

Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on 'EU and international biodiversity policy beyond 2010'

(2010/C 267/08)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- expresses its concern about the serious consequences of increasing loss of biodiversity, both for ethical reasons, as well as with a view to ensuring economic and social stability, mitigating climate change and achieving the Millennium Development Goals;
- stresses that, if biodiversity is to be preserved in the EU and worldwide, regional and local authorities should be equipped with adequate human, financial and technical means, commensurate to their responsibility and to the task of helping to stem biodiversity loss. The CoR encourages local and regional authorities to lead by example;
- urges the EU 2020 Biodiversity Strategy to focus on a limited set of sub-targets which include agriculture, fisheries, land use and habitat destruction and fragmentation, and allow regional and local authorities to measure their own contribution and put in place corrective measures in a timely manner;
- calls for a significant increase of the financial means within post 2013 EU budgets to meet the targets and urges the European Commission to maximise the benefits of EU funding, particularly by tackling the current under spending of Structural Funds in the fields of biodiversity and looking at ways to improve the integrated model to fund biodiversity and Natura 2000;
- calls upon the EU and the European Commission to explore the CoR becoming observer to the EU delegation to the COP 10 of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) in order to assure that the voice of local and regional authorities is represented in an appropriate manner and offers to contribute by promoting decentralised development cooperation in this field;
- urges the COP 10 to accompany the Strategic Plan 2011-2020 with a specific decision dedicated to sub-national authorities, including a Plan of action on Local Authorities and Biodiversity 2011-2020, in order to further enhance and leverage the significant contribution of sub-national authorities to play on the implementation of the CBD Strategic Plan.

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I. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Involving local and regional authorities in better governance and communication

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

A. General observations

1. believes that protection of biodiversity is essential to human health and wellbeing, both directly and indirectly through the services provided by the ecosystem. Everyone has the right to a healthy and sustainable environment, which requires the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity, respecting the central role of biodiversity in the global fight against hunger and for food security. The Committee expresses its concern about the serious consequences for current and future generations due to the increasing loss of biodiversity within its ecosystems, both for ethical reasons and in recognition of the intrinsic value of biodiversity, as well as with a view to ensuring economic and social stability, mitigating climate change and achieving the Millennium Development Goals;

2. supports, in addition to highlighting the intrinsic value of nature as the heritage of mankind, to advance work on the economic valuation of biodiversity and ecosystem services and incorporating it into policy making. It welcomes that thanks to the international study on 'The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity' (TEEB), the economic value of biodiversity and the fact that inaction represents an unbearable financial cost, are becoming increasingly better understood. The CoR welcomes that the local and regional dimension will be specifically addressed in the TEEB 'D 2 Report for Administrators';

3. points out the 2010 EU and international targets have been essential in generating useful actions in favour of biodiversity at local and regional levels, worldwide. There are many examples of good practice across the European Union. However the Committee is seriously concerned that neither the EU nor global biodiversity targets for 2010 have been achieved due to a clear gap between the promises made and the action actually taken;

4. considers that in order to meet the biodiversity protection targets, it is essential for public powers including local and regional authorities to strike a good balance between development policies and biodiversity objectives and to encourage the use of incentives to promote biodiversity conservation;

5. highlights the role of local and regional authorities in halting the loss of biodiversity and putting into place strategies to safeguard biodiversity in their respective regional and local authorities. This has to be considered against the background of recent findings from a Eurobarometer survey released in March 2010 on the attitudes of Europeans towards biodiversity according to which only 38 % of Europeans are aware of the significance of the term and only 17 % feel directly affected by biodiversity loss. To this end the CoR reaffirms its willingness to promote biodiversity conservation projects and to contribute towards generating the interest of citizens at local and regional level and creating synergies between stake holders and public authorities and in this respect, would organise events during the OPEN DAYS 2010;

6. stresses that, if biodiversity is to be preserved worldwide, regional and local authorities should be equipped with adequate human, financial and technical means, commensurate to their responsibility and to the task of helping to stem biodiversity loss. Regional and local authorities are best placed to support local communities in the conservation of their local environment and support voluntary bodies involved in inspiring and engaging the public in conserving the natural environment. Other relevant responsibilities include education, health and wellbeing, land-use planning, and land ownership. The CoR encourages local and regional authorities to lead by example;

7. believes the United Nations International Year of Biodiversity 2010 will reinforce the political commitment at EU and international level to address the global biodiversity crisis whilst encouraging active participation of local and regional authorities;

