



## **Governance for sustainable development at the inter-subnational level**

The case of the Network of Regional Governments for  
Sustainable Development (nrg4SD)

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## 1. Introduction

For several years, the importance of subnational entities<sup>1</sup> in policy and decision-making has been recognized in both policy circles and academic literature. Seen from a governance perspective, moving away from the exclusive focus on nation-states, they are assigned an important role, together with other public and private actors. Especially in the context of the EU, the importance of subnational entities in decision-making becomes clear. EU policy-making now requires the cooperation between different levels of government (regional, national, subnational and local), which is described in the multi-level governance literature. Also in the area of sustainable development the value of the subnational level has often been recognized. For three reasons, subnational entities have a significant role to play in governance for sustainable development. First, they are important spatial entities, which makes that their policies can have large implications on ecosystems, resource consumption, ... (Berger and Pohoryles, 2004, p. 1). Second, subnational entities are often responsible for the implementation of national and international policies, including environmental policies. That is especially true in the context of the EU. Moreover, they have large responsibilities concerning the management of programs related to sustainable development, such as the Structural Funds (Berger and Pohoryles, 2004, p. 1; Morata, 2002, p. 51). In this context, the OECD emphasizes that in its member states, subnational entities often dispose of important competences regarding sustainable development (OECD, 2002, p. 19). Third, it is frequently stated that subnational entities are in a proximity to citizens, which is necessary for stakeholder participation and vital for the success of any sustainability process (Berger and Pohoryles, 2004, p. 1; Catenacci and Sgobbi, 2007, p. 8).

It is not so much the subnational level that interests us in this paper, but the inter-subnational level. This is the level at which subnational entities join together in associations, networks, agreements, ... (Van den Brande et al., 2008, p. 11). In a first section, we build upon a theoretical framework developed by Van den Brande et al. (2008), in which a multi-level governance perspective is applied to sustainable development to analyze the different 'routes' or channels that subnational entities can use to influence multilateral decision-making. One of these channels is the participation in inter-subnational networks. It is a particularly interesting mechanism, because in such networks the subnational entities bypass both the national and the regional level to be directly active at the global level.

The theoretical framework presented in the first section will be used for the in-depth analysis of a case study. The Network of Regional Governments for Sustainable Development (nrg4SD) has been selected because, as Van den Brande et al. (2008, p. 32) show, it is the only inter-subnational network at a global scale that specifically deals with sustainable development. Moreover, nrg4SD is often mentioned in the policy documents of its members (e.g. Flanders), which suggests its importance and policy relevance. Our choice is also motivated by the fact that nrg4SD is currently going through an internal review process, which makes it an interesting moment to take a closer look at it, and by the fact that it has never been the object of scientific research.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> We prefer to use the term 'subnational entities' in stead of 'regions' to refer to the governance level below the nation-state and above the local level. The terms 'region' and 'regional' will be reserved for supranational (continental) regions, as they are used in the context of the UN. In this paper, 'regional' will mostly refer to the level of the EU.

<sup>2</sup> While no specific scientific studies have been conducted on nrg4SD, some authors do mention it as an example of inter-subnational cooperation, or list it among important institutions for sustainable development (Catenacci, 2007, p. 34-35; Catenacci and Sgobbi, 2007, p. 10; Loperena Rota, 2003, p. 174-178; Loperena Rota and Ezeizabarrena Sáenz, 2004).

After an extensive study of the network itself, we present the results of a comparative analysis conducted among three of its European members (Flanders, the Basque Country and North Rhine-Westphalia). We will contrast their views and strategies towards nrg4SD, the way that they operationalize their participation, and the impact this has on their own policies. We conclude by illustrating how the case fits into the theoretical framework previously presented and by offering some suggestions for further research.

## 2. Theoretical framework

Sustainable development is a policy area that typically needs to be tackled at different levels of governance. Vertical policy integration is one of the most widely accepted policy principles of sustainable development (Bruyninckx, 2006, p. 269). Multi-level governance therefore seems an appropriate framework to apply to this policy domain. Van den Brande et al. (2008) make a first attempt in doing so, with the aim of analyzing the different routes that subnational entities can use to influence multilateral decision-making for sustainable development.

Before presenting our theoretical framework, it is relevant to point out the importance of governance, which is essentially the context in which the subject of this paper is embedded. Authors have used the term *governance* to indicate a changed way of governing (e.g. Rosenau, 2005). In contrast with the traditional way of governing—called *government*—the exclusive focus on the state is replaced by the view that social functions and processes are performed and implemented in different ways, by a variety of actors and at different times and places (Rosenau, 2005, p. 31). Attention thus needs to be given to actors and organizations both inside and outside the governmental realm, like stakeholders, private actors, partnerships, networks, ... In addition, the governance context also takes into account informal rule systems, which are not necessarily enforceable (Van den Brande et al., 2008, p. 2-3). It is obvious that sustainable development is a theme that requires a governance framework. The necessary participation of stakeholders and the need for vertical policy integration indicate that a traditional government perspective will not pertain to sustainable development.

Van den Brande et al. (2008, p. 19) confirm that sustainable development needs to be tackled at different levels of governance, which is why they apply a multi-level governance framework to the policy concept. Multi-level governance is a framework that has been developed by different authors, among other things to explain EU integration and decision-making (Marks, 1992). Multi-level governance is defined as “a system of continuous negotiation among nested governments at several territorial tiers [...] and as the result of a broad process of institutional creation and decisional reallocation that has pulled some previously centralized functions of the state up to the supranational level and some down to the local/[subnational] level” (Marks, 1993, p. 392). Applying this framework to sustainable development, Van den Brande et al. (2008, p. 23) distinguish between five main levels of governance: the global, the regional, the national, the subnational and the local level. Multi-level governance assigns a specifically important role to the subnational level, particularly in the context of the EU, where subnational mobilization has been observed for several years (Hooghe, 1995; Jeffery, 1997).

However, Van den Brande et al. (2008, p. 12) show that subnational entities not only try to seek access to national or regional (European) decision-making processes, they are increasingly present at the global level as well. Following a typology made by Geeraerts et al. (2004) in the area of environmental policy, they illustrate four main routes subnational entities can use to influence multilateral decision-making for sustainable development (see table 1). The typology is based on a distinction between intra and extra-state on the hand, and between intra and extra-European on the other. This typology is thus only applicable to subnational entities of EU member states. *Intra* indicates an indirect way to influence decision-making (‘through’ the nation-state or the EU), while *extra* refers to a direct way of influence (the subnational entities thus ‘bypassing’ the national and/or

the regional level). The first route is intra-state and intra-European and can be used, e.g., by participating in national delegations to the EU. In doing so, subnational governments need to coordinate their position firstly with their national government and secondly with the other member states in the EU. A second route is extra-state and intra-European, where subnational entities are directly present at the regional level, without passing through the national level. It can be operationalized, e.g., by participating in the Committee of the Regions or by being active in European networks of subnational governments. The third route, intra-state and extra-European, is used when subnational entities try to influence multilateral decision-making through their national governments only, e.g. in absence of an EU stance. Finally, the extra-state and extra-European route is used when subnational entities are directly present at the global level, either by appointing permanent representatives to multilateral organizations or by participating in networks that are active at the global level. Subnational entities thus, to a certain extent, bypass both the national and the regional level.

**Table 1** Subnational routes to influence multilateral decision-making

|                                      | <b>INTRA-STATE<br/>(indirect)</b>  | <b>EXTRA-STATE<br/>(direct)</b>   |
|--------------------------------------|--|---|
| <b>INTRA-EUROPEAN<br/>(indirect)</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Mandatory approval of treaty revisions by the subnational governments</li> <li>- Attaching a subnational attaché to the national permanent representation to the European Union</li> <li>- Participating in the Council and the Commission working groups/parties</li> <li>- Establishing subnational electoral districts for European parliamentary elections</li> <li>- Staying informed on upcoming EU initiatives by the national government</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Connecting directly with the European Commission</li> <li>- Participating in the Committee of the Regions</li> <li>- Influencing members of the European Parliament</li> <li>- Campaigning for direct representation in the Council of Ministers / European Council</li> <li>- Subnational representatives in Brussels</li> <li>- Participation in inter-subnational networks at the European level</li> </ul> |
| <b>EXTRA-EUROPEAN<br/>(direct)</b>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Influencing national decision-making</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Subnational representatives at multi-lateral organizations</li> <li>- Participation in inter-subnational networks at the global level</li> </ul>   |

Adapted from Van den Brande et al. (2008, p. 37)

It is this last route that interests us in this paper. When subnational entities come together in networks, organizations, partnerships, ..., Van den Brande et al. (2008, p. 11) talk about the inter-subnational level, which can be viewed as an additional level in the multi-level governance framework. Inter-subnational networks are numerous, especially at the regional level. Networks with a global scope are less frequent. In the area of sustainable development, there is only one: the Network of Regional Governments for Sustainable Development (nrg4SD) (Van den Brande et al., 2008, p. 32). This uniqueness makes it a particularly interesting case to analyze, which is the aim of this paper.

### 3. The Network of Regional Governments for Sustainable Development (nrg4SD)

In the following analysis, we will pay attention to the genesis of the network, its institutionalization and membership, the activities it embarks upon and some future perspectives. The section is based on study of literature, analysis of policy documents and internet research, including the website of nrg4SD itself.<sup>3</sup> In addition, the study is complemented by information distilled from personal interviews.<sup>4</sup> The events and dynamics described will subsequently prove useful in the comparative analysis.

