

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the ‘Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament — 2008 Environment Policy Review’

COM(2009) 304 final

(2010/C 347/13)

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On 24 June 2009, the European Commission decided to consult the European Economic and Social Committee, under Article 262 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, on the

Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament – 2008 Environmental Policy Review

COM(2009) 304 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 28 January 2010.

At its 460th plenary session, held on 17 and 18 February 2010 (meeting of 17 February), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 118 votes to 4 with 10 abstentions.

1. Conclusions and recommendations

1.1 In conclusion, the Committee believes that the Community institutions and the Member States have taken the problems of climate change and sustainable development very seriously. Nonetheless, much still remains to be done in order to adopt common positions and to work towards quantified, progressive commitments at international level, by re-examining policies surrounding assistance to the ACP countries and, more generally, to developing countries. The same should apply to our main trading partners, in particular the USA.

1.2 The total ecological footprint of products should be subject to minimum standards, and European policy should continue to include a combination of legislation and voluntary instruments and initiatives to change behaviour and to increase awareness of the new problems we now have to deal with as the human race; the information and education aspects need to be built on within civil society.

1.3 The integrated climate and energy policy is starting to prove its effectiveness, and we now need to pursue it by extending it to other greenhouse gases and other sectors (primarily transport of all kinds), and by promoting international cooperation.

1.4 Legislation such as REACH and environmental liability will continue to play a major role, supplemented by the initiatives of industries, citizens and consumers.

1.5 A number of directives adopted in recent years require attentive monitoring to ensure that they are properly transposed and that the national legislation actually put in place is effective, particularly in terms of monitoring its implementation.

1.6 The report is very comprehensive and extremely valuable, but it is unclear to what extent the public is aware of it.

2. Gist of the Commission document

2.1 The year 2008 was marked by an unparalleled level of awareness of the global climate change crisis among European citizens, who now see it as a key political priority.

2.2 This highlights the need to move towards a low-carbon economy and towards preserving resources. Additional efforts will be needed in order to meet these challenges.

2.3 The economy has been seriously affected by an unprecedented crisis: the financial crisis has strangled investment in the real economy and caused significant levels of unemployment, and government deficits have consequently ballooned due to public loans to and investment in banks and credit institutions.

2.4 The Commission’s report is in the form of a communication to the Council and Parliament; the EESC is not formally consulted on periodic progress reports, but generally asks to be sent these reports as they allow it to monitor the practical implementation of Community legislation and guidelines.

2.5 The 2008 annual environment policy report takes stock of Community initiatives and of their effectiveness with regard, for example, to the greenhouse gas reduction commitments made at Kyoto and the new commitments that were expected to come out of the Copenhagen conference. The Committee has adopted an opinion in this regard ⁽¹⁾.

⁽¹⁾ OJ C 128, 18.5.2010, p. 116

2.6 According to the Commission, and on the basis of the projections, the EU is on track to meet its emission reduction objectives under the Kyoto Protocol on combating climate change. The EU and its Member States, or at least most of them, are on the way to meeting their reduction commitments, and the target is even expected to be exceeded thanks to the unilateral efforts of certain Member States which are looking into additional measures.

2.7 The report reviews the various fields to which EU environment policy applies, but the Commission document is only a summary, the full report being a thick volume more than 200 pages long which is appended to the Commission document.

2.8 On the basis of comprehensive figures referring to 2006, in June 2008 greenhouse gas emissions in the EU-15 were 2,7 % down from the reference year (1990), despite economic growth of 40 % over the same period. Existing policies and measures should make it possible to achieve a total reduction of 3,6 % compared with the reference year by 2010, which is half way through the period of 2008-2012 for which we have committed to an 8 % reduction. Buying credits from emission reduction projects in non-EU countries under the Kyoto mechanisms is expected to achieve an additional reduction of 3 %, which would bring the total reduction to 6,6 %, and a further 1,4 % is expected from carbon sinks.

2.9 All of this would make it possible to achieve, or even exceed, the Kyoto target, given that the Member States have not yet incorporated in their projections the ceilings set for the allocation of emissions allowances for the 2008-2012 trading period for EU emissions allowances, which are expected to bring about a further 3,3 % reduction in emissions compared to the base year.

3. Observations

3.1 The Commission's projections in the report for 2008 are based on relatively old complete data, and on incomplete data from 2006 onwards. However, these were the only data available in 2008, and the Commission has taken account of all the relevant results gathered prior to publication. In spite of the disappointing outcome of the Copenhagen Climate Conference, the Committee believes that the EU must deliver the target for emission reduction it has set itself for 2012, and should press on towards the further reductions it has adopted for 2020.

3.2 A number of directives adopted in recent years require attentive monitoring to ensure that they are properly transposed and that the national legislation actually put in place is effective, particularly in terms of monitoring its implementation. Some Member States have not managed to achieve the objectives assigned to them. The report clearly sets out the problems and obstacles that still persist, as well as the progress that has been made. It is comprehensive and detailed, and sets out new indicators measuring the total ecological footprint of goods and activities; hopefully, it will be widely circulated, and future reports will

be made very accessible and will encourage changes in production, distribution and consumption patterns.

