

## I

(Resolutions, recommendations and opinions)

## OPINIONS

## EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE

480TH PLENARY SESSION HELD ON 25 AND 26 APRIL 2012

**Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the 'Seventh Environment Action Programme and follow-up to the sixth EAP' (exploratory opinion)**

(2012/C 191/01)

Rapporteur: **Mr RIBBE**

On 11 January 2012 the Danish EU Presidency decided to consult the European Economic and Social Committee, under Article 304 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, on the

*Seventh Environment Action Programme and follow-up to the sixth EAP*

(exploratory opinion).

The Section for Agriculture, Rural Development and the Environment, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 10 April 2012.

At its 480th plenary session, held on 25 and 26 April 2012 (meeting of 25 April), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 129 votes to 2 with 6 abstentions.

**1. Summary of the EESC's conclusions and recommendations**

1.1 The last six Environment Action Programmes (sixth EAP) have been important in shaping European environmental policy, but have not been able to change the fact that many environmental problems in Europe remain unresolved. This is not because of a lack of understanding of the causes of the problems or of ideas about how to tackle them; what is missing is the political will to follow through.

1.2 The sixth EAP (expires in mid-2012) was conceived as a practical environment policy response to the EU Strategy for Sustainable Development issued in 2001; the Lisbon Strategy was its economic policy pillar. The European Commission has – without a corresponding Council decision – quietly allowed the Strategy for Sustainable Development to be forgotten. It sees the

Europe 2020 strategy as its new strategic policy instrument; environment policy is to be coordinated through the flagship initiative *Resource-efficient Europe* within that strategy.

1.3 It would not make sense to the EESC to implement a further environment policy instrument in the form of a seventh EAP, containing those aspects of environment policy not sufficiently addressed by the Europe 2020 strategy, alongside the flagship initiative. It would be unclear as to how such a seventh EAP would interconnect with the Europe 2020 strategy and the flagship initiative *Resource-efficient Europe*.

1.4 The EESC recommends that the Commission, the Council and the EP to breathe new life into the sustainability strategy, to choose a comprehensive, workable seventh EAP as its environment policy implementation strategy, to include the

flagship initiative *Resource-efficient Europe* with all its individual initiatives within it, and to ensure close and careful coordination between environment and economic policy considerations. This would give the Europe 2020 strategy, important as it is, the important task of preparing and implementing the short and medium-term economic and finance policy orientations that are needed on the road to long-term sustainable development.

## 2. The role of previous EU Environment Action Programmes (EAPs)

2.1 At the Paris Summit of 1972, the European Council decided on measures to improve living standards and conditions and quality of life in Europe. As a result, in 1973 the then European Economic Community adopted the **first Environment Action Programme** for the period 1974-1975. The notable success of this first EAP hinged on its introduction of the 'precautionary principle', which gives priority to preventing pollution over tackling its effects.

2.2 The **second Environment Action Programme** (1977-1981) supplemented the objectives of the first EAP with five 'guiding principles': (a) continuity in environmental policy, (b) measures for setting up the machinery for preventive action, particularly as regards pollution, land use and the generation of waste, (c) protection and rational management of space, (d) prioritisation of measures for the protection of fresh water and sea water, and of those on atmospheric pollution and combating noise and (e) consideration of environmental aspects in the policy of cooperation between the Community and the developing countries.

2.2.1 Thus, the second EAP provided an important initial foundation for broad fields of environmental policy that are still relevant today, such as protection of waterways, waste policy, and international cooperation.

2.3 With the **third Environment Action Programme** (1982-1986), **sustainable use of natural resources** was adopted as an objective of European environmental policy for the first time.

2.4 The **fourth Environment Action Programme** (1987-1992) was adopted in 1987, the European Year of Environmental Protection. It was shaped by the ratification, shortly before then, of the Single European Act, which considerably expanded the environmental policy-making powers of the European Community, while national environmental standards and limit values were simultaneously restricted with the implementation of the European Single Market. Debate on environmental policy was very intense at the time. As the period of the 4th EAP came to a close, the Rio Conference, which dealt with 'global sustainability', was held.

2.4.1 A State of the Environment report published in 1992 made clear, however, that in spite of the efforts so far and the four Environment Action Programmes, most areas of environmental policy showed signs of, or potential for, deterioration; areas mentioned include water and air quality, and biodiversity.

2.5 In response to the Rio Conference and this rather sobering description of the state of the environment, the **fifth Environment Action Programme** was adopted in early 1993, formally for the period 1992-2000.

2.5.1 In line with the debate at the Rio Conference, it articulated the objective of '*transforming the patterns of growth in the Community in such a way as to reach a sustainable development path*' – an intention from that time that has lost none of its political relevance. The fifth EAP can be seen as one of the first EU initiatives for sustainable development, as reflected in its subtitle: 'towards sustainability'.

