

## Sustainability Science in Central and Eastern Europe

# Summary Statement

of the Bratislava workshop

More than 40 representatives from ministries, politics, academies of sciences, universities and National Commissions for UNESCO from Central and Eastern Europe (the 8 countries having accessed the EU in 2004 plus Austria and Germany) discussed the status-quo and the potential of Sustainability Science for this region from 15 to 17 June 2014 in Bratislava, Slovakia. The following agreed statement summarizes the discussion.

“We are concerned about our unsustainable development despite all efforts invested, and thus adopt the following statement as a result of our three days of work:

1. *The development of the world and of our region is unsustainable.* While strategies, institutions and instruments exist, which have the potential to make our region more sustainable, they are either not well used or not effective enough. Some reasons are fragmented approaches, over-bureaucratization, inappropriate indicators and lack of personal and financial resources for participatory implementation and monitoring. Furthermore, a more holistic view of the policy cycle for sustainable development is needed, as well as better competences for the management of change and for making better use of existing best practice. Yet we are in the position to draw upon the opportunities provided by global trends such as internationalization, green economies, eco-innovation and corporate social responsibility, as well as increased public participation in policy-making. Efforts to increase competitiveness and to reduce economic, ecological and societal risks can be leveraged likewise.
2. *Several aspects are characteristic of our region:* Most countries are small in size and have experienced sharp and fundamental changes of the political systems towards open democracies. The integration into the European Union and into its space of common principles and values has fostered their stabilization. Still, the majority of the countries struggle to accommodate requirements of market economies with sustainable development, in particular because of the low influence of civil society organizations addressing sustainability. However, a long period of relative isolation has helped in a way to establish some low resource lifestyles. The science systems of most countries have to cope with brain-drain and also face particular challenges to make their scientific excellence more visible, e.g. due to language barriers. The science systems are not very effective so far in addressing sustainable development, in particular its social dimension.
3. *Scientific research and higher education are indispensable for the transformation of our societies towards sustainability.* While the contribution of science to sustainable development is recognized in principle, globally and likewise in our region, its actual contribution is rather limited. Some of the reasons are implications of overall characteristics of science in our region, such as: generally low

research investment in relation to GDP; low contributions from governments and the private sector; an over-reliance on project funding in particular from the European Union combined with a low success rate; often unsystematic and unpredictable national calls for proposal; and inappropriate criteria for the evaluation of research funding programmes. Sustainable development is not referenced explicitly enough – in substance – in research programmes. The selection procedures of research projects are not apt for sustainability, since inter alia they are based too much on individual disciplines and on inappropriate quality indicators. Generally, the incentives for inter- and transdisciplinary scientific research on sustainable development are weak. The contribution of science to sustainable development suffers from low institutional support, from a lack of vision for practical action, of tenure tracks and of multiplicative agents as well as from many conceptual and strategic misunderstandings.

4. *We strongly support the concept of Sustainability Science.* In our work on further conceptualizing Sustainability Science for our region, we have preliminarily identified as being important the following aspects:
- a. Sustainability Science involves *stakeholders and other non-academic knowledge holders* into scientific research, in particular in order to define research problems which are relevant to society (co-design); to draw upon all available knowledge and lived experiences (co-production); to strengthen mutual learning, motivation and trust between scientists and stakeholders; to promote societal discourses about unsustainable developments; and to improve implementation through formulating trajectories, processes and policy options.
  - b. Sustainability Science requires *inter- and transdisciplinary research*, in particular the full integration of social science and humanities. It targets the understanding of complex socio-ecological systems.
  - c. Sustainability Science is *mission-oriented, normative and value-based*, as it provides solutions to new demands of design, transformation and management which society addresses to science. It provides not only more secure and robust knowledge, but also knowledge which is optimized towards applicability.
  - d. Sustainability Science supports the valorization of *values, attitudes and socio-economic activities*, which have emerged in cultural contexts of this region and which are particularly conducive to sustainable development.
  - e. Sustainability Science requires *integration of research with education*, so that scientists, including young scientists, acquire the ability to conduct inter- and transdisciplinary research through new and reformed study programmes, including whole-institution-approaches.
  - f. Sustainability Science targets both the *transformation of society* and the *transformation of the scientific system* itself. It is thus self-reflexive and evolutionary. Sustainability Science is a systemic approach in science and policy, and not a discipline on its own.
  - g. Sustainability Science entails an *opening of science towards society* and its legitimate needs and demands. This requires more transparency concerning goals and methods and more interactive dialogue, including participation of society in setting scientific priorities.

5. Sustainability Science can be promoted through, inter alia: international cooperation at all levels, inter-institutional approaches in particular at the local level, partnering with NGOs, smart specialization, student initiatives, and through cooperation with media. Internationally, synergies should be sought with the EU incl. Horizon 2020, COST, and Interreg, with UNEP's 10YFP SCP and particularly with Future Earth and other research efforts on global change. Due to its holistic approach and its intergovernmental scientific programmes, UNESCO should play a special role and should have a special responsibility for Sustainability Science. We call upon all partners to support delineating the role of science in the SDGs and to capitalize on specific references in "The future we want". As regards international cooperation, we can benefit from existing bilateral and multilateral cooperation within the region as well as extending beyond it.
6. *Moving forward*, we are committed to strengthening our cooperation, combining our efforts for, as well as exchanging our experiences on:
  - a. Successful approaches for changing the priorities of research funding and for changing the methods of selection and evaluation of projects, and
  - b. Successful approaches for changing structures within academic institutions and for allowing critical reflection about the societal role, the responsibility and the priorities of academic institutions.

We, the participants of the Workshop on Sustainability Science in Central and Eastern Europe, express our gratitude to the three organizing National Commissions for UNESCO. At the same time, we call upon all National Commissions of the region to further accompany these efforts for strengthening our cooperation. We invite these National Commissions to involve higher education institutions, academies of sciences, funding agencies, policy makers and other partners to support these efforts. Our aim is to achieve substantive progress in our cooperation as a network until the World Science Forum in November 2015 in Budapest."

Bratislava, 17 June 2014