

Opinion of the Committee of the Regions — Green infrastructure — enhancing Europe's natural capital

(2013/C 356/08)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- stresses the primary role of local and regional authorities in defining and implementing the initiative and urges them to take steps in all the relevant sectorial policies, in particular through their spatial and urban planning, to plan and organise green infrastructure (GI); emphasises that the key to successful GI deployment lies in effective multilevel governance and in the participation of all parties and stakeholders;
- calls on the Commission to complete, as soon as possible, concrete implementation guides on integrating GI into the range of EU policies; and calls for additional fact-sheets on urban GI; GI should be included in the Reference Framework for Sustainable Cities and the future Urban Development Network;
- emphasises the urgency of establishing arrangements for including GI and its priority status in the partnership agreements and operational funding programmes as they are currently being designed for the cohesion and structural funds 2014-2020;
- calls on the Commission to incorporate requirements aimed at preventing any net loss of biodiversity and ecosystem services into EU legislation; asks the Commission to maintain and extend the eco-conditionality and biodiversity proofing of EU funding; advocates in addition allocating a certain percentage of all EU support for the deployment of green infrastructure to a biodiversity fund;
- welcomes the announcement that the Commission, together with the EIB, will endeavour to establish by 2014 a special EU financing facility for promoters of GI projects; would like to see local and regional authorities involved in its design;
- welcomes the TEN-G initiative and calls for it to have the same pan-European relevance as transport, energy or ICT networks; and asks the Commission to explore the scope for EU legislation in this area.

Rapporteur	Ms Annabelle JAEGER, Member of Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur Regional Council (FR/PES)
Reference document	Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions — Green Infrastructure (GI) — Enhancing Europe's Natural Capital COM(2013) 249 final

I. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

General comments

1. warmly welcomes the Communication from the Commission entitled 'Green Infrastructure (GI) — enhancing Europe's Natural Capital', which paves the way for the EU strategy in this area. It considers the proposals put forward to be extremely important for achieving Europe's objectives for 2020 in terms of resource efficiency, social and regional cohesion, smart and sustainable growth, attractiveness, improvement in biodiversity and landscape quality, protection against natural risks, promotion of a sustainable urban model, local job preservation and creation in small and medium enterprises, public health improvements and the fight against inequality, in support of the targets of the EU Biodiversity Strategy to 2020, and in compliance with and in support of the Habitats and Birds directives and the connectivity of Natura 2000 sites ⁽¹⁾;

2. expects future GI implementation in the EU to contribute to achieving target 2 of the EU 2020 Biodiversity Strategy, which aims at restoring at least 15 % of degraded ecosystems by 2020, and to halting the loss of biodiversity and restoring ecosystems throughout Europe, and not only in Natura 2000 sites;

3. moreover believes that the various international, European and national strategies and programmes implemented thus far have not yet produced results which are a match for the challenges facing biodiversity; that there is consensus on the need to review societal models of production and consumption in order to respond to the challenges of biodiversity loss, of which they are the main causes, due to destruction and fragmentation of natural habitats and the numerous forms of pollution. Unless this happens, the renewed commitments under the Convention on Biological Diversity and the EU 2020 Biodiversity Strategy will achieve nothing;

4. therefore emphasises the Commission's vital role in promoting a cross-cutting GI-based strategy, which is an unprecedented opportunity for all European national, local

and regional governments, businesses, researchers and associations and the public at large to work together to reconcile the economy, society and the biosphere;

5. is pleased to note the proposed definition, which integrates the connectivity of species and habitats with the quality of ecosystems, at all scales, including urban settings, the remarkable biodiversity of both protected and more ordinary areas, natural solutions and man-made nature-based solutions, but believes that this definition should be explained in concrete terms in the implementation guides to be published, including the concepts of permeability and the ability to host living organisms. It is important to highlight in this respect the creation and use of ecological and operational linkages across all scales;

6. welcomes the fact that the true value of the numerous economic, environmental, risk protection and social benefits of well-functioning ecosystems is recognised, and emphasises that this utilitarian aspect of producing goods or services for human consumption should always be used to support the ethical aspects of nature and biodiversity conservation;

7. points out that the concept of GI, by its very nature, cuts across administrative and territorial borders and that its development, protection or endangerment depends in the first instance on Member States' and regional and local authorities' policies on spatial planning and territorial development and on the conservation of natural resources;

8. welcomes and supports this comprehensive approach, which firmly ties GI to climate change mitigation and adaptation. It stresses the primary role of local and regional authorities in defining and implementing this strategy;

9. argues that it is far less expensive to preserve, develop and maintain GI in the medium to long term than grey infrastructure in view of its overall cost, including the external costs currently being borne by society. Solutions based on or inspired by nature, applied in synergy with biodiversity (environmental engineering), are less energy-intensive and require less maintenance and upkeep than conventional solutions and are therefore more efficient and sustainable;

⁽¹⁾ CdR 22/2009 fin, CdR 112/2010 fin.