#### 3.1 Gauteng Declaration

The World Summit on Sustainable Development, held in Johannesburg from 26 August to 4 September 2002, brought together thousands of people from all over the world. Besides delegates from national governments, participants included representatives from international organizations, the private sector and civil society. Whereas local authorities enjoy a special status under Agenda 21 (in the same way as the other ‘Major Groups’<sup>5</sup>), subnational governments remained largely absent in the international sustainable development debate. During a preparatory meeting in Bali in May 2002, this lack of representation prompted some subnational officials and NGOs to organize a parallel conference of subnational governments in the margins of the World Summit (Loperena Rota and Ezeizabarrena Sáenz, 2004). The event, facilitated by Stakeholder Forum<sup>6</sup>, was attended by representatives of several subnational governments. They were convinced of the importance of the subnational level in the domain of sustainable development, especially concerning the implementation of policies. In addition, they expressed a motivation to share knowledge and to work together on sustainability issues and they were animated by an overall sense of pessimism regarding the results of the Summit.<sup>7</sup> The meeting resulted in the signing of the Gauteng Declaration (named after the South African province of Gauteng of which Johannesburg is the capital) by 23 subnational governments and 4 inter-subnational associations. An overview of the initial signatories can be found in annex 1. The Declaration stated the importance of the subnational level of governance in the development and implementation of sustainable development policies and the opportunities of inter-subnational cooperation. It also expressed the intention of creating a global network of all subnational governments (*The Gauteng Declaration*, 2002).

#### 3.2 Institutionalization

The global network that was suggested in the Gauteng Declaration institutionalized at a relatively fast pace. *Institutionalization* commonly refers to a process in which values, norms and social practices crystallize into institutions (van Tatenhove and Goverde, 2000, p. 30). In this paper, *institutions* are understood as “the rules by which political decision making and implementation is structured” and they can refer “to social entities as actors as well as to systems of rules shaping behaviour” (Spangenberg et al., 2002, p. 70). Spangenberg et al., who analyze the institutional content of Agenda

<sup>3</sup> [Http://www.nrg4SD.net](http://www.nrg4SD.net).

<sup>4</sup> An overview of our respondents can be found at the end of this paper.

<sup>5</sup> The recognized Major Groups are women, youth, indigenous people, NGOs, local authorities, workers, business and industry, the technological community, and farmers (Earth Summit, 1993, p. 220-243).

<sup>6</sup> Stakeholder Forum for a Sustainable Future is an international organization working on sustainable development by supporting the increased involvement of stakeholders in international and national governance processes. It played a key role in the preparation and follow-up to the Earth Summit (Stakeholder Forum, 2007).

<sup>7</sup> See Earth Summit (2002).

21 to measure the effectiveness of institutions for sustainable development, distinguish between three types of institutions: institutional orientations, institutional mechanisms and organizations. This paper will show that the network discussed can be considered as an *organization*, with a structured and permanent character and with implicit and explicit internal rules (Spangenberg, 2002, p. 140).

After the Gauteng meeting, a second conference was held in the Basque Country in March 2003, where the subnational governments present agreed upon an initial structure for the network, which was baptized *Network of Regional Governments for Sustainable Development* or *nrg4SD* (hereafter also referred to as “the Network”) (Loperena Rota, 2003, p. 175). A Steering Committee was set up as the governing body and the Network would be supported by a Secretariat (provisionally housed by the Basque Country) and a Treasury (offered by the Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions, CPMR) (nrg4SD, 2004b, p. 1). Until then, the administration had been provided by Stakeholder Forum (Dodds and Strauss, 2004, p. 139).<sup>8</sup> The Steering Committee elects two Co-chairs, who formally represent the Network. The Network also established a budget, made up by annual membership fees. The fees range from € 250 to € 6000 and are calculated on the basis of the members’ population and on their GDP per capita (nrg4SD, 2006a, p. 11; nrg4SD, 2006b, p. 1). Both the Secretariat and the Treasury are provided free of charge. In its coordination tasks the Secretariat is aided by the Focal Points, designated members in each of the six continents,<sup>9</sup> that serve as intermediaries between the Secretariat and the subnational governments of each region.

After having obtained a certain formalized structure, the Network convened other conferences in Western Australia (September 2003) and Wales (March 2004). In July 2004, the Network obtained a legal foundation as its statutes were incorporated into Belgian law, registering nrg4SD as an international non-profit association. That legal registration was an important and necessary step towards the recognition of nrg4SD in the global arena (cf infra). The final steps of the institutionalization process were taken in 2005. Since then, the Network has convened an annual General Assembly, during which decisions regarding the organization of its activities are taken. Every three years, the General Assembly goes hand in hand with a high-level Summit to which subnational governments from all over the world and other actors are invited to discuss an overarching theme. The first Summit was held in North Sumatera in March 2005, a few months after the area was severely hit by the tsunami, and focused on rehabilitation and reconstruction of post disaster settlement. The theme of the second Summit, scheduled in October 2008 in Saint Malo (Brittany), will be climate change. An overview of nrg4SD’s meetings can be found in annex 2.

One of the outcome documents of the North Sumatera General Assembly was the Network’s strategy, in which it affirmed the mission and vision of nrg4SD and the priorities for the period between 2005 and 2011. The goals of the Network, as they emerge from the strategy, can be grouped into two main ambitions. On the one hand, it wants to achieve better understanding and cooperation at the subnational and inter-subnational level:

- “promoting sustainable development at the regional<sup>10</sup> level around the world”,

<sup>8</sup> Initially four Co-chairs were chosen, but later the Network decided to bring the number down to two (Loperena Rota, 2003, p. 175).

<sup>9</sup> Currently, the Focal Points are Western Cape for Africa, Northern Sumatera for Asia, Western Australia for Oceania, Wales for Europe, Sao Paulo for Latin America and the Caribbean, and The Northern Forum for Northern America.

<sup>10</sup> Nrg4SD prefers the term ‘regional’ to refer to the subnational level. It defines *region* as “an area where a system of governance exists and which is the largest and highest level of political subdivision within an individual state, represented by the United Nations, but which is above the municipal level” (nrg4SD, 2004c, p. 1). It specifies that its members use different denominations, such as ‘provinces’, ‘states’, ‘autonomous communities’, ‘districts’, ... (nrg4SD, 2005, p. 3). As mentioned before, we use the term ‘subnational entity’.

- “bring together all regions of the world to work together and to answer the specific needs of each region specially those coming from developing countries”,
- “exchange information and experience regarding the policy making on sustainable development at the regional level of governance”,
- ... (nrg4SD, 2005, p. 1-2);

on the other hand, the Networks aims for recognition at the global level:

- “to be a voice for and to represent regional governments at the global level”,
- “seek greater international recognition of the importance of the contributions made by the regions in the field of sustainable development”,
- “contribute to the international discussions on sustainable development by providing the view point of the regions at the sub-national level as well as information on these regions”,
- ... (nrg4SD, 2005, p. 1-2, 6).

In conclusion, in less than three years time nrg4SD evolved from an almost ad hoc initiative to a fully institutionalized organization, with a permanent structure and internal rules. The Network disposes of formalized organs and decision-making mechanisms, a budget and a legal statute. The next section will discuss the membership of nrg4SD.

### 3.3 Membership and outreach

According to the official website, 29 subnational entities and 4 inter-subnational associations currently form part of nrg4SD.<sup>11</sup> While several governments who participated in Johannesburg didn't materialize their commitment, others have joined. An overview of the current members can be found in annex 1. When looking at the membership, one has to admit that the European members outweigh others in number. There is a relatively strong presence of Latin American subnational governments, but African (only Western Cape and Reunion) or Asian (three Indonesian provinces) members are scarce. A second obvious observation is that the Network's members are very diverse, both in size as well as in level of development or in competences. Despite the mainly Western character of the membership, the balance between the members from the North and from the South is considered of paramount importance (nrg4SD, 2005, p. 9). The Network tries to achieve such a balance by having two Co-chairs, one of which from a developing country, and by organizing every other Summit in a subnational entity from the South. The few members of developing countries are thus highly cherished. The Network's Standing Rules also state that financial problems should not be an obstacle to becoming a member of nrg4SD. Governments can always ask an exemption from the fees (nrg4SD, 2006b, p. 2). In addition, a solidarity fund has been established through which the Network can pay for travel expenses of members with limited resources.<sup>12</sup>

Nrg4SD's membership structure shows that the organization positions itself in “a changed way of governing” (cf supra). Indeed, the Network doesn't limit participation to governmental actors. Apart from regular members, it also allows for stakeholders to become associate members (without the right to vote). It specifies *stakeholders* as “interested parties such as non-governmental organizations, universities and academic institutes, trade unions, trade associations, employers' associations and other associations/groupings committed to sustainable development, and agreeing to the Gauteng Declaration” (nrg4SD, 2004c, p. 2). The only one that has joined so far is the Fundación Comunidad Valenciana-Región Europea, a non-profit association under the auspices of the subnational

<sup>11</sup> The research for this paper was finalized in February 2008. Subsequent developments are therefore not taken into account.

<sup>12</sup> According to some of our Flemish respondents, however, this mechanism lacks the transparency it needs. Consequently, questions about abuse are sometimes raised.

government of Valencia. It seats in Brussels together with the Valencian representation to the EU and serves as contact point for all EU and international matters in Brussels. In fact, the only stakeholder formally involved in the Network thus represents a subnational government.

