

**Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the 'Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament on pan-European environmental cooperation after the 2003 Kiev conference'**

(COM(2003) 62 final)

(2003/C 234/09)

On 6 February 2003 the Commission decided to consult the European Economic and Social Committee, under Article 262 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, on the above-mentioned communication.

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 27 June 2003. The rapporteur was Mr Ribbe.

At its 401st Plenary Session of 16 and 17 July 2003 (meeting of 16 July), the Committee adopted the following opinion by 119 votes to one, with one abstention.

## 1. Content of the Commission communication

1.1. The Commission presents its ideas for pan-European environmental cooperation in the wake of the fifth conference of European environment ministers in Kiev on 21 to 23 May 2003, and describes the main challenges facing Europe today in the field of environmental protection, especially with regard to the countries to the east and south-east of the EU's current external frontiers. The sweeping political changes in recent years have paved the way for the joint discussion of measures to reduce environmental damage.

1.2. The first conference of European environment ministers was held in Dobris in 1991. The aim at that time was to create a framework for joint action and to support the new democratic societies in their endeavours to provide more environmental protection and sustainable development. In addition, however, the conference also established the 'Environment for Europe' process, and the continuation of this process was discussed in Kiev.

1.3. The Commission praises the cooperation to date and a series of concrete results and developments which have led in part to appreciable reductions in environmental damage. On the other hand, however, it also makes it clear that a great deal must still be done. It talks about the serious neglect of the environment in some countries and points to the adverse effects on the health of those countries' populations, and especially their children. The Commission states that it is necessary to develop and implement more efficient environmental strategies as a matter of urgency.

1.4. According to the Commission, the aim of the phase in the 'Environment for Europe' process now being addressed is — in a nutshell — to bring the relevant countries' environmental laws into line with EU standards and to implement the sustainable development objectives laid down at the

Johannesburg summit. This is to be achieved by implementing international agreements and also with the aid of actions and investments. EU funding is also to be used for this purpose in order to implement concrete projects and carry the political decision-making processes forward.

1.5. Civil society and, in particular, environmental NGOs are mentioned as a part of this process, but no vital role is assigned to them.

1.6. The Commission divides the countries in question into four distinct groups, depending on the closeness of their political ties with the EU:

- the 10 accession countries and the three further candidate countries (Bulgaria, Romania, Turkey),
- the five Western Balkan countries,
- the Western NIS and the Caucasus, and
- the NIS countries of Central Asia, which participate in pan-European cooperation as members of the UN European region and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

## 2. General comments

2.1. Because of the short space of time between the publication of the Commission communication, the Council of Ministers' discussion on the matter (with resolution) and the conference itself the EESC refrained from adopting an opinion prior to the Kiev conference. Instead it would like to assess in this opinion not only the communication but also the conference proceedings and outcome.

*The 'Environment for Europe' process and the Kiev conference*

2.2. It was in Dobris back in 1991 that 'Environment for Europe' was chosen as the name for the process described in the Commission communication. This name gives the impression that the process still involves an overall strategy for environmental protection and sustainable development in the whole of Europe. However, this is not the case (any longer), even though ideas to that effect were expressed at the time in Dobris.

2.3. The EESC underlines the importance thus far of the 'Environment for Europe' process for the development of environmental policy within the EU, too. One of the positive effects of this process is, for example, the 1998 Åarhus Convention which triggered an important step towards the involvement of society in environmental policymaking.

2.4. The efforts to date of the Commission and all the countries involved in the 'Environment for Europe' process are welcomed by the Committee. This commitment emphasises the importance of environmental protection and sustainable development for the future of Europe. The high attendance at the Kiev conference (about 4 000 participants) is indicative of the great importance attached to environmental protection and sustainable development in society.

2.5. In the EESC's view, one particularly positive sign to emerge from the conference — apart from the agreements<sup>(1)</sup> concluded — was that ministers held extensive talks with NGO representatives.

2.6. However, the Committee would criticise the fact that no detailed assessment was presented either in the run-up to the conference or at the conference itself indicating which elements in the 'Environment for Europe' process have been particularly effective so far and where particular difficulties have arisen. Given the continuing drastic state of the environment in some areas (cf. 'Europe's Environment: the third assessment' presented at the Kiev conference by the European Environment Agency), such an assessment would certainly be appropriate after 12 years of the 'Environment for Europe' process and also helpful if 'more efficient environmental strategies' (cf. point 1.3) really are to be developed as required.

*The new challenge in the field of environmental protection to the east and south-east of the EU's current external frontiers*

2.7. The communication and the document issued at the end of the Kiev conference make it clear that the main concern now within the process is to protect the environment in the east and south-east European countries in question. Even if the initial situations and opportunities for making progress in the

regions in question are extremely disparate, the main aim everywhere — according to the conference participants — is to bring environmental standards into line with EU standards. This objective is expressly welcomed and supported by the EESC, for the comprehensive adoption and application of environmental law would undoubtedly bring about important reductions in environmental damage.