10. stresses that the prevention of ecosystem degradation and the restoration of degraded ecosystem functionalities must be absolute priorities because measures to manage the consequences of ecological imbalances caused by human activity are always more costly, lengthy and, above all, uncertain in their outcomes;

11. considers that although the economic evaluation of ecosystem services could help decide between conflicting objectives in the context of certain cost-benefit studies, it has its methodological difficulties — to the point that it could even be unsuitable in many situations — and also has obvious ethical implications. It should also be emphasised that there is another way to evaluate the cost of biodiversity loss, i.e. calculating the cost of maintaining the environmental potential to restore this loss by calculating the cost of the investments required to maintain or improve biodiversity in order to ensure the continued flow of environmental services. This is the method that the Committee of the Regions would prefer to see adopted;

12. urges local and regional authorities to take steps in all the relevant sectoral policies, in particular through their spatial and urban planning responsibilities, to plan and organise green infrastructure;

13. therefore calls on the EU and the Member States to support their efforts by providing them with the human, technical and financial resources to meet these challenges ⁽²⁾;

Farming, forests, land and soil

14. believes that action against the loss of soil functions, land-use intensification and land degradation must be the absolute priority for spatial and urban planning. Ensuring 'no net loss' of natural environments, forests and farmland is essential in the face of urban sprawl, and some local and regional authorities have already started to incorporate the concepts of GI and 'no net loss' into their urban and regional planning, in different forms;

15. also reiterates its support for Member States to resume discussions to adopt a common European legal framework for protecting and restoring soil functionality, which is crucial to successfully addressing this key issue ⁽³⁾;

16. recalls that forestry contributes to GI, either actively, by restoring forest continuity or adopting environmental management practices, or passively, by preserving woodland boundaries. To be able to establish GI, particularly in regions

where forests are under fragmented and private ownership, properly-functioning associations of owners need to be established and regional and local authorities need to be given the tools to mobilise these private stakeholders, i.e. land ownership measures, training, technical support and assistance for mutualisation, including financial support;

17. notes the decisions taken by the EU for the Common Agricultural Policy for 2014-2020, and wonders how GI is to be efficiently implemented in these areas by 2020. The Committee of the Regions therefore emphasises the importance of the activities of the relevant authorities: they must make GI one of the guidelines for their use of resources in relation to maintaining and restoring biodiversity through the greening of direct payments in ecological focus areas and the use of the EARDF including the coherent localisation of and budget allocation for agri-environmental measures. At the same time they must free up resources to restore the biodiversity of agricultural environments, not least by supporting organic farming and agroforestry;

18. in view of promoting sustainable agriculture and forestry within GI, believes that developing bio-sourced building materials is crucial for solidarity between rural and urban areas since the use of traditional building materials in urban areas and for grey infrastructure exerts considerable pressure on rural and also maritime environments. It is essential to encourage the use of wood and other materials originating from co-products of agriculture or complementary to usual crops (straw, hemp, flax, wool etc.) to the benefit of local stakeholders. The CoR believes that local growth dynamics need to be promoted, especially through aid for structuring sectors, for investing in industrial processing tools, and for structuring the market through exemplary public procurement practices or encouraging communities which use them. It is also necessary to develop research programmes on the technical properties of these materials and the proper conditions for producing them in terms of preserving ecosystems. Finally, appropriate labelling must be used to inform users of the agricultural provenance and conditions of these materials;

Shared governance

19. emphasises that the key to successful GI deployment lies in the cooperation between all governance levels and in the effective implementation of multilevel governance (MLG) principles as well as in participation of all parties and stakeholders, including local residents, in its development and implementation;

20. advocates participatory approaches, which will generate necessary and complementary bottom-up initiatives, from those who directly participate in spatial planning and land use management, and in particular local communities ⁽⁴⁾;

⁽²⁾ CdR 22/2009 fin, CdR 112/2010 fin.

⁽³⁾ CdR 112/2010 fin.

⁽⁴⁾ CdR 112/2010 fin.

