

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the Proposal for a Council Decision establishing a Community civil protection mechanism (recast)

(COM(2006) 29 final — 2006/0009 (CNS))

(2006/C 195/10)

On 7 March 2006, the Council decided to consult the European Economic and Social Committee, under Article 37 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, on the abovementioned proposal.

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 26 April 2006. The rapporteur was Ms Sánchez Miguel.

At its 427th plenary session held on 17 and 18 May 2006 (meeting of 17 May), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 144 votes, with one against and one abstention.

1. Conclusions and recommendations

1.1 The EESC welcomes the Decision adopted by the Council on the Community civil protection mechanism which, overall, takes up the observations made by the EESC in its Opinion of November 2005 regarding the Communication on improving this mechanism ⁽¹⁾.

1.2 The EESC wishes to stress that, as a method for simplifying Community legislation, the recasting procedure makes it easier for civil protection authorities in Member States to understand and apply the legislation, enabling them to be more responsive to disasters of both natural and human origin.

1.3 By strengthening the action of the mechanism through the provision of greater powers and, above all, increased and improved resources, intervention can be facilitated both inside and outside the EU. The reference to coordination between the mechanism and the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs is of particular importance. However, the EESC believes that it should be extended to the Red Cross and to the NGOs which operate in affected areas, and should also act as coordinator for the volunteers who play an important role in disaster work.

1.4 Sufficient budget resources are crucial in order for the mechanism to operate properly, and it is also important to recognise the need to improve information, provide transport means, make provision for expert training, etc. The EESC reiterates the necessity of this vital point, and believes that the Commission should have access to these funds and should require the Member States to comply with the obligations so that civil protection can be successfully achieved.

⁽¹⁾ Opinion CESE 1491/2005 of 14 December 2005. OJ C 65, 17.3.2006, p. 41.

2. Introduction

2.1 The Community civil protection mechanism was set up in 1981 ⁽²⁾; since then, together with the Civil Protection Action Programme ⁽³⁾, it has made it easier to mobilise and coordinate civil protection inside and outside the EU. The experience acquired over the years has made it clear that the mechanism needs to be improved, especially since both the European Parliament and the Council have been appreciative of its intervention in major disasters inside and outside the EU.

2.2 With the aim of making the mechanism more effective, the Commission issued a Communication ⁽⁴⁾ proposing a series of improvements, focusing on:

- greater coordination between the mechanism and national civil protection systems, and with international organisations, particularly the UN;
- greater preparation of teams, with particular reference to the existence of rapid response modules and the creation of reserve modules in each Member State, available for action within and outside the EU;
- analysis and assessment of needs for each disaster, by means of a warning system using the resources of the Common Emergency Communication and Information System (CECIS);
- reinforcing the logistical basis.

⁽²⁾ Decision 2001/792/EC, Euratom.

⁽³⁾ Council Decision, 1999/847/EC, 9 December.

⁽⁴⁾ Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions – Improving the Community Civil Protection Mechanism COM (2005) 137 final.

2.3 The EESC issued an Opinion ⁽⁵⁾ on the Communication. It welcomed the proposed improvements, but felt that there were some measures that could be modified in the light of experience, especially that acquired during the recent interventions in response to disasters in Asia. In its Opinion, the EESC made the following suggestions to the Commission aimed at improving the operation of the mechanism:

- the CECIS system could be boosted via a satellite-based structure that would help to increase knowledge of disasters and provide the data needed to improve the deployment of resources and people;
- when training intervention teams, the need for language learning should be taken into consideration, and there should also be a visible identification system for disaster relief workers sent by the EU;
- there should be minimum intervention measures which would be coordinated by the mechanism and with the UN; for this purpose, there should be a centralised technical team on call 24 hours a day, with sufficient funds for it to be operational under optimum conditions;
- the mechanism should be able to use its own communications and transport resources.

3. Comments on the proposal

3.1 The Council Decision, which recasts the earlier Decision of 23 October 2001 and the aforementioned Communication in one text, falls in line with the Commission's programme to simplify legislation. The recasting method used will facilitate implementation, both for the mechanism and the national authorities responsible for civil protection. The content has also been improved considerably, both in terms of the functioning of the Community civil protection mechanism and the provision of resources required for it to be operational.

3.2 The EESC welcomes this initiative, which aims to clarify the role of the Community body responsible for coordinating disaster intervention inside and outside the EU, particularly as its scope has been extended to include disasters of human origin and terrorist attacks, and accidental marine pollution.

3.3 Even more important is the inclusion of certain improvements to the mechanism, as suggested by the EESC in its Opinion of 2005. For example, it is worth highlighting the reference in Article 2 to the availability of support from military assets and capacities, which are often essential for swift, efficient intervention. Another of the EESC's proposals was also included: the adoption of measures for transport, logistics and other support at Community level.

3.4 The EESC reiterates its support for the intervention modules which are to be provided by the Member States and coordinated by the mechanism, and are to remain in constant contact with the CECIS so that, by means of an early warning system, it will be possible to deploy the appropriate resources, including additional means of transport .

3.5 One modification has been made that was not mentioned in the Communication, relating to intervention outside the EU. The modification stipulates that it will be the Member State holding the Presidency of the EU Council that will liaise with the affected country. Nonetheless, the CECIS will have information and the Commission will appoint the operational coordination team which, in turn, will coordinate with the UN. The EESC believes that the Community civil protection mechanism should involve EU representation at the highest level in its actions, and it therefore calls for the intervention of the EU's foreign policy high representative; however, it does not consider that the system finally proposed is capable of full implementation.

3.6 It is important to note the new Article 10, which establishes how the Community mechanism will complement national civil protection bodies, which can be given assistance with transport, and the mobilisation of modules and teams able to intervene on the ground.

3.7 Lastly, Article 13 establishes the Commission's power to implement all the measures provided for in the Decision, particularly the availability of resources for intervention, the CECIS, the teams of experts and their training, and any other form of additional support. The EESC welcomes the reference to availability of resources, but believes that these should be quantified so that it is possible to act in each one of the attributed areas of competence.

Brussels, 17 May 2006.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Anne-Marie SIGMUND

⁽⁵⁾ See note 1.