8. welcomes the projects that many regional and local authorities have initiated to contribute to the protection of biodiversity, for example projects aimed at the establishment of protected natural areas and at the restoration of degraded habitats, and conservation of wetlands and other ecosystems, the establishment of green belts and urban planning using biodiversity conservation criteria, and to raise awareness of their citizens on biodiversity such as competitions for the best gardens and green spaces in urban areas. Residential gardens provide a vital refuge for birds and animals and are essential for cooling and filtering air and for storing carbon;

B. Towards an EU 2020 Biodiversity Strategy

9. welcomes the 2050 vision and new and ambitious target for 2020 of 'halting the loss of biodiversity and the degradation of ecosystem services in the EU by 2020, and restoring them in so far as feasible, while stepping up the EU contribution to averting global biodiversity loss' as it has been agreed by the Environment Council on 15 March 2010 and endorsed by the European Council on 25/26 March 2010. This bears witness to the EU renewed commitment to deliver tangible results;

10. expresses however concern that within the EU 2020 Strategy's objective of sustainable growth biodiversity remains subordinate to economic growth patterns and the pursuit of a low carbon economy instead of being considered on its own merit;

11. welcomes the fact that, in line with what the CoR has previously recommended, ecosystems services have been incorporated in the target for 2020, with a view to restoring them and thereby reversing the current trend. Nevertheless calls on the European Commission and the Member States to clarify how the limitation of the objective to '*restore them insofar as possible*' is to be interpreted at local and regional level;

12. agrees with the Council that urgent and effective action is needed now to avoid serious ecological, economic and social consequences;

13. recognises that this is an important step in demonstrating the EU's commitment to taking action and 'leading by example' at the 10th meeting of the Conference of the Parties (COP 10) of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) in October 2010 in Nagoya;

14. supports the call of the Council upon the European Commission to submit an EU 2020 Biodiversity Strategy, taking account of the results of the COP 10 to the Convention on Biological Diversity;

15. insists that this EU 2020 Biodiversity Strategy will only be able to deliver the post-2010 EU and global targets on biodiversity on the ground if it firmly supports local and regional authorities and other land users or owners. The strategy needs to address the current underspend of structural funds on environment and biodiversity-related issues and promote the exchange of best practice to empower regional and local authorities for action on the ground. Promotion of good practice among authorities and providing a forum to identify common problems and share solutions to biodiversity will help build capacity within regional and local authorities;

16. welcomes the fact that its call for the establishment of an 'environmental infrastructure' ⁽¹⁾ has been taken up by the Council ⁽²⁾ and opens the way for the European Commission to draw

up an EU Strategy on the environmental infrastructure for the post-2010 period. In accordance with the subsidiarity principle, such a Strategy should include a territorial dimension and allow existing initiatives, at local and regional level in particular, to be integrated into a coherent framework;

Role of local and regional authorities in promoting a EU 2020 Biodiversity Strategy

17. stresses that the new EU 2020 Biodiversity Strategy would be successful if all actors and local stakeholders participate to the policy development and implementation according to a real model of multilevel governance. It is important to bring together all stakeholders involved in protecting biodiversity and ecosystems, including scientific experts, owners of biodiversity action plans, NGOs and education authorities;

18. stresses the need to implement fully the directives on birds and habitats at regional and local level too, accelerate the establishment and full development of the Natura 2000 network and to put appropriate financing in place, also bearing in mind that biodiversity is unevenly distributed in the EU, and taking account of certain effective management and restoration measures;

19. welcomes, in this regard, the call made by the Environment Council of 15 March for participatory approaches which will 'generate necessary and complementary bottom-up initiatives from those who directly participate in land and sea use management, and in particular local communities';

20. underlines the crucial role of local and regional authorities in raising citizens' awareness on importance of biodiversity and calls for greater support from the Member States in the implementation of European and national legislation;

21. urges local and regional authorities to draw up biodiversity programmes, and to include biodiversity objectives in their land use planning and authorisation, to promote extension of green areas, to avoid soil degradation, damage to ecosystems and the fragmentation of landscapes and habitats, to minimise the negative impacts of climate change and to seek opportunities for combining restoration or building of natural habitats with spatial and land-use initiatives; On the other hand, points out that in the case of sparsely populated areas and areas with good access to green spaces, with large zones set aside for nature conservation, the quality of environmental protection should be defined more precisely and improved, and coordination with other types of land use improved;

22. considers that the corollary of the Council's recognition of the need to develop exchanges of good practice to ensure the most effective use of resources in combating biodiversity loss, is that the European Union and the Member States should increase their support for such exchanges between local and regional authorities;

⁽¹⁾ CdR 22/2009 fin.

⁽²⁾ Conclusions of the Environment Council of 15 March 2010.