A new type of citizenship

21. notes the considerable social demand for natural areas in urban environments, which is just as much a response to the need for green areas in their various forms (leisure and recreation areas, areas dedicated to gardening and agriculture, landscaping and embellishment features, wilderness areas etc.) as to the sense of well-being they bring, as well as to public health issues, combating economic and social inequalities; these needs must be met for the sake not only of young people, but also of older or disadvantaged people;

22. notes with interest and encourages GI-related citizens' initiatives, especially in urban and peri-urban areas (participatory biodiversity inventories, involvement in the establishing new urban biodiversity areas, the rehabilitation of fallow or abandoned land, shared gardens, etc.). Connecting all these areas by means of access routes for non-motorised transport is crucial to improving people's quality of life;

Potential for innovation and new jobs

23. notes that GI generates research and innovation, which are development opportunities for planners, e.g. in relation to plant-based walls and roofing or ecological restoration; nevertheless points out that the real benefits of GI, in terms of climate adaptation for instance, depend on the quality of implementation. Only functional, climate-appropriate and biodiversity-friendly solutions should be encouraged;

24. supports the Commission's proposal to reduce the risks associated with innovation through financial instruments (such as risk-sharing practices) and backs its plans to support projects involving private and public funds;

25. is pleased to note the emergence of new GI-related jobs in the area of environmental engineering to restore, maintain and rehabilitate degraded ecosystems, and stresses the importance of indirect or secondary jobs (in the production of plant-based materials, farming sectors, etc.). Regions and local authorities with responsibility for economic development should facilitate and support this potential for job creation;

26. believes that GI is based on ecosystems and the associated human cultures, which are both extremely diverse for biogeographical and historical reasons. This is why it is a driver for developing local economic sectors and jobs that cannot be relocated. In this context, the CoR would point out that the EU legislation on public procurement is under review and that the Committee on the Internal Market of the European Parliament (EP), clarified on 11 January 2013 that the contracting authority should base the award of public

contracts on the criterion of the most economically advantageous tender. The CoR supports the EP's view that that criterion should include, in addition to the price or costs, qualitative, environmental and social considerations, such as social, environmental and innovative characteristics, including cost-effectiveness of short-distance procurement where relevant;

Levers for action

27. calls on the Commission to draw up, as soon as possible, practical, precise and concrete implementation guides on integrating GI into the range of EU policies and suggests that regions and local authorities already promoting GI should be involved in designing them in order to co-develop, with the Commission, local versions of these guides, which would be more accurate with regard to local biotopes, knowledge and know-how; acknowledges in this regard that first guidance is already available with the 'Guide to multi-benefit cohesion policy investments in nature and green infrastructure' ⁽⁵⁾;

28. calls for additional fact-sheets on urban GI, which would also help to mobilise projects using new measures under the Structural Funds, which set aside 5 % of funds for investment in sustainable urban development;

29. calls for GI to be included in the Reference Framework for Sustainable European Cities ⁽⁶⁾ and in the future Urban Development Network envisioned as part of cohesion policy for 2014-2020;

30. calls for the future review of Directive 2001/42/EC on the assessment of the effects of certain plans and programmes on the environment to include a reference to GI as an additional criterion for determining the likely significance of effects;

31. reiterates the need, when a grey infrastructure project is deemed essential following an upstream study of all the GI-based solutions, for it to be designed in such a way as to minimise its impact, for this residual impact then to be reduced and finally, for validated equivalent ecological and land-use offsets to be imposed ⁽⁷⁾. The Committee of the Regions calls on the Commission to incorporate these requirements into EU legislation, taking into account the work carried out by the European Commission on action 7b of the EU Biodiversity Strategy 2020 aimed at preventing any net loss of biodiversity and ecosystem services;

⁽⁵⁾ http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/docgener/studies/pdf/guide_multi_benefit_nature.pdf

⁽⁶⁾ Reference Framework for Sustainable European Cities (RFSC), a joint initiative of the EU Member States, the European Commission and European organisations of local governments. See <http://www.rfsc-community.eu/>

⁽⁷⁾ in order to achieve the goal of causing no net loss of biodiversity.

