

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the ‘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

(2014/C 67/31)

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On 3 July 2013, the European Commission decided to consult the European Economic and Social Committee, under Article 304 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, on the

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.

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 1 October 2013.

At its 493rd plenary session of 16 and 17 October (meeting of 16 October), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 134 votes in favour with 4 abstentions:

1. Conclusion and recommendations

1.1 The Committee welcomes the Commission’s communication on Green Infrastructure (GI) and its intention of promoting GI projects by means of a package of measures.

1.2 The Committee recommends that use be made of experience with the implementation of the package of measures in order to develop it into the GI strategy announced in the Biodiversity Strategy 2020.

1.3 The EESC supports the aim of linking environmental benefits with economic and social benefits through GI projects. The aim is to create infrastructure with natural, semi-natural, used or urban landscape structures, thus contributing to the maintenance of biodiversity and other environmental factors, while providing cheap, sustainable services to society. In contrast to Natura 2000, the promotion of GI is not a legal instrument; it is not the purpose of the GI initiative to create an additional nature protection network alongside Natura 2000.

1.4 The EESC notes that the main responsibility for Green Infrastructure projects lies with the Member States, especially the bodies responsible for regional and local planning. The EU has a mainly supporting role to play in the promotion of GI. The GI concept should, in particular, be rapidly and effectively integrated into policy areas such as agriculture, forestry, nature conservation, water, marine and fisheries, regional and cohesion policy, urban planning, climate policy, transport, energy, disaster prevention and land use policies as well as into the corresponding EU financing instruments.

1.5 In the case of GI projects of European importance the EU must take on direct responsibility. The EESC supports the proposal to introduce, by analogy with the TEN-T, TEN-E and eTEN networks, a TEN-G for the financing of Green Infrastructure, with a list of cartographically presented GI projects of European importance.

1.6 The main actors in GI projects at regional and local level are the bodies responsible for regional and local planning, cities and local authorities, bodies responsible for infrastructure projects in areas like road building, railways, hydraulic engineering and flood protection, agriculture and forestry, companies and developers, civil society environmental organisations and trade unions. These actors should be strengthened. The progress of GI projects will depend to a great extent on their being initiated, accepted and supported by these actors.

1.7 The EESC considers that much more attention should be paid to the early participation of civil society in GI projects than is the case in the Commission’s communication. Participatory planning processes, with early involvement of citizens and civil society organisations, are of decisive importance.

1.8 It should also be borne in mind that GI projects can also give rise to conflicts between the legitimate interests of various stakeholders and mechanisms must therefore be provided for conflict settlement, balancing of interests and project optimisation. If properly used, GI could help to mitigate or overcome

traditional tensions in nature conservation between protection and use. The EESC stresses that sufficient incentives must be created for the mobilisation of the necessary private investment.

2. Introduction

2.1 The value of biodiversity *per se* and the services it provides as a form of natural capital mean that its maintenance and restoration are of vital importance for human well-being, economic prosperity and decent living conditions. In its Biodiversity Strategy for 2020⁽¹⁾ the European Commission therefore set itself the target of stopping the loss of biodiversity and the deterioration of ecosystem services in the EU by 2020 and of reversing these processes as far as possible. In particular, Green Infrastructure is to be promoted by means of a European GI Strategy.

2.2 The communication entitled *Green Infrastructure (GI) — Enhancing Europe's Natural Capital* adopted by the Commission on 6 May 2013 focuses on:

- Promoting GI in the main policy areas such as agriculture, forestry, nature, water, marine and fisheries, regional and cohesion policy, climate change mitigation and adaptation, transport, energy, disaster prevention and land use policies, by the publication of guidance for the integration of the GI concept into the implementation of these policies from 2014 to 2020;
- Improving GI research and data, strengthening the knowledge base and promoting innovative technologies;
- Improving access to finance for Green Infrastructure projects – establishment by 2014 of a special EU financing facility together with the European Investment Bank to support Green Infrastructure projects;
- Supporting EU-level Green Infrastructure projects – by the end of 2015 assessment by the Commission of the development of a network of Green Infrastructure projects of European importance as part of a TEN-G initiative.

2.3 In its opinion on the Biodiversity Strategy of 26 October 2011⁽²⁾ the EESC welcomed the strategy in principle but was critical of the failure to analyse the reasons why the targets had not been met. In particular the lack of political will in the Member States was preventing their effective implementation.

3. General comments

3.1 A clear definition of GI is used by David Rose in *Green Infrastructure. A landscape approach*: "Green infrastructure refers to

features that connect the natural and built environments and make cities and towns more liveable, such as parks, trails, green roofs, green streets, and the urban tree canopy. At the scale of a region, green infrastructure comprises the network of natural areas, green spaces, greenways, working (forest and agricultural) lands, and other features that provide multiple benefits for the health and well-being of people and ecosystems (...)".