If we include the four inter-subnational associations that are members of the Network (see annex 1), nrg4SD represents several hundreds of subnational entities. But in a strict sense, the Network can so far only count on a few dozen actual member governments. Several respondents confirm that only a small group of subnational entities are truly active in the Network. Those are mostly the founding members and often those who exercise formal functions within its structure. We have to conclude, therefore, that the Network does not yet dispose of an extensive membership, certainly with regard to its ambition of representing subnational entities on a global scale (cf *supra*). Moreover, two governments who have been members of nrg4SD from the outset have recently pulled out. Poitou-Charentes has suspended its membership, allegedly to focus on its participation in CPMR. North Rhine-Westphalia, in contrast, has left the Network completely starting from 1 January 2008. With North Rhine-Westphalia the Network loses one of its most active members, as well as the largest contributor to its budget. North Rhine-Westphalia's decision will be further explained in the comparative analysis (cf *infra*).

Not surprisingly, one of the Network's objectives is to expand its membership. In nearly every document issued by nrg4SD, it invites other subnational governments to join. However, no concrete outreach activities have been undertaken until the approval of the nrg4SD Promotion Campaign by the General Assembly of Khanty-Mansiysk in 2007. Three continental events are organized to present the Network to other subnational governments and to invite them to join. In Latin America and Asia, events have been organized in the framework of the summit of the Latin American Organization of Intermediate Governments (OLAGI) in November 2007 and during the 13th Conference of the Parties (CoP) of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in Bali. One of the specific ambitions there was to attract an Indian state. A European event has been organized in February 2008 (nrg4SD, 2007). At the time of writing no new members have joined as a result of these outreach activities.

### 3.4 Activities

In the previous sections we already touched upon some of the Network's activities. For its internal organization, the General Assembly is convened annually and the Steering Committee meets at least twice a year (nrg4SD, 2004c, p. 3-4). The three-yearly Summits give nrg4SD the opportunity to invite non-members and other interested actors. Additionally, the Network has organized two Latin American and Caribbean continental meetings and is planning a third. These continental conferences are mainly aimed at strengthening cooperation among Latin American subnational governments and with nrg4SD (nrg4SD, 2003; nrg4SD, 2004a). An overview of all nrg4SD's conferences and some other activities can be found in annex 2.

We have mentioned that one of the main ambitions of nrg4SD is to represent subnational governments at the global level in the domain of sustainable development (cf *supra*). The focus of the Network's global interest has been the UN's Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD), one of the most important organizations for sustainable development at the global level (Van den Brande et al., 2008, p. 25), and the UNFCCC, which illustrates the importance that subnational governments attach to climate change policies as a means of achieving sustainable development. Given that nrg4SD wants to be actively present at these forums to be able to represent subnational governments, accreditation processes have been at the core its concern. It has been recognized as an official CSD Partnership and it has organized official presentations at the CSD Partnerships Fairs. Other international recognition followed after the legal registration. So far, nrg4SD has been granted observer status to the CoP of the UNFCCC and to the Governing Council and the Global

Ministerial Environment Forum of UNEP. The ultimate goal for accreditation is to obtain observer status to the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), but the process is not finalized yet.

As a consequence of these processes, the Network is annually present at the session of the CSD and at the meeting of the CoP of the UNFCCC. To fulfill its role as a voice for subnational governments in these fora, it has developed a series of policy papers in which it expresses the subnational entities' point of view on several issues related to sustainable development. Such policy papers have been published on the themes of international co-operation, sustainable development strategies, water, sustainable energy and renewables, sustainable tourism, sustainable forest management and fair trade. In preparation of the 2008 Summit, a policy paper on climate change is expected as well. The policy papers count as the Network's official opinion, while the individual members don't have to agree on every aspect of them. They are not meant as binding declarations with which the Network's members have to comply, but as instruments to make the viewpoints of the subnational entities known to the outside world. In addition to presenting the subnational entities' positions, the Network also uses multilateral meetings to organize side-events, to present itself to the outside world and to give information on best practices developed by its members. It are the Co-chairs and the active members who represent nrg4SD at those events and who give presentations about their own policies.

Other international activities have included the participation at the Steering Committee meeting of the Decentralised Cooperation Programme of UNITAR in 2004 and at the Bonn International Conference on Renewables.<sup>13</sup> At the European level, nrg4SD has contributed to the consultation for the review of the EU Sustainable Development Strategy, submitting a joint review with ENCORE (Environmental Conference of the European Regions). The Network has also signed a Memorandum of Understanding with UNDP, in the context of its Hub for Innovative Partnerships, an initiative aimed at development cooperation for local and subnational authorities.

The other large part of nrg4SD's activities concern inter-subnational or bilateral cooperation. In the margins of the Network's meetings, a considerable amount of partnerships have been concluded. On nrg4SD's website, documents of about a dozen partnerships are available, but not all partnerships are published. The documents usually take the form of protocols of intentions, in which the parties declare how and on what issues they would like to collaborate. In some occasions, these protocols are followed by action plans in which very concrete projects are planned. As interviews with policy officials have shown, not all partnerships are actually concretized. Often declarations are solemnly signed by ministers in the margins of official conferences, and forgotten afterwards. However, some partnerships do make way for cooperation between officials or technical experts of specific departments. As this happens in a less official sphere, the impact of such cooperation is difficult to assess.

A less direct way of cooperation than through partnerships is the mechanism for information-sharing supplied by the website. It provides links to relevant websites of the member governments and it reports about their plans and strategies and about best practices. However, cooperation between the members happens mostly on an informal basis. Nrg4SD events offer a good opportunity for the members to share information about their policies. Over the years, the subnational officials who serve as contact persons for nrg4SD have come to know each other very well. Information-sharing between them happens in an informal and almost natural way. Needless to say that individual relations play a large role here. That is why, in some cases, decisions are already

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<sup>13</sup> A spin-off of this conference is REN21, a global policy network that provides a forum for international leadership on renewable energy. Nrg4SD has been a member of the steering committee of REN21, represented by North Rhine-Westphalia. It is unclear how the Network will continue to be involved in REN21 after North Rhine-Westphalia's withdrawal (cf *infra*).

informally prepared in the corridors of multilateral meetings, when members align their positions for the next Steering Committee meeting.

### 3.5 Future perspectives

All in all, nrg4SD is a relatively young initiative. During its five-year existence, however, it has managed to set up stable institutional structures and it has undertaken a vast array of activities. What will the future look like for this unique network? Two processes, that will potentially have an impact on nrg4SD's evolution, are important to mention.

Firstly, a recent initiative has brought subnational governments closer together. In March 2007 several inter-subnational networks joined in Marseille and set the first steps towards the establishment of an umbrella structure meant to encompass all existing networks of subnational entities: the Forum of Global Associations of Regions (FOGAR).<sup>14</sup> Several members of nrg4SD were reluctant towards the initiative. They feared that yet another network would eclipse nrg4SD's efforts. In addition, some members were skeptical about the true goals of certain actors (e.g. within nrg4SD and CPMR) with regard to FOGAR. That reluctance is apparently the reason why FOGAR is *only* a forum and not a network in itself. However, according to some of our respondents the Forum has great ambitions, including the recognition by the UN as an intergovernmental organization (IGO). Nrg4SD would by extension be considered an IGO itself and be lifted out of the non-governmental realm. Nrg4SD's registration as a non-profit association could, however, prove an obstacle. In addition, it is most unclear and contested how FOGAR could ever achieve the recognition as an IGO. Whatever statute it might obtain, a promising observation is that in the Marseille Declaration, the founding document of FOGAR, nrg4SD is assigned as the sole representative of the Forum in the domain of sustainable development (*Declaration of the regions on their participation in the governance of globalisation*, 2007, p. 3). Considering that FOGAR is still a very young initiative, it is too early to make an assessment of the role of nrg4SD in this new structure.

Secondly, nrg4SD is in the process of an internal review. After a boom of initiatives and documents in the first years of its existence, the Network seems to have lost some of its initial momentum. The last policy paper, for instance, dates from March 2005. Besides the decrease in output, several members also seem to have lost some of their enthusiasm, because of recent events such as the development of FOGAR and the withdrawal of North Rhine-Westphalia and Poitou-Charentes (cf supra), among other things. On that account some nrg4SD members came together in the margins of the 15th session of the CSD in New York and agreed that the Network needed a revitalization. A few weeks later, the General Assembly of Khanty-Mansiysk confirmed the decision and called for an independent contractor to draw up the strategic plan (2008-2014) and work program (2008-2011) of the Network. In September 2007, the Co-chairs (the Basque Country and Western Cape) and the Treasurer of the Network (CPMR) assigned the task to the University of the Basque Country. The team will undertake a survey among the members to identify the problems and bottlenecks of which the Network suffers. Although most members agree on the current difficulties, our interviews show that there is strong disagreement about the reasons of the problems. The

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<sup>14</sup> The founding networks of this Forum, the signatories of the Marseille Declaration, are AIRF (Association Internationale des Régions Francophones), AEBR (Association of European Border Regions), CPMR, IT4ALL (Network of Local Authorities for the Information Society), nrg4SD, Morte Grande, The Northern Forum, OLAGI, ZICOSUR (Zona de Integración del Centro Oeste de América del Sur) and Conférence des Présidents de Régions ultrapériphériques de l'Union européenne (*Declaration of the regions on their participation in the governance of globalisation*, 2007, p. 3-4).

drafting process of the new documents is expected to last<sup>15</sup> until October 2008, when the strategy should be adopted by the General Assembly in Saint Malo.

