does the Government’s current fiscal and legislative agenda accord with the action required and, if not, why not and where might it be improved?

9. No. The government already has a record of failing to deliver on the kinds of policies and action required. We take the energy sector as an example. The UK is one of Europe’s top three producers of wind power, and for the time being continued government support is required to maintain and extend this trajectory to create a world-leading, sustainable business sector for the UK. Instead, the government’s plans to end subsidies for onshore wind threaten the future of this fledgling industry in the UK, handing a competitive advantage to foreign competitors. The reduction in support for solar and biomass is also disappointing. We share the European Commission’s concern that the UK could miss its target to obtain 20% of energy from renewables by 2020.
10. Privatising the Green Investment Bank is also a retrograde step, because abundant international evidence from various key industrial sectors shows that long-term public investment and patient, mission-oriented finance has played and continues to play a decisive role in creating world-changing, strategic industries^{6,7}.

- Where should responsibility lie in Government for ensuring the sustainable development approach is adopted by all Government departments?

11. Sustainable development (as defined by this inquiry) is a key source of jobs and growth and requires greater prioritisation and co-ordination by central government. This would go beyond the approach under the previous parliament of “making sustainable development a part of all government policy and operations”.⁸
12. We note the previous government’s policy that “The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) has a role in overseeing sustainable development across central government”.⁸ Whilst Defra does possess much of the key government expertise associated with sustainable development, few priorities could be higher than sustainability and we recommend that coordinating responsibility should be placed at the heart of government itself, in the Cabinet Office.
13. Globally, the UK should make further efforts to articulate its own approach with international processes and the Sustainable Development Goals. We reaffirm the advice we gave in our submission to this Committee’s 2014 inquiry on the Sustainable Development Goals, where we advised that “the multi-faceted nature of the Sustainable Development Goals and their cross-departmental nature mean that co-ordination across government and with relevant stakeholders will be a key challenge in the coming year. We believe that supporting a well-resourced team with cross-Ministerial supervision, able to take responsibility for this co-ordination, would be a prudent step in aligning local, national and international processes to take forward the Goals.”

- What metrics could the Committee use to monitor the Government’s performance on sustainable development over the course of the Parliament?

14. The United Nations is in the process of defining indicators for the Sustainable Development Goals, to be discussed at the General Assembly later this month. The UK should contribute its expertise to this process, whilst at the same time ensuring that democratic inputs help to define national priorities for monitoring, measurement and reporting.

⁶ Mazzucato, M. and C. Penna (Eds)(2015) Mission-oriented finance for innovation. London, Policy Network

⁷ Mazzucato, M. (2015) The Green Entrepreneurial State, in Scoones, I., P. Newell, and M. Leach (Eds.) The Politics of Green Transformations, Abingdon, Routledge

⁸ UK Government (2010) Policy paper 2010 to 2015 government policy: sustainable development