3.2 Examples of GI are:

- The creation or maintenance of natural flood plains: whereas a dike merely prevents floods, flood plains also filter the water, stabilise the water table, provide leisure opportunities, store CO₂, provide timber and help to link up natural habitats.
- Forests with a good species, age and structural mix absorb large quantities of water and protect the soil, prevent flooding and landslips as well as mitigating their effects.
- GI as an integral part of the development of residential areas: well-designed parks, avenues, footpaths and green roofs and walls are a cost-effective way of improving the urban climate and generally improving the quality of urban life. This also contributes to biodiversity and combating climate change.

3.3 82 % of land in the EU is outside the Natura 2000 network. The maintenance and restoration of biodiversity by promoting Green Infrastructure, also outside Natura 2000, are therefore clearly essential both for the viability of the network of protected areas and for the provision of ecosystem services in general. In contrast to Natura 2000, the promotion of GI is not a legal instrument. It cannot therefore replace implementation of Natura 2000 but it adds a further component to it. On the other hand, it is not the objective of the GI initiative to create an additional nature protection network alongside Natura 2000. The EESC argues that the GI initiative should be used in particular to promote cooperative protection of nature and the environment in all Member States.

3.4 The EESC stresses the urgency of early and active participation of civil society in GI projects, as provided for in the Aarhus Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters. Numerous examples show the extent to which the success of projects depends on approval or rejection by civil society. There should therefore be much greater emphasis on the bottom-up approach and on the building of partnerships, involving local authorities, bodies responsible for infrastructure projects, industry and trade unions, agriculture and forestry, water resources management and coastal protection and environmental NGOs in the European Commission's strategy.

⁽¹⁾ COM(2011) 244 final.

⁽²⁾ EESC opinion on *An EU Biodiversity Strategy to 2020*, OJ C 24, 28.1.2012, pp. 111-116.

3.5 The EESC notes with regret that the Commission communication on GI is not yet the European GI strategy announced in the Biodiversity Strategy 2020. The EESC welcomes the actions announced in the communication as steps in the right direction. Experience with the implementation of these measures should be used to develop this into a GI strategy.

3.6 The EESC considers it necessary to go further than the communication in setting priorities for the implementation of GI. Like the Biodiversity Strategy, the communication lacks a clear analysis of the reasons why Green Infrastructure has not been adopted on a sufficient scale. The planned technical guidelines and improvements in the state of information and knowledge will not be sufficient to compensate for a lack of political will in individual Member States to implement these concepts. The EESC believes that an effective GI strategy will require stringent monitoring and a critical analysis of the measures in the Member States as well as, where necessary, targeted follow-up measures to support Member States or regions with significant deficits.

4. Specific comments

4.1 Role of the EU in promoting GI

4.1.1 The main responsibility for Green Infrastructure projects lies with the Member States, especially the bodies responsible for regional and local planning. The EU has a mainly supporting role to play by publicising the concept of GI and, as provided for in the Commission communication, providing suitable and accessible sources of information and knowledge. Moreover, the EU financing instruments have a major influence on regional and local planning, and the integration of the GI concept into these financing instruments must therefore be given high priority.

4.1.2 In the case of certain GI projects of European importance the EU must take on direct responsibility. Such projects are typically based on cross-border landscape features such as mountain ranges, rivers or forests. The communication cites the European Green Belt initiative as a successful example of this. Particular attention should also be paid to cross-border river valleys as the basis for a European GI. Particularly in the case of rivers like the Danube or the Elbe, which this year once again experienced serious flooding, the GI concept can combine improved flood defences with the maintenance of sensitive waters of importance for pan-European biodiversity, as well as economic and tourism development.

4.1.3 The EESC supports the promotion of a strategically planned European network of GI projects of European importance with a list of cartographically presented projects. This project should, in the framework of a TEN-G initiative, be assigned similar status to European infrastructure initiatives in the areas of transport, energy and telecommunications.

4.2 Dissemination of the concept of GI

One major obstacle to the dissemination and promotion of GI is, the EESC believes, to be found in the lack of knowledge of the concept of GI and of the practical advantages, including possible cost advantages. The Commission therefore rightly set itself the goals of raising important stakeholders' awareness of GI, promoting established practices by the exchange of information and improving the state of GI knowledge. Social media offer a particularly useful platform in this connection. The EESC considers the use of a clear and easily understandable definition of GI to be an essential precondition for this publicity work. The definition used by the Commission does not fulfil this condition ⁽³⁾.

