

Opinion of the Economic and Social Committee on the 'Proposal for a Council Decision establishing a Community mechanism for the coordination of Civil Protection intervention in the event of emergencies'

(2001/C 139/07)

On 24 October 2000 the Council decided to consult the Economic and Social Committee, under Article 262 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, on the above-mentioned 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 1 February 2001. The rapporteur was Mrs zu Eulenburg.

At its 379th plenary session of 28 February and 1 March 2001 (meeting of 28 February 2001), the Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion unanimously.

1. Gist of the Commission proposal

1.1. The proposal provides for more effective coordination of the individual interventions of national Civil Protection teams in the event of a disaster, and so supplements the existing Community Action Programme for Civil Protection.

1.2. The plan to improve the effectiveness of Community Civil Protection procedures is the outcome of calls for urgent improvement of Civil Protection action at Community level prompted by all the recent disasters that have caused serious damage in several Member States and neighbouring countries.

1.3. The measures proposed — such as early notification, identification of operational teams, setting up of assessment and coordination teams and establishment of common rules for joint interventions — are not provided for in the above-mentioned action programme. The proposal for a more effective Community mechanism thus goes beyond the existing action programme, also by providing for a training programme to improve mutual intervention capability.

1.4. The present system for dealing with emergencies is based on the Resolution of 8 July 1991 on improving mutual aid between Member States in the event of natural or technological disaster.

2. General comments

2.1. Basic position

The ESC welcomes the Commission proposal: introducing a Community mechanism for Civil Protection measures in serious emergencies, or imminent threat of emergency, which may require urgent response action, will enhance the existing Community action programme on Civil Protection.

2.2. Planned measures

2.2.1. The proposed measures for strengthening the mechanism seem in principle to be appropriate for improving cooperation and coordination in disaster situations. They include:

- identification of resources available for coordinated assistance intervention in the event of emergencies;
- setting-up of a training programme;
- establishment of assessment and coordination teams;
- establishment of an emergency communication system.

2.2.2. However, it will be impossible to avoid difficulties when implementing the proposal because in many cases the situation varies widely between the Member States. Details of this aspect are discussed in the specific comments on the various articles and the Annex (point 3 below).

2.2.3. The Commission should also vigorously promote the development of preventive systems in the applicant countries.

2.2.4. The ESC shares the Commission's view that the strengthened Civil Protection mechanism could also contribute to the Union's overall non-military response to crises in third countries under the Common Foreign and Security Policy.

3. Specific comments

3.1. Notification (Article 2)

Mutual and extensive notification between the Member States and to the Commission in the case of serious emergencies and disasters should be welcomed. However, the channels of communication must be clearly and bindingly specified in advance, in order to avoid unnecessary work and to ensure effective procedures.

3.2. Capability (Article 3)

3.2.1. The wording ‘... intervention teams which are available or could be established for intervening abroad at very short notice’ has been kept very vague. In order to improve the quality of information and to facilitate the information-gathering procedure, the ESC recommends that a standard system be developed in the context of the management committee provided for in Article 8. Standardised information, e.g. on the size of the team and the objectives of assistance, will make it possible to compare and thus assess efficiency.

3.2.2. Existing transnational information and databases — in particular the resources of non-governmental organisations — should as far as possible be used and integrated into the information system in an appropriate way. The Member States will thus be asked to improve the usefulness of information-gathering by contributing themselves.

3.3. Coordination of intervention (Article 4)

3.3.1. Developing a training programme inevitably raises the question of precise objectives. A training objective should be defined in agreement with the Member States which is as concrete and realisable as possible.

3.3.2. We welcome the setting-up of a programme for the evaluation and dissemination of lessons learned.

3.4. Requests for assistance (Article 5)

3.4.1. The ESC notes that the options described for requesting assistance complement — as far as necessary — existing bilateral agreements between certain Member States and the transnational civil protection or assistance provided under mutual aid arrangements. A reference to such existing arrangements would be useful.

3.4.2. The phrase ‘where an emergency occurs within the Community’ in Article 5(1) should be followed by ‘or if a Member State is threatened by an external emergency’.

3.5. Involvement of third countries (Article 6)

We very much welcome the involvement of the candidate countries of Central and Eastern Europe, and Cyprus, Malta and Turkey.

3.6. Specific comments on the Annex — Fundamental principles of assistance intervention within the Community

3.6.1. It is difficult to ensure logistical independence in situ for 48 hours, but the aim should be to achieve this. Since the intervention teams have to be incorporated into existing structures anyway, it should be adequate to request logistical independence for the first 24 hours.

3.6.2. Point 3 of the fundamental principles (direction according to tasks) seems to make sense. However, the limits of the tasks entrusted to the intervention team should always be specified in order to avoid misunderstandings.

3.6.3. Point 5 of the fundamental principles (provision of means of assistance and communications by the Member State requesting assistance) could be problematic in practice. Cooperation must be agreed prior to intervention and communications problems resolved in advance.

3.6.4. We welcome points 6 and 7 of the fundamental principles (support and simplification of administrative procedures).

Brussels, 28 February 2001.

The President
of the Economic and Social Committee
Göke FRERICHS