Monitoring and evaluation

32. welcomes plans for a progress review on GI in 2017 and points out that the regions and local authorities are ready to contribute to this through their local observatories for biodiversity, economic activity, health, social inequalities, etc. in order to pass on the relevant data to the EU level;

33. wonders to what extent GI will be efficient, and stresses the need to support the development of a user-friendly and straightforward rapid tool to evaluate the functional health of ecosystems, not only to assess efficiency, but also to allow for comparison with grey infrastructure;

34. considers that it should be made possible to carry out a full assessment of grey infrastructure interactions with nature, and supports the Commission's work on the Mapping and Assessment of Ecosystems and their Services (MAES) in Europe; also emphasises the need to support the development of methodologies and measurement and calculation tools that will make it possible to draw up a transparent assessment of economic activities and products as a whole and their interactions with nature and ecosystem services, based on lifecycle analysis;

Communication, awareness-raising and education

35. recommends that the EU carry out an ambitious communication campaign in partnership with all levels of governance and suitable for use by local and regional authorities in particular⁽⁸⁾ as well as other local stakeholders (associations, businesses, etc.). This campaign could concentrate on the three benefits of GI: environmental, economic and social, and on current good practice in Member States;

36. points out that the promotion of good practices needs to be stepped up. The Commission, in conjunction with other institutions, associations, and local and regional authorities which already have this information, must continue to identify, disseminate and promote success stories through a discussion platform, as well as through regular meetings and training sessions, which the regions and local authorities are prepared to hold with its support since they play a key role in raising awareness about GI;

37. urges the Commission to include aspects of GI in existing or future EU Ecolabel schemes, whether they refer to spaces (natural parks in rural, peri-urban or urban areas) or products (materials, construction, etc.);

⁽⁸⁾ CdR 112/2010 fin.

Funding

38. while recognising that cross-financing helps to steer sectoral policies towards biodiversity issues, the Committee of the Regions underlines the difficulties of mobilising these funds for a variety of reasons, ranging from designations that vary from one financial tool to another to complex financial engineering; therefore calls for precise user guides;

39. emphasises the urgency of establishing arrangements for including GI and its priority status in the partnership agreements and operational funding programmes as they are currently being designed for the cohesion and structural funds 2014-2020, thereby enabling the relevant authorities to fully meet their funding responsibilities in this area; encourages the competent regional or local authorities to take up the possibilities for financing site-adapted GI solutions proposed in the operational programmes and invest in the necessary cross-sector capacity building, co-financing and networking to ensure their successful implementation;

40. endorses the need for a specific financing facility for GI projects and wholeheartedly welcomes the announcement in the communication that the Commission, together with the EIB, will endeavour to establish by 2014 a special EU financing facility for promoters of green infrastructure projects. The CoR would like to see local and regional authorities involved in its design;

41. advocates allocating a certain percentage of all EU support for the deployment of grey infrastructure to a biodiversity fund, in addition to this financing facility; this fund would be used to deploy GI in the Member States concerned by this grey infrastructure, applying the rationale of recapitalisation;

42. calls on the Commission, Member States and local authorities to take effective action at all levels of financial support to stop subsidies and tax relief that harm biodiversity;

43. asks the Commission to maintain and extend the eco-conditionality⁽⁹⁾ and biodiversity proofing⁽¹⁰⁾ of EU funding to ensure that the impact on GI and biodiversity is taken into account in all projects supported by EU funding and that the level of EU funding support is adjusted accordingly;

⁽⁹⁾ CdR 22/2009 fin, CdR 218/2009 fin.

⁽¹⁰⁾ IEEP, December 2012: Background Study towards biodiversity proofing of the EU budget

44. calls on the Commission in its mid-term review of the Structural Funds 2014-2020 and the Connecting Europe Facility to identify and highlight further actions to be taken in the area of GI;

The TEN-G initiative

45. greatly welcomes the TEN-G initiative and calls for all preliminary studies to include the local and regional dimensions of pan-European GI, in order to ensure consistency, effective outcomes in terms of restoring ecosystem functionalities and hence conserving biodiversity and its resilience to climate change, and the highest levels of citizen and stakeholder uptake;

46. calls for TEN-G to be recognised as having the same pan-European relevance as transport, energy or ICT networks, and asks the Commission to explore the scope for EU legislation in this area;

Cross-border and pan-European challenges

47. encourages regions and local authorities to work together in areas of cross-border ecological connectivity in order to ensure consistent GI, and asks the Commission to incorporate this cross-border cooperation into a comprehensive EU-level system;

48. calls for the EU's GI initiative to be extended beyond European borders by stepping up EU neighbourhood instruments for investments in GI in rural and urban areas. Existing initiatives such as the Emerald Network, the Man and Biosphere (MAB) Programme and the Pan-European Ecological Network could contribute in this respect;

Subsidiarity

49. considers the Commission's proposals for incorporating GI into other EU policies and the support it intends to provide for the other levels of governance to develop their own policies in this area to be in line with the subsidiarity and proportionality principles.

Brussels, 8 October 2013.

*The President
of the Committee of the Regions*
Ramón Luis VALCÁRCEL SISO