4.3 Taking account of the specific situation in the individual Member States

4.3.1 The situation with regard to the availability of natural, semi-natural and urban land in the individual Member States and regions is highly diverse. Whilst in some densely populated regions and cities a great deal of land is used for "grey infrastructure", other regions have large areas of land which are left to nature. European GI promotion measures must make a distinction between regions attempting to create new GI and those where the emphasis is, rather, on the maintenance and care of landscapes.

4.4 Integration of GI into key policy areas and their financing instruments

4.4.1 The communication rightly assigns the highest priority to the effective integration of GI considerations into a broad range of policy areas.

4.4.2 The EESC welcomes the drawing-up of technical guidelines, with principles and conditions for the integration of GI aspects into regional and cohesion policy, climate and environmental policy, health and consumer policy and the Common Agricultural Policy, including the related financing mechanisms. These should be rapidly published so that the Member States, which are already working on the operational plans, can use the guidelines for the 2014-2020 programming period.

4.4.3 GI depends not only on public but also private investment. The EESC emphasises that sufficient incentives are needed for private investment in GI. The EESC welcomes the proposed establishment of a special EU financing facility jointly with the EIB.

4.5 Effective participation of civil society in regional and local planning

4.5.1 The Communication does recognise the need for integration of GI into regional spatial planning and local planning,

⁽³⁾ COM(2013) 249 final, p. 3.

but the EESC points to the lack of any specific measures in the action plan. Local spatial, landscape and building planning in particular have a significant impact on the implementation of GI but, under the subsidiarity principle, can only be influenced by the European level to a limited extent.

4.5.2 The EESC calls for the early participation of regional and local civil society actors in GI projects, without which the projects will be impossible to implement or will fail for lack of social acceptance. Participatory planning processes are therefore needed, assigning an active, shaping role to these actors. It should be borne in mind that, when decisions on GI are taken, there are not only "win-win" scenarios, and individual stakeholders may in certain cases have to accept disadvantages (e.g. if the maintenance of GI on river banks or coasts results in construction bans). Conflicting objectives arising from competing land use claims (e.g. food, housing and infrastructure, biotope connectivity, biodiversity) must be addressed and solutions found.

4.6 GI in urban areas

4.6.1 The EESC sees enormous potential for GI measures in urban areas. Here they bring health advantages, improve the urban climate, create jobs and improve the attractiveness of cities. In cities in particular it is important to improve understanding of GI solutions - beginning in schools - and to strengthen the active participation of civil society. The EESC sees the current strong interest in urban gardening and farming as a strong signal of the willingness of many people to contribute to intact ecosystems and to try out new forms of community and community spirit.

4.7 Integration into agriculture and rural development

4.7.1 The nature and extent of the integration of GI will depend to a great extent on the outcome on the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and the EU's Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) for 2014-2020. Political agreements have been reached in both areas. The EESC has repeatedly advocated a multifunctional agriculture and function-orientated direct payments. With a view to the forthcoming agricultural reform and a more environmental orientation for European

agriculture, direct payments have, inter alia, been made dependent on the achievement of higher environmental standards and the identification of environmental priority areas. The EESC will study the decisions on the CAP reform in detail and compare them with its own positions.

4.7.2 The EESC expects to see further environmental connectivity services provided in the framework of the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development and in particular the agricultural environment measures. The EESC has repeatedly pointed to the interest in nature and biotope conservation among a large proportion of farmers and foresters. Many pilot projects have convincingly demonstrated that a partnership-based approach can achieve positive effects. The EESC calls for both extensively and intensively farmed land which is farmed in a resource-efficient way to be included in GI projects. Preference should be given here to voluntary, integrated production measures. Here too it is important to unlock the potential of GI for rural development in social and demographic terms.

4.8 Linking GI to other policy areas

4.8.1 **Integrated management of waters and coasts** should make the most effective possible use of the potential of Green Infrastructure ⁽⁴⁾.

4.8.2 The deterioration of ecosystems in the EU is above all a consequence of increasing land-take, land fragmentation and more intensive use of land. GI can counter this trend. It should be supported by more intensive European **soil protection policy** measures, including legislative steps, to reduce land-take ⁽⁵⁾.

4.8.3 GI acts as a carbon sink, especially by protecting natural soils. The general **climate policy** objective of developing the European economy into a low-carbon, bio-based economy makes healthy ecosystems even more important. The many uses of GI should be given special attention in the Member States' strategies for adaptation to climate change.

Brussels, 16 October 2013.

*The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee*
Henri MALOSSE

⁽⁴⁾ EESC opinion on *Maritime spatial planning and integrated coastal management*, (not published yet in O.J.)

⁽⁵⁾ EESC opinion on the *7th Environment Action Programme* (point 4.2.2), OJ C 161, 6.6.2013, pp. 77-81.