2.5.2 The **fifth EAP** proposed '**strategies**' for seven areas:

- global warming
- acidification
- biodiversity
- management of water resources
- the urban environment
- coastal zones
- waste management.

It will be noticed that some of these were already mentioned in previous EAPs.

2.5.3 In reviewing the **fifth EAP** in 1996, the European Commission itself pointed to a lack of concrete targets and inadequate participation by Member States as the Programme's weakest points. The Economic and Social Committee also observed in its opinion of 24 May 2000 '*that the programme has produced a number of positive results,*' but added that it was '*very much worried about the continuing deterioration of the quality of Europe's environment, which it considers the single most important criterion for assessing the effectiveness of the successive European Environmental Action Programmes and European environmental policy at large*'.

2.5.4 The fifth EAP paved the way in policy strategy terms for the **Sustainable Development Strategy adopted in 2001 in Gothenburg** by the heads of state or government.

2.6 This Sustainable Development Strategy was, in turn, to take environmental policy form as the **sixth Environment Action Programme** (2002-21 July 2012), and economic policy form as the Lisbon Strategy.

2.6.1 The sixth EAP was also given a subtitle (*Our Future, Our Choice*). It mentions four priority themes for European environmental policy: (1) **tackling climate change**, (2) **protection of nature** and biodiversity, (3) **environment, health and quality of life**, and (4) **sustainable use** and management of **natural resources and wastes**.

2.6.2 In addition, just like in the fifth EAP, **seven thematic strategies** were declared and later adopted with regard to:

- air pollution
- the marine environment
- waste prevention and recycling
- sustainable use of natural resources
- the urban environment
- soil protection
- sustainable use of pesticides.

2.6.3 As was the case previously, some old themes reappeared in the sixth EAP.

### 3. The state of environmental policy and of debate on sustainability in Europe at the end of the sixth EAP

3.1 First of all, it is clear that even at the end of the sixth Environment Action Programme, many fields of environmental policy that have been on EAP agendas for a number of years have been addressed inadequately or not at all. To give just two examples:

- ‘Protection of soils’ has been identified as a priority theme in various Environment Action Programmes for some years now, but has not resulted in any genuine ‘actions’ at EU level; one reason for this is the failure to achieve consensus in the Council about the draft Directive proposed by the Commission.
- The theme of biodiversity runs almost like a common thread through the history of the EAPs. In 2001 the European Council pledged to arrest the decline in biodiversity by 2010, but even a Biodiversity Action Programme comprising 160 measures was not enough to achieve this objective. In 2011 a new biodiversity strategy was issued with the declared goal of achieving the original objective ten years later.

3.2 In its opinion of 18 January 2012 (NAT/528, CESE 152/2011, 6th EAP final assessment), the EESC addressed the again partly sobering results of the sixth EAP; the opinion also discusses a new State of the Environment report with little positive to say about progress in core areas of EU environmental policy.

3.3 The question as to why many environmental problems in Europe remain unresolved despite many long-running EAPs has not yet really been investigated and answered by the EU. One thing is clear to the EESC: the problem is not a lack of knowledge or of possible solutions, but often a lack of will to take decisive action. What is lacking is putting knowledge, and sometimes even political decisions, into practice. The underlying cause of this is probably that there are often conflicts between necessary action on the environment and short-term economic interests, in which the latter prevail.

3.4 Of chief relevance to the EESC at the end of the period of the sixth EAP, however, is the observation that the Commission appears to have abandoned the Sustainable Development Strategy, of which the sixth EAP formed the environmental policy pillar.

3.5 Whereas previously the Commission and the Council referred to the Sustainable Development Strategy as the framework for all others, including the Lisbon Strategy, there is now an alarming silence on the issue. It no longer appears in the Commission’s work programmes (even if the European Council has not issued a formal decision on the matter). The EESC has criticised this on numerous occasions. It reiterates its criticism now and once again makes clear that all but merging the Sustainable Development Strategy into the Europe 2020 Strategy is the wrong move. It has repeatedly stated its reasons for this view, with no response from the Commission, the Council or the Parliament.

3.6 Consequently, previous attempts to coordinate the three pillars of the economy, ecology and social cooperation within a single policy of sustainability have been suspended. Therefore, the framework in which the Commission, the Council and the Parliament wish to coordinate sustainability and environmental policy in future is now unclear.

### 4. The Europe 2020 Strategy and the prospect of a seventh EAP

4.1 The Europe 2020 Strategy, seen by the Commission as the most important element of its planning and governance framework, at least offers a more or less clear response to the question of how the Commission appears to see things.

4.2 The Europe 2020 Strategy specifies seven flagship initiatives:

- *Innovation Union*
- *Youth on the Move*
- *Digital Agenda for Europe*
- *Resource-efficient Europe*
- *An Industrial Policy for the Globalisation Era*

— *Agenda for New Skills and Jobs*

— *European Platform against Poverty.*

4.3 Without a doubt, *Resource-efficient Europe* is understood by the Commission as a new Environment Action Programme, and the absence of a draft for a seventh EAP even though the sixth EAP is set to expire in July 2012 must come down to this understanding.