The future development of nrg4SD could tell us something about the robustness of the institution. *Robustness* (or durability) is “a measure of the capacity of an institution to survive various pressures intact in the sense of withstanding the impact of destabilizing forces without suffering collapse or experiencing transformative change” (Young, 2002, p. 7). According to Young (2002, p. 7), destabilizing forces can come either from within or without the institution and they may take the form of sharp shocks or crises on the one hand, or pressures with gradually increasing intensity on the other. Since nrg4SD has decided to react to some of the recent destabilizing forces (e.g. the withdrawal of some of the active members or the distrust towards the creation of FOGAR) by drafting a new strategy, it looks like it aims at surviving these pressures by adjusting, or through a process of transformative change.

#### **4. Nrg4SD and the sustainable development policies of subnational governments: a comparative analysis**

In the previous section, we have given a detailed analysis of the genesis, the structure, the activities and the challenges of nrg4SD as an organization. However, it is important to point out that a network like nrg4SD is first and foremost an association constituted by a series of actors, in this case subnational governments. An analysis of the Network as an organization thus falls short in giving a complete image. It needs to be complemented by an analysis at the level of its members. In this paper, we want to take a first step in doing so, by comparing three subnational governments in terms of their views and strategies towards nrg4SD. In this section we will firstly outline our framework of comparison and the objectives of the analysis. Subsequently, the results of the analysis will be presented. We will conclude by discussing certain patterns of convergence and some of the most noticeable differences.

This comparative analysis is based on personal interviews, both with representatives of nrg4SD, as with high-level political and administrative officials of the three members compared. The data acquired during these interviews is complemented by the analysis of policy documents and study of literature, including internet research.

##### **4.1 Framework of comparison**

In order to be able to frame the analysis in the proposed theories and to obtain a certain degree of comparability, we selected three subnational entities of EU member states and with a considerable level of autonomy, namely Flanders (Belgium), the Basque Country (Spain), and North Rhine-Westphalia (Germany). It is our aim to study whether these members have different views regarding the Network and to what extent that has an impact on their participation and on the benefits they extract from their membership.

The three subnational entities will be treated separately. First, we will give a brief introduction to their sustainable development policy. This is a logical starting point, since the participation in inter-subnational networks in the area of sustainable development needs to be framed in the way the governments approach the policy concept internally. It is not our aim to make a comparison of the three policies, nor to evaluate them. We will rather bring a few points to the attention which might prove useful to contextualize the analysis. Second, the participation of the members in the framework of nrg4SD will be analyzed. We are interested in the degree of commitment of the

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<sup>15</sup> Since the process is still running, the development of the new strategy will not be further examined in the present paper.

members, and in their initiatives and activities in the context of nrg4SD. Third, we will give an outline of the views and opinions concerning nrg4SD and its functioning, expressed by our respondents in the three subnational governments. It is important to point out that those opinions are often personal and sometimes conflicting, even within the same government, so that we can only offer tentative and generalized statements. Fourth, we will look at the impact that the participation in nrg4SD has on the members' own policies, including the benefits that they extract from their membership.

## 4.2 Flanders

### 4.2.1 The Flemish sustainable development policy

Flanders has lagged behind of its national counterpart regarding the awareness of sustainable development.<sup>16</sup> Initially, the Flemish Environment minister was responsible for the matter. This changed within the framework of the large-scale restructuring of the Flemish government which is known as the process *Beter Bestuurlijke Beleid*. It led to the decision in 2004 to transfer the responsibility for the coordination of sustainable development to the services of the Minister-President (Leterme, 2004, p. 10; Vlaamse Regering, 2008). He now disposes of a coordination unit, though small, which is responsible, among other things, for the Working Group Sustainable Development. This interdepartmental Working Group is composed by 16 delegates at administrative level of the different policy domains of the Flemish government. It aims at detecting the needs of the different departments in the area of sustainable development and at tuning possibly divergent positions. In addition, the members of the Working Group are responsible of giving feedback to their own administrations. The Working Group is meant as a coordinating instrument, rather than a decision-making mechanism.<sup>17</sup>

Flanders characterizes its sustainable development policy as an *inclusive* policy, i.e. “a policy where a line of policy agreed by the Flemish Government is translated by every Flemish minister in his/her own way to the policy in his/her domain” (Vlaamse Regering, 2007b, art. 2, personal translation). Basically, the inclusive policy does not want to heighten planning duties or impose new initiatives. Rather, it seeks to provide a minimal coordination between the policy initiatives of the different departments.

The content of the Flemish sustainable development policy is defined by the Minister-President's Policy Note on Sustainable Development and by the first part of the Flemish Sustainable Development Strategy, agreed in 2006. That text frames the Flemish sustainable development policy and is aimed at policy integration and at developing a long-term vision of the policy in Flanders. It is set up around seven themes, mainly based on the renewed sustainable development strategy of the European Union: poverty and social exclusion, the ageing of the population, climate change and clean energy, mobility, spatial planning, natural resource management, and public health. It contains the formulation of challenges, long and medium-term goals and short-term strategic objectives. The elaboration of the strategy will consist of a series of operational projects, which will eventually form the second part of the Flemish Sustainable Development Strategy (Vlaamse Regering, 2007a). In 2008, the Flemish sustainable development policy will be legally embedded by the approval of a decree by the Flemish Parliament. The decree, as it has been preapproved by the Flemish

<sup>16</sup> Belgium was one of the first countries that legally embedded sustainable development, through the law concerning the coordination of the federal sustainable development policy of 5 May 1997.

<sup>17</sup> The predecessor of the Working Group was already established in 2003 by the Department of the Environment and was later reconfirmed by the Flemish government and transferred to the services of the Minister-President.

Government in November 2007, obliges the government to take certain actions, such as the preparation, implementation and evaluation of the Sustainable Development Strategy, consultation among policy domains, participation of stakeholders and cooperation with the global, regional, national and local levels.

Finally, it is important to point out that, while the competence of sustainable development formally lies with the Minister-President, it is still the Environment minister who carries out the international aspects of the sustainable development policy. Therefore, it is the division of International Environmental Policy within the Department of the Environment that is occupied with the CSD and with inter-subnational networks like nrg4SD, among other things.

#### 4.2.2 Participation

Flanders has been involved in nrg4SD from the outset, starting from the informal talks during the preparatory meeting in Bali in May 2002. In Johannesburg, the Minister of the Environment Dua co-negotiated and signed the Gauteng Declaration. Flanders is one of the co-founders of nrg4SD, from which it draws a certain degree of authority within the Network. It is also often cited as one of the more active members. For these reasons, but also because of Flanders' prestige among other subnational entities in Europe (due to its extremely high degree of autonomy) and because of the strategic location of Brussels for lobbying activities, it has often been approached by other members of the Network to assume a more prominent role within the organization, e.g. the function of Co-chair or continental Focal Point. But so far, Flanders has only been a candidate for a seat in the Steering Committee. When the legal registration of the Network took place under Belgian law, Flanders did offer the logistics needed for the housing of the Secretariat in Brussels, but not the staff, which is why it remained in the Basque Country. Although the Flemish involvement has always been high at administrative level, it seems that the political engagement has never been substantial enough in order to make a bigger contribution to nrg4SD.<sup>18</sup> This hypothesis seems confirmed by the Flemish participation in nrg4SD's events. While Flanders has been almost continuously represented at administrative level, the Flemish ministers have rarely attended nrg4SD's meetings. Apart from Minister Dua's participation in Johannesburg, we can only cite a presentation by Minister Tavernier during a side-event of the 12th session of the CSD in 2004 and Minister Peeters' presence during the General Assembly in Brussels in 2006. The organization of this General Assembly in Brussels has been the highest commitment of Flanders to nrg4SD so far.

With regard to the high participation of Flanders in nrg4SD's events, a distinction has to be made between nrg4SD's own meetings and multilateral events where nrg4SD is present. It is true that Flanders has attended almost every Steering Committee meeting, which is why it is cited as one of the more active members. But as far as Flanders' frequent participation in side-events at multilateral forums is concerned, an additional factor is important. Flanders has always been present at those forums through the Belgian delegation, in other words using the intra-state route. Although it is not a guarantee for input at nrg4SD's side-events, it certainly facilitates the Flemish presence.

#### 4.2.3 View

For Flanders, nrg4SD's main function needs to be situated at the global level. The Network's most interesting characteristic, in the Flemish view, is its aim to be a voice for subnational entities worldwide, in the field of sustainable development. It can particularly remind international and regional organizations and nation-states that the subnational level is a significant and efficient level in the area of sustainable development. Nrg4SD's accreditation and recognition in certain multilateral

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<sup>18</sup> This is both true in the time of the green ministers, as well as under the Christian democratic ministers (from 2005 on).

forums is thus seen as its biggest strength. The goal of contributing concretely to policy and decision-making is, however, less pronounced in the Flemish participation in nrg4SD. Because of Flanders' high degree of autonomy within the Belgian state, it feels it has much more impact through intra-state routes, i.e. via the Belgian delegations to multilateral bodies, than through extra-state routes such as nrg4SD.