23. lends its support to the initiatives and networks – such as the LIFE + and European Capitals of Biodiversity projects – that are helping to achieve the commitments which local and regional authorities have undertaken on a voluntary basis and to disseminate best practice at European level;

Integrating biodiversity protection into key sectors

24. notes protection of biodiversity and ecosystems services is a cross cutting theme requiring a systemic approach whereby all different actors at all levels have to work together;

25. reiterates the sector-specific recommendations included in its opinion 'New impetus for halting biodiversity loss' ⁽³⁾ and points out that effective and robust protection of biodiversity is only possible if it is incorporated into broader strategy and policies addressing those key sectors which are responsible for habitat destruction, fragmentation and degradation caused by land use change, pollution, etc. These include agriculture/forestry, energy, transport, climate change, regional development/spatial planning; equally, any international trade deals involving the EU must consider and mitigate against biodiversity loss;

26. draws attention to its call for Member States to review their taxation systems to make them more supportive of biodiversity, for example, by lowering the VAT rates on organic farm produce or produce sourced from Natura 2000 sites and abolishing certain taxes and subsidies which encourage action that has an adverse effect on biodiversity;

27. stresses that protecting and restoring biodiversity provides some cost-effective opportunities for climate change mitigation or adaptation, e.g. in the creation of green corridors aimed at developing and restoring of wetlands, renaturalising of rivers and in promoting green roofs or in interlinking important biotopes;

Setting sound sub-targets, indicators and cost-effective measures to achieve them

28. encourages the European Commission to focus on a limited set of sub-targets which deliver the strategy in clear and simple language and allow regional and local authorities to measure their own contribution and put in place corrective measures in a timely manner. These targets need to move from status related targets which are difficult to measure to 'pressure-related' targets. The number of sub-targets should be limited to 5 or 6 and include agriculture, fisheries and marine environments, land use and habitat destruction and fragmentation;

29. recommends that a sub target on land use and spatial planning should be carefully defined in view of concerns of subsidiarity, to address the pressures of habitat destruction and

fragmentation. Regional and local authorities play a vital role in implementing the concept of ecological networks and are best placed to take into account the differing needs of concentrated areas of dense population or wide areas which are sparsely populated. Local and regional authorities would be key contributors to such a target;

30. underlines the importance of a clear baseline, to be established by the European Environmental Agency by June this year, ensuring constant monitoring and reporting on the sub targets and indicators for halting biodiversity loss and on restoring ecosystems. Delivery of positive action requires good quality baseline data and on-going monitoring, and to achieve this will require significant increased funding. This may in part be achieved through obligations on developers, but unless the EU and the Member States agree on significantly increasing funding for this purpose, the financial means available for local and regional authorities to do this will be insufficient;

31. calls on the EU and the Member States to introduce the concept of ecosystems into their baseline and indicators. An example is the European Environment Agency first set of biophysical maps of ecosystem services;

Financing to achieve the new target

32. points out that current budget allocation for protecting biodiversity is not sufficient to meet the targets, including the Natura 2000 objectives, and calls on a significant increase of the financial means within post 2013 EU budgets; care must be taken when planning new directives and programmes that no funding is given to measures which might impair biodiversity;

33. urges the European Commission to maximise the benefits of EU funding, particularly by tackling the current under spending of structural funds in the fields of biodiversity and environment and looking at ways to improve the effectiveness of the integrated model to fund biodiversity and Natura 2000;

34. reiterates its calls ⁽⁴⁾ for the appliance of a system of eco-conditionality to regulate public aid access, in particular for the Common agricultural policy and common fisheries policy; also calls on the Member States to work to ensure that individual sectors of the economy make a fair contribution to the cost of re-establishing ecosystem services;

35. in the light of the recent conclusions of the European Environment Agency ⁽⁵⁾, recommends a reform of the Common Agricultural Policy so that it provides better support for high nature value (HNV) farming;

⁽³⁾ CdR 22/2009 fin.

⁽⁴⁾ CdR 22/2009 fin, CdR 218/2009 fin.

⁽⁵⁾ EEA Technical report No 12/2009 'Distribution and targeting of the CAP budget from a biodiversity perspective'.