4.4 It is thus no coincidence that the European Commission only started working on a draft seventh EAP after the (Environment) Council and the EP critically questioned where the seventh EAP was.

4.5 The Commission has chosen, as part of the new structure for its policy and programme planning, to make the Europe 2020 strategy an overarching strategy to be implemented through the seven flagship initiatives, with the *Resource-efficient Europe* initiative covering environment policy.

4.6 However, it is becoming increasingly apparent that

— on the one hand, certain overarching sectors that were hitherto covered by the sustainable development strategy (e.g. issues such as distribution justice and intergenerational justice) are not adequately addressed by the Europe 2020 strategy, and

— on the other, certain environment policy areas are not mentioned in the flagship initiative *Resource-efficient Europe*.

4.7 Thus, among the 20 individual initiatives that are meant to give life to *Resource-efficient Europe*, there are a considerable number of familiar faces from previous Environment Action Programmes, such as biodiversity, and water and air quality policy (including transport policy). However, the issue of the environment and human health is not given adequate consideration, nor are chemicals policy or nanotechnology.

4.8 The EESC has commented on both the *Resource-efficient Europe* flagship initiative and its road map, making explicit reference to the shortcomings that characterised previous Environment Action Programmes: many fine objectives and promises, few tangible measures, hardly any indicators and little concrete implementation.

4.9 The EESC invited the Commission 'to describe in precise detail within the 20 individual initiatives:

— what exactly is meant by "resource efficiency";

— what can already be achieved simply through technical optimisation; and/or

— which sectors require the "significant transition" it refers to, what this should look like in each case and what instruments are to be used to achieve this, and

— what specific behavioural changes on the part of producers and consumers are considered necessary and how these can be speeded up.'<sup>(1)</sup>

The Commission has failed to respond, however, and instead stuck to vague and noncommittal language.

4.10 The EESC takes this as confirmation that the Commission's approach to date does justice neither to all environment policy needs nor, more particularly, to the requirements of sustainability. This being the case, what could a seventh EAP achieve?

4.11 The time when Environment Action Programmes were needed to ascertain and describe what must be done has passed. Decision makers in Europe are well aware of what they need to do. Only a few fields are in need of further brainstorming; nanotechnology can be seen as one of them. That does not call for a separate Environment Action Programme, however.

4.12 Above all, Europe wants for implementation. There is serious dearth of real action for which all levels (EU, Member States, regions, communities and citizens) are culpable. In this context, the EESC would like to state clearly: the Commission can draw up all the well-intentioned programmes and make all the announcements it likes, but the main responsibility for implementation lies with the political bodies and/or in the Member States.

4.13 The EESC does not consider establishing a seventh EAP just to offer a home to all the environment policy areas that are not covered by the *Resource-efficient Europe* flagship initiative to be a worthwhile option. The interconnection between such a seventh EAP with a) the flagship initiative but also b) the Europe 2020 strategy would remain unclear.

4.14 However, the Committee is open to the idea of a seventh Environment Action Programme if it is clear what it is supposed to achieve, how it can be ensured that it is ultimately more successful than its predecessors and – thirdly and most importantly – if there is clarity as to which overarching policy area it is supposed to serve.

4.15 The EESC recommends that the Commission, the Council and the EP revive the EU sustainability strategy, choose a comprehensive, workable seventh EAP as its environment policy implementation strategy, include the flagship initiative *Resource-efficient Europe* with all its individual initiatives within it, and to ensure close and careful coordination between environment and economic policy considerations. This would give the Europe 2020 strategy, important as it is, the extremely important task of preparing and implementing the short and medium-term economic and finance policy orientations that are needed on the road to long-term sustainable development.

<sup>(1)</sup> See OJ C 376, 22/12/2011, p. 97, point 1.2.

4.16 In the view of the EESC, such a seventh EAP would need to focus on implementation of absolutely binding decisions on issues that in many cases have been live for years.

4.17 The question is whether Europe is ready and able to do this. There is no ignoring the fact that in politics, time and time again, ambitious goals are set and initiatives called for – and this is equally true of the Commission. However, it is often the very same politicians who then find reasons for failing to adopt or implement them. There is no shortage of examples of this. Whether it be the Energy Efficiency Directive, which is blocked by the Council, or the failure to carry out old promises (in the Sustainable Development Strategy), such as to compile a list of environmentally damaging subsidies and abolish them – there are yawning gaps between word and deed, and the Commission, the Council and the Parliament are called upon to explain to the public how these will be closed.

Brussels, 25 April 2012.

*The President*  
*of the European Economic and Social Committee*  
Staffan NILSSON

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