As for nrg4SD's weaknesses, four points need to be mentioned. First, our Flemish respondents deplore the institutional instability of the Network. With the seat formally in Brussels, the Secretariat in the Basque Country and the budget administered by the CPMR in France, things are often difficult to manage, with a lack of transparency and often confusing communication as a result. Second, the heterogeneity of nrg4SD's members makes it hard to agree on a common focus. Even though the current emphasis on climate change seems to bring many different actors together, the subnational entities represented in nrg4SD often have largely different goals and interests. Third, Flanders is worried about the setback in output. It makes it harder for officials to defend their involvement in the Network towards their ministers, which ultimately weakens nrg4SD. Fourth, the Network is sometimes plagued by politico-strategic games. For instance, the lack of transparency regarding the involvement of nrg4SD and the CPMR in the establishment of FOGAR has raised much skepticism, including in Flanders, concerning the true interest of certain actors.

Flanders sees three challenges nrg4SD needs to tackle in the near future. First of all, it must review its goals and prioritize its activities. After having obtained accreditation at some multilateral bodies, it is now a matter for nrg4SD to operationalize its observer status. Subsequently, the internal organization of the Network needs to be revised, and the functioning needs to be more efficient and transparent. Having a fully independent Secretariat could contribute to this, but such an option would substantially raise the financial duties of the members, which Flemish officials see as problematic considering the low political commitment. Finally, the Network needs more members, especially big and active ones. This opinion could be viewed as ironic, seeing that Flanders itself has not fully exploited its capacities to be active, certainly on a political level. But the reasoning could be reversed as well, arguing that the level of political involvement in Flanders would possibly be heightened when nrg4SD attracts more members.

Because of its criticism, Flanders has been one of the members strongly lobbying for a revision of nrg4SD's strategy, and it will closely follow up its development. Although critical voices are rising, the Flemish government does not have the intention to leave the Network during the current phase of reflection. However, the results of the internal review will possibly have an impact on the future Flemish involvement in and contribution to nrg4SD (Deketelaere, 2008).

#### 4.2.4 Impact

The engagement of Flanders in nrg4SD at political level stands in contrast with nrg4SD's visibility in Flemish policy documents. Indeed, a large number of the documents issued by the Flemish government regarding its sustainable development policy mentions Flanders' membership of the Network. Also the Flemish agreement to the Gauteng Declaration is ardently emphasized (e.g. Leterme, 2004, p. 6; Vlaamse Overheid, 2007, p. 131; Vlaamse Regering, 2006, p. 14; Vlaamse Regering, 2007a, p. 20). However, apart from the brief appearance in a number of documents, the

visibility of the Network in Flanders is relatively low. Not many people have actual knowledge of it. Consequently, the impact of the Network's activities on the Flemish policy is virtually nonexistent.<sup>19</sup>

Flanders has developed some partnerships in the framework of nrg4SD. The focus has been on subnational entities of other EU member states, such as North Rhine-Westphalia, the Basque Country and Wales.<sup>20</sup> Although Flanders has not made many formal partnerships within the framework of nrg4SD, its membership is sometimes used in a more informal manner. When cooperation with other subnational entities is desired, the department of the Environment will look for other nrg4SD members in first instance. Networks like nrg4SD can then be used to approach other subnational governments in a more direct way. However, if concrete cooperation follows, the framework offered by the Network is largely left aside.

### 4.3 The Basque Country

#### 4.3.1 The Basque sustainable development policy

The origin of the Basque sustainable development policy needs to be traced back to 1998, when the General Law of Environmental Protection was issued. The first objective of that law was precisely the achievement of sustainable development (Gobierno Vasco, 1998, p. 5326). However, it wasn't until 2002 that the government concretized its goal by adopting a sustainable development strategy. The Environmental Strategy of Sustainable Development 2002-2020 adds a long-term perspective to the regular five-yearly environmental framework programs. It contains several detailed and quantified objectives around five general goals: guaranteeing clean and healthy air, water and soil, responsible management of natural resources and waste, protection of nature and biodiversity, a common focus on territorial balance and mobility, and limiting the influence of climate change. The strategy only focuses on the environmental dimension of sustainable development. The entire policy is, in fact, situated within the environmental realm. The responsibility of nrg4SD therefore lies within the Ministry of the Environment and Land Use Planning.

The Basque Country has always tried to be actively present at the international scene, both at the European and the global level. It needs to be pointed out that since the establishment of autonomous communities in Spain, the Basque Country has always been governed by nationalist coalitions led by the ruling Basque Nationalist Party (PNV). The current coalition also includes Eusko Alkartasuna, of social democrat and nationalist ideology, and a small far left party. The Basques are very aware of the fact that the subnational level has important responsibilities in policy-making, certainly with regard to implementation. Consequently, the Basque government strives for active participation of subnational entities in multilateral decision-making. It is therefore not surprising that the Basque Country is an active member in many inter-subnational associations and networks, and a strong supporter of extra-state routes to multilateral decision-making. In addition, it is very active in bilateral relations. Privileged partners include Latin America and the other constituents of the historical territory of the Basque region.

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<sup>19</sup> Arguably, the only exception is a note made by the statistical office of the Flemish Government in the context of establishing indicators for sustainable development. The note shows that the effort made by nrg4SD regarding indicators has been used for the initial development of some of the Flemish indicators (Studiedienst van de Vlaamse Regering, 2006). Subsequently, however, it has been decided by the statistical office to not use the nrg4SD indicators in the final version.

<sup>20</sup> In the aftermath of the tsunami, there was rumor of the involvement of the Flemish external relations and international cooperation department and of a partnership with North Sumatera, the host of the 2005 General Assembly. But in the end the mechanism offered by nrg4SD was not used and preference was given to a direct cooperation with the Indonesian national government. However, Flanders did participate in small-scale activities organized by nrg4SD in the affected areas in North Sumatera.

### 4.3.2 Participation

The Basque government, in the person of the former Environment minister (the current coordinator of the nrg4SD Secretariat), has been among the initiators of the Gauteng Declaration and the establishment of nrg4SD. From the outset, its engagement has been of a maximum level, which is illustrated by the fact that it hosted the second meeting of the Network early 2003. The Basque Country has always wanted to be actively involved in nrg4SD, which is why it presented itself for a seat in the Steering Committee and why it offered to provide the Secretariat free of charge. In addition, during the first Summit of nrg4SD the Basque Country was appointed Co-chair (together with Western Cape). While other members might sometimes be skeptical towards the fact that the Basques seem to claim a lot of control inside nrg4SD, it is true that they invest many resources in it. Without any doubt the Basque Country is the single most active member in the Network. Partly due to the functions that it assumes within its organization, it displays a maximum degree of participation and a constant presence at nrg4SD's activities. Moreover, the Basque presence is always of ministerial or vice-ministerial level.

As a member the Basque Country has taken various initiatives<sup>21</sup> for the functioning of the Network. Several policy papers were initiated by the Basques. Other initiatives, e.g. the development of subnational indicators for sustainable development, also need to be traced back to proposals made by the Basque Country. As the Co-chair and the host of the Secretariat, moreover, the Basque government has a strong say in the direction that the Network is taking. It is remarkable, for instance, that the majority of the recent incoming members are Latin American or Spanish subnational entities. Furthermore, it is striking that the contract for drawing the new strategy has been assigned to a multidisciplinary team of the University of the Basque Country.

### 4.3.3 View

While the Basques try to make use of all of nrg4SD's functions, it is safe to say that the officials of the Basque Country are mostly attracted by the inter-subnational dimension of the Network. Its initial participation in nrg4SD was partly motivated by the aim of development cooperation. The Basque Country historically has many links to areas in Latin America and it feels it is able to help them, including by providing expertise in the area of sustainable development. Nrg4SD is very useful for those purposes, because it offers a framework in which bilateral and inter-subnational contacts are easily maintained and strengthened. By participating in the Network, the Basque officials have access to many places, bodies and officials that would otherwise be much harder to reach. Because of its role as Co-chair, moreover, those contacts aren't limited to other subnational entities. They also include high-level officials of UN bodies, regional organizations, other inter-subnational networks, ... In sum, in the Basque view nrg4SD serves as an instrument for cooperation purposes and as a key to doors that otherwise might remain closed.

According to our Basque respondents, the low political implication of many members is the single most important weakness of the Network. While the Basque government is highly involved in nrg4SD, strong political engagement of the majority of the other members is lacking.<sup>22</sup> The technical commitment, needed for some of the exchange purposes, is often present, but the Network also needs a dose of commitment at ministerial level. In the Basque view, this lack of political commitment prevents the Network from moving forward and dealing with its challenges. Other observed weaknesses include the fact that some Steering Committee members sometimes don't

<sup>21</sup> By this we mean actions or initiatives taken by one specific member and which lead to concrete output by nrg4SD.

<sup>22</sup> Whether this lack of political commitment is related to nrg4SD itself or to the topic of sustainable development, would be an interesting question to investigate.

seem to have the ability to take decisions and that the bureaucracy of the Network often restrains dynamic decision-making. In that reasoning, the reduced output of nrg4SD might be due to the Network's bureaucracy and to the overall lack of political commitment.