36. calls upon the European Commission to set up appropriate financing mechanisms to allow regional and local authorities to gain 'capacity building' for halting and safeguarding the biodiversity of their areas and promote exchange of best practise between regions;

Invasive species

37. points out that invasive non-native species are recognised as a threat to biodiversity on a global scale with decisions concerning this issue arising from the last five conferences of the parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD);

38. notes the European Strategy on Invasive Alien Species developed in 2003 under the Bern Convention. Objective 5 of the 'EU Action Plan to 2010 and Beyond' ⁽⁶⁾ calls on Member States to develop national strategies on invasive alien species. In this regard, the CoR reiterates its call ⁽⁷⁾ upon the European Commission to develop a EU Strategy on invasive species;

39. underscores climate change response is one factor driving range extensions of species and this will continue over coming decades, providing the potential for additional species to become invasive;

40. regrets the limited understanding by the general public of the threats posed by invasive non-native species. Improved awareness and understanding of the issues is key to wider involvement, and the public could modify behaviours to help reduce the likelihood of introducing invasive species and the risk of facilitating their spread, as well as assisting with their detection and monitoring. Regional and local authorities are best placed to engage with the general public at the local level, and thereby improve public understanding and involvement;

41. points out regional and local authorities also have a role to play through education and as landowners. In addition, their specialist staff can help national government organisations tackle invasive species in partnership with key interest groups outside government, making optimum use of available capacity and resources to improve detection and monitoring capabilities;

C. CoR contribution to the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and its 10th Conference of the Parties (COP 10)

42. recognises that biodiversity issues do not stop at national borders and therefore urges that coherent action is not only taken at EU level but also in an international context;

⁽⁶⁾ Document SEC(2006) 621, annexed to the European Commission Communication 'Halting the loss of biodiversity by 2010 - and beyond', COM(2006) 216 final.

⁽⁷⁾ CdR 22/2009 fin.

43. stresses the importance of preserving and re-establishing biodiversity, including ecosystem services, at a global level in order to help with poverty eradication, food security and local development all over the world; believes, for this reason, that implementing the Convention on Biological Diversity is an essential contribution to achieving the Millennium Goals – especially Goal 7 (environmental sustainability);

44. calls upon the EU and the European Commission to explore the CoR becoming observer to the EU delegation to COP 10 in order to assure that the voice of local and regional authorities is represented in an appropriate manner not only in national delegations, but also in the EU delegation ⁽⁸⁾;

45. offers to contribute to the CBD process and its COP 10 by promoting decentralised development cooperation between European local and regional authorities and those of developing countries in sustainable management of biodiversity and ecosystems;

46. urges the COP 10 to adopt the revised and updated Strategic Plan for the Convention for the 2011 – 2020 period in order to ensure a continuum in CBD strategic planning after 2010;

47. welcomes the reference made in the draft Strategic Plan that maintenance and restoration of ecosystems generally provide cost-effective ways to address climate change and that addressing climate change therefore opens up a number of opportunities for biodiversity conservation and sustainable use;

48. agrees that greater convergence at international and national levels is needed in efforts to address climate change and biodiversity loss in a mutually reinforcing manner, optimising opportunities in ongoing global processes within the Rio Conventions;

49. recognises that actions taken so far to implement the CBD have not been sufficient to achieve the 2010 international target;

50. supports strategic and secondary goals and 2020 headline targets that are both achievable and more measurable and provide a more effective framework through national and in particular sub-national targets. It suggests reducing the number of targets in order to make the strategy more understandable and focused;

51. advocates a new headline target which explicitly states that by 2020, all CBD Parties will have engaged regional and local authorities, in the implementation of the Convention. This involvement must focus in particular on the revision and implementation of national biodiversity strategies and action plans (NBSAPs) and support for capacity-building at regional and local level;

⁽⁸⁾ The Executive Secretary of the CDB Secretariat has sent a notification on 4 February 2010 to all parties to the CBD, inviting them to nominate mayors and local authorities as part of their COP 10 delegation.

52. urges the COP 10 to adopt a specific decision dedicated to sub-national authorities and takes note of the 'Draft CBD Decision for COP 10 on Cities, Local Authorities and Biodiversity', with its 'Draft Plan of action on cities, local authorities and biodiversity 2011-2020' ⁽⁹⁾ in this regard. Such a coherent plan of action is needed to further enhance and leverage the significant contribution of sub-national authorities to play on the implementation of the CBD Strategic Plan 2011-2020. The CoR

acknowledges the 'Global Partnership on Cities and Biodiversity' and ICLEI's 'Local Action for Biodiversity (LAB)' programme in this regard;

53. takes note of the Singapore Index on Cities' Biodiversity (CBI), to be presented at the COP 10. This index should be further developed so that it can be voluntarily applied to other authorities.

Brussels, 10 June 2010.

*The President
of the Committee of the Regions*
Mercedes BRESSO

⁽⁹⁾ Document of 27 January 2010, http://www.cbd.int/authorities/doc/CBD%20Plan%20of%20Action_2010_01_draft.doc.