3.3 The Committee is not entirely convinced by the argument that the crisis is, in itself, an opportunity to redirect production and consumption patterns towards more sustainable solutions: a growing number of families have seen their purchasing power fall dramatically due to unemployment and the closure of businesses, some of which have relocated their production activities to non-EU countries. Employment and housing are still key concerns in the short term, particularly for young people, and we need to provide positive responses.

3.4 There is a tendency towards precarious, fixed-term, part-time jobs, which introduces a level of instability that is unlikely to encourage changes in the consumption patterns of households and in businesses. Businesses sometimes tend to export their most polluting products outside the EU rather than invest in other production models, which is particularly difficult now that credit is scarce and particularly for SMEs.

3.5 The report only skims over the issue of the consequences of the crisis, which are still a long way from being dealt with in an environmentally friendly way. The crisis has also been a major blow for countries outside the EU-27, particularly for developing countries; it is difficult to come up with effective policies towards these countries in the short term when official development assistance and various kinds of aid are shrinking rapidly. There absolutely must be a quick and consistent change in behaviour in order to help these countries, which have neither the resources nor the technology to combat climate change.

3.6 Simply going back to business as usual, with the same economic organisation, will not bring us any closer to a safer, better environment, but the signals emanating from the financial markets and industry are far from encouraging; a strong political will is absolutely vital, as are greater mobilisation of the European public and the provision of objective information, rather than pointless scaremongering, by the media.

3.7 In industrialising countries such as China, Brazil and India, the old consumption patterns of the industrialised countries with market economies are still a goal to aim at, and neither governments nor the public in these countries really understand the restrictions being imposed on them in terms of pollution and changes in lifestyles and consumption. They see the obligations tied in with the fight against climate change as a kind of historic injustice against them, at a time when they are trying to raise their people out of poverty and to support education and health care thanks to subcontracting for transnational companies on an industrial scale.

3.7.1 They are asking for aid and technology transfer, which we need to consider seriously if we want to make progress down the path opened up by the climate agreements.

3.8 The issue of transporting goods from one side of the world to the other in fragmented production chains and to far-flung consumer markets needs to be looked at and dealt with appropriately. The reinternalisation of the actual costs for the environment and climate currently falls on consumers, in the form of cost and pollution. The Committee therefore supports the efforts to revise the Marpol Convention and to limit pollution from ships, but it would also be useful to introduce general regulations for the financial markets, as well as regulations to improve transport logistics and to promote sustainable manufacturing.

3.9 The EESC shares the Commission's view that governments should use their economic recovery plans to improve energy efficiency, by aiming to develop environmental infrastructure and by promoting eco-innovation.

3.10 A strong environment policy may help to kick-start a 'greener' recovery, with a smaller carbon footprint and a shift in the consumption patterns of businesses and households.

3.11 The rapid loss of biodiversity worldwide (the disappearance of a large number of animal and plant species, with some of the worst hit, such as birds and bees, being vital to agriculture) means that policies need to be put in place to halt the extinction of species; this involves, in particular:

- forest management, and putting a stop to clearcutting in primary forests and rainforests;

- methods used in agriculture (it has been determined that modern plant protection products affect the health of bees and the food supply of birds).

3.12 The EESC welcomes the creation of new indicators that take account of biodiversity and the climate, as introduced for Eurostat for the priority areas of the 6th Environment Action Programme.

3.13 CO₂ is not the only greenhouse gas, and it is also worth paying careful attention to NO_x (nitrogen oxides) and to everything that may affect the ozone layer and contribute to global warming.

3.14 The Committee stresses the need for greater awareness and active involvement on the part of the public, focusing on good practice with regard to the goods consumed and to reducing and sorting household waste; it is also vital for businesses to be more aware, and to make combating climate change part of their corporate social responsibility commitments.

3.15 Most of the programmes and legislation referred to in the report have been the subject of an EESC opinion at one time or another ⁽²⁾, and the EESC has set up a permanent sustainable development observatory in order to make a more effective contribution to developing strategies to combat climate change, to following up EU policies and legislation and to monitoring their effectiveness.

Brussels, 17 February 2010

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⁽²⁾ EESC Opinions: OJ C 128, 18.5.2010, p. 122; OJ C 318, 23.12.2009, p. 97; OJ C 317, 23.12.2009, p. 75; OJ C 318, 23.12.2009, p. 92; OJ C 306, 16.12.2009, p. 42; OJ C 277, 17.11.2009, p. 67; OJ C 277, 17.11.2009, p. 62; OJ C 318, 23.12.2009, p. 88; OJ C 218, 11.9.2009, p. 55; OJ C 218, 11.9.2009, p. 50; OJ C 218, 11.9.2009, p. 46; OJ C 175, 28.7.2009, p. 34; OJ C 218, 11.9.2009, p. 59; OJ C 306, 16.12.2009, p. 39; OJ C 204, 9.8.2008, p. 66.