The Basque Country was not an active supporter of reviewing nrg4SD's strategy and working program. It feels that the Network's main problem, the lack of political commitment, will not be resolved by approving a new document. The biggest challenge of the Network is thus to attract more political involvement from its members. As a result, nrg4SD would be able to make more use out of its lobby functions, to be more actively present in decision-making (e.g. by responding to EU Green Papers), to strengthen its Secretariat and to have more dynamic meetings. However, since the decision of revising the strategy has been made, the Basque Country has input to give as well. In that context, our respondents pronounced the desire of clarifying and limiting the number of goals for the Network. The new strategy should set forward a few priorities, based on the international agenda, such as climate change or sustainable production. However, some voices also expressed the will of expanding the scope of nrg4SD, notably by involving the subnational agencies for development cooperation and the academic world.<sup>23</sup> Another challenge for nrg4SD pronounced by some of our Basque respondents is the ambition of being recognized, through FOGAR, as an IGO.

#### 4.3.4 Impact

The membership of nrg4SD has an impact on the Basque policy which is noticeable in several ways. At the global level, the extra-state route offered by the Network gives the Basque officials an access to forums where they wouldn't be present otherwise. Concretely the Basque Minister, as Co-chair of nrg4SD, has the opportunity to speak at the CSD or at the CoP of the UNFCCC, and she has meetings with EU Commissioners and UN officials, among other things. Of course, all of these interventions are made on behalf of nrg4SD and they are not meant for the exclusive benefit of the Basque Country. But for a nationalist government that seeks to stress the importance of subnational participation in decision-making, it is clear that the opportunities offered by the Network to receive access at the global level are highly welcomed. In this context, it needs to be pointed out that Basque officials, when they are present at multilateral fora, are usually registered as members of the nrg4SD's delegation, and not of the Spanish one.<sup>24</sup>

Another point to make is that the Basque participation in nrg4SD has a strong domestic visibility. Many people involved with policy, even when they have nothing to do with nrg4SD, know that the Basque Country forms part of it and that it plays an active role within its organization. This has much to do with the fact that the Secretariat is headed by their previous Environment minister. But nrg4SD is also very often mentioned in all kinds of policy documents.

The Basque government makes much use of the framework provided by nrg4SD to conclude partnerships with other members. According to the Network's website, it has signed about a dozen partnership agreements, the overall majority of which concern Latin American subnational entities. The Basque government's investment in bilateral partnerships is explained by the aim of policy learning on the one hand, and image-building on the other. Not all partnerships are effectively followed-up. Some of them don't bear any fruits, but others do. In the latter cases, it mostly results in transfer of information, experiences, or sometimes even personnel. The link to development cooperation is never far away.

<sup>23</sup> While a previous attempt to involve the scientific world in the activities of nrg4SD failed (Loperena Rota, 2003), this time it should include universities that already have a link with the policy of the Network's members.

<sup>24</sup> This was certainly true during the governments led by the Aznar's PP. As our respondents have pointed out, the government led by the PSOE of Zapatero has shown more openness in this regard.

Another impact on the Basque policy can be observed. In the second Environmental Framework Program, for instance, use is made of the knowledge of other governments' experience with sustainable development strategies, e.g. Flanders (Gobierno Vasco, 2007, p. 4). The recent Basque Plan to Tackle Climate Change also mentions the use of information-sharing through nrg4SD (Gobierno Vasco, 2008, p. 30). It is partly thanks to the informal mechanisms provided by the Network that the Basque Country is able to easily follow-up what other subnational governments are doing and how their experiences can be used in the Basque policy.

In the Basque case, besides the impact nrg4SD has on its policy, an impact in the opposite direction is noticeable as well. It is clear that the Basque Country, due to the specific role it plays in the Network, has a very strong influence on the direction nrg4SD is taking (cf supra).

## 4.4 North Rhine-Westphalia

### 4.4.1 The North Rhine-Westphalian sustainable development policy

In North Rhine-Westphalia, the responsibility for sustainable development falls under the heading of the Ministry of the Environment and Conservation, Agriculture and Consumer Protection. One of the seven departments of the Ministry deals specifically with sustainable development. In the North Rhine-Westphalian policy, a strong divergence is to be observed between the previous and the current political term. In 2000, the social democrats (SPD) and the green party (Grüne) formed a government for the second time. They agreed to carry out an Agenda 21 at the subnational level during the following five years. It was to be a participative process based on cooperation with stakeholders (industry, research institutes, environmental organizations, labor unions, ...). The aims were to promote the bottom-up development of Agenda 21 projects and networks, to search for best practices and to develop goals and indicators for sustainable development in North Rhine-Westphalia. Politically, the process was guided by the State Secretary Committee for Sustainable Development, an organ in which different policy domains were represented at state secretary level. The government also set up an advisory body, the Future Council, with representatives of industry, the academic world, civil society, ... to give policy recommendations (MUNLV 2005). The philosophy behind the Agenda 21 process was to pave the way for an actual and far-reaching sustainable development strategy.

The 2005 elections were won by the Christian democrats (CDU) and the liberal party (FDP), who replaced the red-green coalition. The change in governments marked a shift in the sustainable development policy. The Agenda 21 process was not followed up and the running projects were stopped. The coalition agreement did not include a sustainability strategy. In the current policy, four elements have a significance for sustainable development. Firstly, in the area of land use an alliance has been set up between the government, local authorities, industrial, agricultural and political associations and scientific organizations, the *Allianz für die Fläche*. It aims at agreeing on a sustainable use of the surface in North Rhine-Westphalia (MUNLV 2007, p. 269). A second initiative is the Dialog Industry-Environment. In this setting, officials from the Environment Ministry and the Economics Ministry meet with representatives of the industrial world to discuss certain environmental issues. The Dialog mostly works on the basis of EU directives. It is aimed at involving the industry in environmental decision-making and in stimulating companies to integrate the environment in corporate policy. Environmental movements are not included in the Dialog. The third pillar is set up around the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, in the context of which North Rhine-Westphalia carries out a series of measures. The fourth pillar can be labeled 'sustainable economics' and mostly consists of helping small and medium enterprises to make a more sustainable use of resources and energy. Apart from those four elements, many initiatives are taken in the area of climate change. North Rhine-Westphalia has had a climate change

strategy since 1992, which is currently in the process of its second revision. In the area of climate change, the focus lies on energy, which is why it falls under the responsibility of the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Energy.

In its international activities, the focus of North Rhine-Westphalia during the previous political term was manifestly on renewable energy. Nearly every presentation that government officials made in international forums concerned renewables. Especially for the green party, who provided the Environment minister, it was a clear priority. During the present political term that focus seems less straightforward, although the theme did not totally disappear.

#### 4.4.2 Participation

North Rhine-Westphalia was not among the founding members of nrg4SD, but after its accession it immediately became one of the most active participants with an almost constant presence. It is largely due to the personal involvement at administrative level. At several occasions the government has also been represented at ministerial level (especially by Minister Höhn up to 2005). North Rhine-Westphalia was also an active participant in nrg4SD's side-events at multilateral meetings. Its absence has been noticeable since the 15th session of the CSD. It is around that time that the political decision to pull out was made, motivated by the argument that the Ministry chooses to concentrate its scarce resources on other domains, including bilateral contacts and the ENCORE network. Given that North Rhine-Westphalia was a big and active member, not to mention the biggest contributor to nrg4SD's budget, the Network and its members deplore this decision.

During its membership, North Rhine-Westphalia has taken several own initiatives for the functioning of nrg4SD. Its input includes the policy paper on renewable energies and the coordination of an online platform about the use of renewables at the subnational level.<sup>25</sup> In addition, North Rhine-Westphalia has seated as a representative of nrg4SD in the steering committee of REN21, a policy network on renewables set up during the Bonn International Conference on Renewables in 2004. In this network nrg4SD seats as the voice of subnational governments. It is unclear how this representation will be assured now that North Rhine-Westphalia has left nrg4SD.<sup>26</sup>

#### 4.4.3 View

In the view of the officials who have been involved in nrg4SD at administrative level, the main function of the Network is to be situated in the inter-subnational dimension. Although the lobby functions at multilateral bodies are considered important as well, the emphasis is placed on networking. Nrg4SD, much more than bilateral relations, is considered a useful and efficient mechanism to make contact with officials who deal with sustainable development in other governments. Afterwards, it is up to each member to choose how they want to make use of those contacts.

Although the decision to pull out of the Network was not based on a negative evaluation of nrg4SD or its functioning, officials in North Rhine-Westphalia do have some criticisms. Some of its organizational characteristics, e.g. the holding of mixed meetings with administrative and political

<sup>25</sup> <http://www.regional-renewables.org>. This website is no longer updated.

<sup>26</sup> North Rhine-Westphalia's pulling-out might have other consequences for nrg4SD, e.g. for its membership. It is believed that in some governments the silent policy exists that not too many subnational entities of the same country should adhere to the Network. In that regard, it could be imaginable that other subnational governments in Germany will now be interested to fill North Rhine-Westphalia's position, especially considering the competition that often exists between the most powerful subnational entities of the same country.

officials, are considered inefficient and the goals and objectives of the Network are felt to be not clear enough. In addition, North Rhine-Westphalia was among the skeptical members with regard to the establishment of FOGAR and the true interest of CPMR within it. In addition, it considers the undemocratic character of the Forum as problematic for accreditation at UN bodies. While the associations within FOGAR have a democratic structure and a clear legitimization, the Forum itself does not. Besides these criticisms, voices in North Rhine-Westphalia repeat that the biggest problems the Network has to deal with are political. That is why a new strategy will not offer much relief. According to North Rhine-Westphalia, nrg4SD's biggest challenge for the future is expanding its membership, preferably with big subnational entities.