2.8. However, it is also necessary not to overlook the fact that the EU itself has made it clear in many documents that it is not because of the all too frequent infringements of EU environmental legislation that there are environmental problems in Europe. The vast majority of the activities which cause undue damage to the environment are within the law (in Europe), i.e. more far-reaching initiatives in and beyond the EU are an absolute necessity. The EESC has already pointed this out on several occasions. However, this also means that the EU standards to be applied in the countries in question can therefore only be regarded as an intermediate step on the road towards sustainability. The laws must be tightened up further, and both businesses and private individuals must give the utmost consideration in the way they behave to environmental protection and sustainable development.

2.9. The Commission communication divides up the countries to which the future process is to apply into four regions (cf. point 1.6). The Committee thinks that this breakdown makes sense, for both the initial situations and opportunities for future action in these countries differ enormously. For example, the accession countries — unlike the other regions — will be adopting the EU's environmental provisions and will also be able to profit from Structural Fund, Cohesion Fund and rural development monies.

*The role of civil society*

2.10. The EESC praises the efforts made so far to solve the environmental problems in some of the countries in question, but agrees with the Commission that awareness of the need for more environmental protection and the political will to do more can and must be strengthened considerably.

2.11. The vast proportion of the money to be invested on environmental protection and sustainable development in the future will have to come from the budgets of the countries themselves or from businesses and private individuals. Only if there is a high sense of environmental awareness will politicians be ready to make the funds available. This will require the development of a society which regards environmental protection and sustainable development as offering the prospect of a better society and not as rivals for the funds to be spent on the expansion of general infrastructure or, for example, the health, educational or social sectors. There is an urgent need to work on the creation of such an awareness.

(1) Protocols on strategic environmental assessment, pollutant release and transfer registers and civil liability and compensation of damages caused by transboundary effects of industrial accidents.

2.12. Organised civil society plays a very decisive role here. The EESC has stressed on several occasions that environmental protection and sustainable development cannot be imposed from above and that a bottom-up approach must be sought and found. The Commission refers in part to civil society in its communication, which, for example, describes the important role played by the Regional Environment Centres (RECs) that it co-finances.

2.13. Despite all the high regard for the work of the RECs, however, one criticism which must be made is that a properly functioning environmental network system has not yet been built in the individual countries. The many groups which exist there are frequently very poorly organised nationally so that in many cases they play only a secondary role in political decision-making.

2.14. In this context it is necessary to discuss the role to be played by the RECs in supporting the creation of integrated and not only decentralised structures, the involvement of organised civil society in the 'Environment for Europe' process, and the strengthening of environmental NGOs.

2.15. The EESC thinks that one important concern should be to involve business associations and trade union organisations more closely in this process. Environmental mainstreaming must permeate all sections of society and start at a very young age. Only if education and training include environmental issues will it be possible to push through the aforementioned bottom-up approach. In the EESC's opinion, the 'Environment for Europe' process has not taken account of this aspect, and has not progressed far enough in the desired direction.

### 3. Specific comments

3.1. The EESC notes the outcome of the Kiev conference, including the final declaration. It underlines the point made in the declaration that foreseeable developments could create many new problems. However, neither the Commission communication nor the Kiev conference's final declaration describes clearly how new environmental problems, which are

hardly known or unknown at present but which are wholly predictable, can be avoided in future in the countries in question.

3.2. One example which the EESC would point to and was also mentioned by the environment ministers is the growth in traffic especially on the roads already evident in those countries, and in particular in the countries with high economic growth and noticeable rises in living standards. A further example is the intensification of agricultural production. The export of old technology (such as motor vehicles with no or little exhaust-gas pollution control) or the transfer of old processes from the EU to these countries exacerbates the problem in part.

3.3. The EESC would therefore welcome it if future Commission documents — after taking a detailed description of the problems as their starting point — were to give a much clearer description of the strategies for remedying the resultant damage. In this respect the EESC regards both the Commission paper and the final declaration as being too general and imprecise. The aim is not only to clear up the environmental disasters inherited from the old regimes but also to provide sustainable development for the future, for which significant progress still has to be made in the present EU Member States, too. Seen in these terms, the failure of the Commission document and the Kiev conference's final declaration to commit themselves leaves a nasty aftertaste.

3.4. The EESC would like to recommend to the Commission and the UNECE as the co-hosts of the Kiev conference that they carry out a separate assessment on the successes and failures to date and the resultant strategy for integrating civil society into the 'Environment for Europe' process.

3.5. The EESC thinks that the role to be played by civil society within the 'Environment for Europe' process is still not adequately recognised. Especially in countries still lagging a long way behind in terms of prosperity, it will not be possible to establish sustainable development unless all groups give their support or even demand the appropriate initiatives from their governments. Notwithstanding its high regard for the RECs' serious and devoted work, the EESC doubts whether the establishment and promotion of such centres is enough.

Brussels, 16 July 2003.

*The President*  
*of the European Economic and Social Committee*  
Roger BRIESCH