#### 4.4.4 Impact

North Rhine-Westphalia's pulling-out of nrg4SD will probably pass without a sound, considering the low visibility its membership had in its domestic policy. Apart from brief mentions in one or two policy documents (e.g. MUNLV 2007, p. 343), the government's participation in the Network has not been largely displayed. However, North Rhine-Westphalia had some obvious benefits thanks to its membership, such as the seat in REN21's steering committee. In the multilateral arena, North Rhine-Westphalia had less direct interests in participating in nrg4SD. As Germany's highest populated and richest subnational entity, it feels it has much more influence through intra-state routes, both formal and informal. The Network had more impact on the North Rhine-Westphalian policy at the inter-subnational level, although in a less obvious or formal way. Many of the inter-subnational contacts maintained by the Environment ministry result from nrg4SD. Sometimes they lead to concrete bilateral cooperation. However, when the government cooperates with other subnational entities it prefers to do so on an informal level, without the framework offered by networks like nrg4SD. It is felt that the formal obligations of official partnership agreements are rather restrictive to efficient cooperation.

#### 4.5 Patterns of convergence and divergence

The comparative analysis put forth in this paper shows many interesting results. However, since the data were mostly gathered through interviews, the views often concern personal opinions, so that the absolute validity of the results should not be overstated. On the other hand some trends and differences do emerge in an obvious way. In this last section we will bring together some of the obtained results in order to discover some patterns of convergence and divergence.

Some observations correspond in all three entities. Flanders and the Basque Country, as well as North Rhine-Westphalia before 2007, are three very active members in nrg4SD. All three have a seat in the Steering Committee and are almost continuously present at nrg4SD's meetings. Officials of the three subnational governments also make regular presentations at nrg4SD's international events, which shows a high commitment at administrative level. While the three members have diverging views on nrg4SD's future, they all agree that the Network should prioritize and clarify its goals and objectives.

At the other end of the continuum, there are marked differences among the three members. These mostly concern the view on nrg4SD's weaknesses. In addition, the Network's impact on the sustainable development policies of its members shows striking differences. The Basque Country displays a large impact, with a high visibility of nrg4SD in its policy and tangible results in plans and strategies, largely due to the investment in partnerships and bilateral cooperation. In addition, the Basque Country benefits from substantial access to multilateral policy-making thanks to its participation in nrg4SD. In North Rhine-Westphalia, in contrast, nrg4SD has a low impact and a limited visibility, due to the fact that the government prefers informal ways of cooperation. However, many bilateral contacts are a consequence of North Rhine-Westphalia's participation in

nrg4SD, so its indirect impact should not be ignored. In Flanders the situation is somewhat ambiguous, with a high visibility in documents but relatively no impact on policy.

Many observations are shared by two of the three analyzed governments. In that regard, the Basque Country shares some characteristics with North Rhine-Westphalia. They both have taken many own initiatives in nrg4SD's organization, which Flanders has done less. It seems, though, that North Rhine-Westphalia has become less active since the shift in governments, which has to be linked to the fact that the current government puts a minor emphasis on the theme of renewable energies. Another similarity with the Basques is that North Rhine-Westphalia attaches a strong importance to the inter-subnational functions of nrg4SD. Finally, both North Rhine-Westphalia and the Basque Country doubt that the revision of the Network's strategy will formulate an answer to its problems, especially not to the political ones.

The biggest similarities are found between the Flemish and the North Rhine-Westphalian results, which are often in contrast with the Basque observations. Five elements need to be stressed. First, both Flanders and North Rhine-Westphalia show a much lower commitment at political level. This results in the fact that they fail to assume an official function, which stands in contrast with the activeness at administrative level. Second, both Flanders and North Rhine-Westphalia feel they have more influence in multilateral decision-making through intra-state routes, which is why they attach a less important role to nrg4SD in that regard. The Basque Country strongly prefers the extra-state route and wants to be present in multilateral forums as part of an inter-subnational delegation. Third, Flanders and North Rhine-Westphalia make much less use of nrg4SD's framework to conclude partnerships with other members. If bilateral cooperation does follow, it is mostly with governments from fellow European subnational entities. Fourth, Flanders and North Rhine-Westphalia shared their overt skepticism towards the establishment of FOGAR. Fifth, they both express the need of nrg4SD to attract more and bigger members.

Conclusions from this comparative analysis can only be tentative and should only be drawn for subnational governments operating in an EU context. One could argue, for instance, that the impact of nrg4SD on the policy of its members is correlated with the level of political engagement. The Basques, who have invested a lot in nrg4SD and show a strong commitment at ministerial level, extract many benefits from their membership. The Network provides them with an interesting extra-state and extra-European route to multilateral decision-making and gives them privileged access to senior officials of multilateral organizations. In addition, they make use of the lessons learned through partnerships and bilateral contacts in their own policy. This is less true in the Flemish and the North Rhine-Westphalian case. Besides this observed correlation, the analysis has shown that the three members have very different views on nrg4SD, its functioning and its future challenges. It has shown that subnational entities don't make the same use out of the networks they are participating in. Some opportunities are exploited, other aren't, depending on the members' domestic context. Moreover, it has become clear that a network like nrg4SD, besides providing an extra-state and extra-European route to multilateral decision-making, can fulfill other functions for its members, particularly in terms of inter-subnational and bilateral cooperation.

## 5. Concluding remarks

In this paper we have taken a first step in analyzing the Network of Regional Governments for Sustainable Development (nrg4SD), framed in a multi-level governance perspective. The case study has demonstrated that, although nrg4SD is a relatively young institution, it has already gone through a long process of institutionalization and has evolved from an almost ad hoc initiative to a relatively stable organization. The study has also shown that after a wave of enthusiasm, the Network is currently experiencing a period of stagnation. It is now facing an internal review which could test its robustness as an institution. It has been found interesting to complement the study of the Network

by a comparative analysis of three of its members. That analysis illustrates the fact that the members have diverging views on the Network and the direction it should go, and that they use their participation in very different ways.

Nrg4SD's case has proved an interesting application to the framework developed by Van den Brande et al. (2008). It offers its members an extra-state and extra-European route to multilateral decision-making which is unique in the domain of sustainable development. Our comparative analysis, however, illustrates that the members don't use that route in the same way or with the same objectives. Our study also demonstrates the analytical value of considering the inter-subnational level as an additional level in the multi-level governance framework. Indeed, by participating in a network like nrg4SD, the subnational entities to a certain extent bypass both the national and regional levels to be directly present at the global level. On the other hand, nrg4SD is more than an extra-state and extra-European route to decision-making. It also offers a platform for information-sharing and cooperation among different subnational governments in the area of sustainable development.

Since this paper only has a limited scope, we would like to offer some ideas for further research. The institutional aspects of nrg4SD might be further analyzed using the conceptual framework of Young (2002), who offers an analytical structure to study the institutional dimension of environmental change. It might also be interesting to assess the effectiveness of the Network as an institution for sustainable development using the framework of Spangenberg (2002), who has developed a set of indicators for that purpose. Furthermore, our comparative analysis could be supplemented with other members, in order to refine the results. It would also be valuable to conduct an analysis of some of the members from the South (e.g. Western Cape, Sao Paulo, North Sumatera) and contrast their view with the members from the North. For such a study, however, the theoretical framework needs to be revised, as these governments work outside the context of the EU. Finally, interesting insights regarding the organization and functioning of nrg4SD could be generated by comparing it with other inter-subnational networks, e.g. networks that are active at EU level in the area of sustainable development (see Van den Brande et al., 2008, p. 32).

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## Annex 1: Members of nrg4SD

The following table gives an overview of the initial signatories of the Gauteng Declaration (31 August 2002), and the current members (subnational governments, inter-subnational associations and associate members) of nrg4SD according to the website (February 2008). To give an image of the geographical distribution, we distinguish between the different continents. The members Poitou-Charentes and North Rhine-Westphalia are put in italics, since they are still mentioned on the website but have announced pulling out as from 2008.

|                      | Gauteng Declaration   | Current nrg4SD members   |
|----------------------|---|--|
| <b>Europe</b>        | Flanders (Belgium)<br>Walloon Region (Belgium)<br>Bavaria (Germany)<br>Lapland (Finland)<br>Poitou-Charentes (France)<br>Tuscany (Italy)<br>Basque Country (Spain)<br>Catalonia (Spain)<br>Greater London Authority (UK)<br>Wales (UK)<br>Association of European Regions<br>Committee of the Regions of the EU<br>Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions (CPMR) | Flanders (Belgium)<br>Walloon Region (Belgium)<br>Brittany (France)<br><i>Poitou-Charentes (France)</i><br><i>North Rhine-Westphalia (Germany)</i><br>Tuscany (Italy)<br>Kaunas (Lithuania)<br>Azores (Portugal)<br>Tulcea (Rumania)<br>Andalusia (Spain)<br>Aragon (Spain)<br>Basque Country (Spain)<br>Catalonia (Spain)<br>Galicia (Spain)<br>Wales (UK)<br>Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions (CPMR)<br>Fundación Comunidad Valenciana-Región Europea |
| <b>North America</b> | Pennsylvania (USA)  |  |
| <b>Africa</b>        | Gauteng (South Africa)<br>Mpumalanga (South Africa)   | Reunion (France)<br>Western Cape (South Africa)  |
| <b>Asia</b>          | West Java (Indonesia)   | North Sumatera (Indonesia)<br>Riau (Indonesia)<br>West Java (Indonesia)  |

|   |   |  |
|---|---|--|
| <p><b>Latin America and the Caribbean</b></p> | <p>Entre Rios (Argentina)<br/>Goias (Brazil)<br/>Mato Grosso (Brazil)<br/>Pernambuco (Brazil)<br/>Rio de Janeiro (Brazil)<br/>Rio Grande do Sul (Brazil)<br/>Tocantins (Brazil)</p> | <p>Chaco (Argentina)<br/>Santa Fe (Argentina)<br/>Goias (Brazil)<br/>Sao Paulo (Brazil)<br/>Callao (Peru)<br/><br/>ABEMA (Brazilian Association of State Environmental Entities)<br/>OLAGI (Latin American Organization of Intermediate Governments)</p> |
| <p><b>Oceania and the Pacific</b></p>         | <p>Australian Capital Territory (Australia)<br/>Western Australia (Australia)</p>   | <p>Australian Capital Territory (Australia)<br/>South Australia (Australia)<br/>Victoria (Australia)<br/>Western Australia (Australia)</p>   |
| <p><b>Cross-continental associations</b></p>  | <p>The Northern Forum</p>   | <p>The Northern Forum</p>  |

## Annex 2: Timeline of nrg4SD's activities

The following timeline gives a non-exhaustive overview of the activities of nrg4SD, starting from the meeting in the margins of the Summit of Johannesburg and ending with some planned events for 2008. It distinguishes between meetings of the Steering Committee, the General Assemblies and Summits (as from 2005), other meetings or conferences, and multilateral and international events. Places and dates are given as much as possible. The timeline also gives note of the published outcome documents of every meeting, such as declarations or policy papers (PPs).

|             | Steering Committee meeting | General Assembly | Summit | other nrg4SD events   | participation in the multilateral arena and other international activities |
|-------------|----------------------------|------------------|--------|---|--|
| <b>2002</b> |                            |                  |        |   |  |
|             |                            |                  |        | <b>1st Conference</b><br>Johannesburg, 1-3 September<br><i>Gauteng Declaration</i>  |  |
|             | London, 9 December         |                  |        |   |  |
| <b>2003</b> |                            |                  |        |   |  |
|             |                            |                  |        | <b>2nd Conference</b><br>San Sebastian – 31 March<br><i>Statement of the 2nd nrg4SD Conference</i>                            |  |
|             | Brussels, 9 April          |                  |        |   |  |
|             |                            |                  |        |   | <b>CSD-11</b> , nrg4SD side-event<br>New York, 28 Apr – 9 May              |
|             | London, 2 July             |                  |        |   |  |
|             | Fremantle, 16 September    |                  |        | <b>3rd Conference</b><br>Fremantle (Perth), 16-19 Sep<br>- <i>Conference Declaration</i><br>- <i>Work programme 2003-2004</i> |  |

|             |  |  |  |  |   |
|-------------|--|--|--|--|---|
|             |  |  |  | <p><b>1st Latin America and Caribbean nrg4SD Continental Conference</b><br/> Toluca and Valle de Bravo (Mexico), 28-31 October<br/> <i>Valle de Bravo Declaration of Principles for environmental protection and sustainable development</i></p>   |   |
|             | <p>Milan, 5 December<br/> <b>PP 'Developing the added value of regional action for international co-operation'</b></p> |  |  |  | <p><b>9th Session of the CoP to the UNFCCC, nrg4SD side-event</b><br/> Milan, 1-12 December</p>             |
| <b>2004</b> |  |  |  |  |   |
|             |  |  |  |  | <p><b>Steering Committee meeting of the Decentralised Cooperation Programme of UNITAR, 2-4 February</b></p> |
|             | <p>Cardiff, 22 March</p>   |  |  | <p><b>4th Conference</b><br/> Cardiff<br/> 22-26 Mar</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>Cardiff Declaration</i></li> <li>- <i>PP 'Sustainable Development Strategies'</i></li> <li>- <i>PP 'Sustainable Energy and Renewables'</i></li> <li>- <i>PP 'Sustainable Tourism'</i></li> <li>- <i>PP 'Water'</i></li> <li>- <i>Discussion paper 'Regional Government working in Partnership with Local Government to Deliver Sustainable Development'</i></li> <li>- <i>Statutes</i></li> </ul> |   |

|  |                    |  |  |  |   |
|--|--------------------|--|--|--|---|
|  |                    |  |  |  | <b>CSD-12 Partnerships Fair</b><br>New York, 19 – 31 April                                    |
|  | Bonn, 31 May       |  |  |  | <b>Bonn International Conference on Renewables, 2 Juni</b>                                    |
|  |                    |  |  | Statutes incorporated in Belgian law, 31 July  |   |
|  |                    |  |  | <b>2nd Latin American and Caribbean nrg4SD continental meeting</b><br>Recife, 27-28 Augustus<br>- <i>Recife Declaration</i><br>- <i>nrg4SD-UNEP Protocol</i> |   |
|  |                    |  |  |  | <b>World Urban Forum</b><br>Barcelona, September  |
|  |                    |  |  |  | nrg4SD-ENCORE joint contribution for review EU Sustainable Development Strategy, October      |
|  | Bilbao, 8 November |  |  | <b>Seminar on Sustainable Development Indicators</b><br>Bilbao, 9-10 November  |   |
|  |                    |  |  |  | <b>10th Session of the CoP to the UNFCCC</b> , nrg4SD side-event<br>Buenos Aires, 11 December |

| 2005 |                            |   |   |  |  |
|------|----------------------------|---|---|--|--|
|      | North Sumatera<br>9-12 Mar | <p><b>North Sumatera, 10-12 March</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>Strategy 2005-2011</i></li> <li>- <i>Report on the activities 2002-2004</i></li> <li>- <i>PP ‘Sustainable Forest Management and Protection of the World’s Forests’</i></li> <li>- <i>PP ‘The Role of Regions in the promotion of Fair Trade’</i></li> <li>- <i>Lake Toba Call for Action</i></li> </ul> | <p><b>North Sumatera, 10-12 March</b></p> <p>theme: ‘Global partnership on rehabilitation and reconstruction of post disaster settlement’</p> |  |  |
|      |                            |   |   |  | <b>CSD-13 Partnerships Fair</b><br>New York, April   |
|      | Cape Town, June            |   |   |  |  |
|      |                            |   |   |  | nrg4SD obtains observer status at the CoP of the UNFCCC, November  |
|      | Montreal<br>5 Dec          |   |   |  | <b>11th Meeting of the CoP to the UNFCCC</b><br>Montreal, 9 December<br><i>nrg4SD Montreal Statement</i> |
| 2006 |                            |   |   |  |  |
|      | Brussels, 3 April          | <p><b>Brussels, 4 April</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>amended Strategy 2005-2011 + Standing Rules</i></li> <li>- <i>programme of work 2005-2008</i></li> <li>- <i>activity report 2005</i></li> <li>- <i>budget 2006</i></li> <li>- <i>paper ‘Nrg4SD and Minority Languages’</i></li> </ul>   |   |  |  |

|             |  |                                   |  |  |   |
|-------------|--|-----------------------------------|--|--|---|
|             |  |                                   |  |  | <b>CSD-14 Partnerships Fair</b><br>New York, 1-12 May   |
|             | Nairobi, 16 November<br><i>Memorandum of Understanding with UNDP, Hub for Innovative Partnership</i> |                                   |  |  | <b>12th Meeting of the CoP to the UNFCCC</b><br>Nairobi, 6-17 November  |
|             | Brussels, 19 December  |                                   |  |  |   |
| <b>2007</b> |  |                                   |  |  |   |
|             |  |                                   |  |  | nrg4SD obtains observer status to the Governing Council and the GMEF of UNEP, 19 February   |
|             |  |                                   |  |  | <b>The First International Convention for a Regional and Local Approach to Development, 5-7 Mar</b><br><i>Marseille Declaration</i><br>(establishment of FOGAR) |
|             |  |                                   |  |  | <b>CSD-15 Partnerships Fair</b><br>New York, 2-8 May  |
|             | Khanty-Mansiysk, 30 May  | <b>Khanty-Mansiysk, 28-31 May</b> |  |  |   |
|             |  |                                   |  |  | <b>4th Summit of OLAGI,</b><br>nrg4SD side-event<br>Punta del Este, 8-9 Nov   |
|             | Bali, 10 Dec   |                                   |  |  | <b>13th Meeting of the CoP to the UNFCCC</b><br>Bali, December  |

|             |                           |                                  |   |   |   |
|-------------|---------------------------|----------------------------------|---|---|---|
| <b>2008</b> |                           |                                  |   |   |   |
|             |                           |                                  |   |   | <b>nrg4SD presentation event<br/>Brussels, 6 February</b>   |
|             |                           |                                  |   |   | <b>10th Special Session of the<br/>GC/GMEF of the UNEP,<br/>nrg4SD side-event<br/>Monaco, 21 February</b> |
|             | Sao Paulo, 13 March       | <b>Sao Paulo, 13 March</b>       |   | <b>3rd Latin American and<br/>Caribbean nrg4SD<br/>continental meeting<br/>Sao Paulo, 14-15 March</b> |   |
|             | Saint Malo, 28-30 October | <b>Saint Malo, 28-30 October</b> | <b>Saint Malo, 28-31 October</b><br>theme: "Climate Change" |   |   |