



European Economic and Social Committee

NAT/592
7th Environment
Action Programme

Brussels, 20 March 2013

OPINION

of the
European Economic and Social Committee

on the

**Proposal for a Decision of the European Parliament and of the Council on a General Union
Environment Action Programme to 2020**

"Living well, within the limits of our planet"

COM(2012) 710 final – 2012/0337 (COD)

Rapporteur: **Mr Ribbe**

On 10 December 2012, the European Parliament and, on 12 December 2012, the Council decided to consult the European Economic and Social Committee, under Article 192(3) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, on the

Proposal for a Decision of the European Parliament and of the Council on a General Union Environment Action Programme to 2020 – "Living well, within the limits of our planet"

COM(2012) 710 final – 2012/0337 (COD).

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 5 March 2013.

At its 488th plenary session, held on 20 and 21 March 2013 (meeting of 20 March), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 82 votes to 4 with 2 abstentions.

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1. **Conclusions and recommendations**

- 1.1 The EESC welcomes the draft proposal for a seventh Environment Action Programme (EAP). The decision of the Council and of the Parliament establishes an environment policy consensus among the EU's decision-making institutions on how serious the environmental situation remains, that there are significant deficiencies in the implementation of European environment law, that the efforts made to date to solve current and future problems have been inadequate, and on what action needs to be taken in environment policy in the period up to 2020.
- 1.2 The proposal is in keeping with the view expressed by the Committee on a number of occasions, that Europe's current environmental problems are attributable not to a lack of understanding or of ideas about how to tackle them, but to a lack of political will to follow through.
- 1.3 However, this draft seventh EAP is characterised less by clarity and more by a lack of specifics, both in general and on individual points. If the aim of a programme according to its title is to allow us to live well "within the limits of our planet", it must offer at least a rudimentary description of those limits and explain in greater detail the link between specific policy measures and their impact on social and economic activity in Europe. Unfortunately, the seventh EAP does not do this.
- 1.4 The seventh EAP is therefore more a report on the environmental situation than a genuine policy document or action programme.

- 1.5 In the EESC's view, the seventh EAP does not take a clear enough position on the economic and social changes needed to achieve the environment policy goals. The Committee would point out that when the Commission presented the "resource-efficient Europe" flagship initiative, it stressed that achieving the necessary changes would require not only technological improvements and changes in the behaviour of producers and consumers, but also "a significant transition in energy, industrial, agricultural and transport systems".
- 1.6 The seventh EAP accurately analyses shortcomings in implementing previous EAPs, but it hardly offers any proposals on how these failures might be mitigated or eliminated altogether. Almost all positive developments in terms of nature and the environment have come at the behest of civil society. In the view of the EESC, civil society organisations are key players in implementing the seventh EAP, and their role should be strengthened and given much more attention in the form of an additional priority objective.
- 1.7 The role of an effective seventh EAP must be to describe much more clearly the path away from conventional environment policy focusing on end-of-pipe technology and towards sustainable development. The Europe 2020 strategy expires at the same time as this seventh EAP. The EESC has repeatedly said that the Europe 2020 strategy cannot be a substitute for a European sustainability strategy that defines the goals and strategies for sustainable development in Europe, with a long-term planning horizon and balanced consideration of the economic, social and environmental dimensions. It invites the Council and Parliament to set the objective in the seventh EAP of developing a new overarching EU sustainability strategy, as called for by the Council of Environment Ministers in its conclusions on the United Nations Rio+20 sustainable development conference (Point 3 of the Conclusions on Rio+20: Outcome and follow-up to the UCSD 2012 Summit; 3194th Environment Council meeting; Luxembourg, 25 October 2012). This would bring real added value to the seventh EAP.

2. **Introduction**

- 2.1 The Environment Action Programmes (EAPs) – of which there have now been six – have made an important contribution to the development and shaping of EU environment policy since the early 1970s. The sixth Environment Action Programme expired in July 2012; the European Commission has since been asked by the Council and the European Parliament to propose a successor programme.
- 2.2 According to the Commission, the proposed seventh EAP aims to step up the contribution made by environment policy to conserving natural capital, to the transition to a resource-efficient, low-carbon economy, and to protecting human health.
- 2.3 The proposal takes stock of the environmental situation, referring in particular to the problem of the ongoing loss of natural capital, including biodiversity. It also expresses concern that natural resources continue to be wasted through inefficient use, and about ongoing air and water pollution and contamination by hazardous substances.

- 2.4 The proposal points to inadequate implementation of existing environment legislation and established standards by the Member States as a key source of the problem.
- 2.5 The Commission concludes "there is evidence that planetary boundaries for biodiversity, climate change and the nitrogen cycle have already been transgressed."
- 2.6 The seventh EAP counters this with a vision for 2050 of "living well, within the limits of our planet", and sets out a framework for environment policy action to 2020 that focuses on nine *priority objectives*.
- 2.7 The EESC was involved in the preliminary stages of the discussions on the seventh EAP, with an exploratory opinion at the request of the Danish Presidency¹. It stressed that Europe's current environmental problems were attributable to a lack of political will to follow through. The Committee felt that it was not clear how the seventh EAP would relate to the Europe 2020 strategy and to the "resource-efficient Europe" flagship initiative and roadmap. It recommended reviving the sustainability strategy, adopting a workable seventh EAP as its environment policy implementation approach, incorporating the flagship initiative resource-efficient Europe with all its individual initiatives, and ensuring close and careful coordination between environment and economic policy considerations.

3. **General comments**

- 3.1 In the EESC's view, the primary added political value of the seventh EAP lies in the fact that, unlike the Commission's existing environment policy strategies, flagship initiatives and roadmaps, it will be adopted by the Council and the Parliament, thus establishing a degree of consensus between the EU's decision-making institutions on what must be done in environment policy to 2020.
- 3.2 The seventh EAP thus provides a point of reference for future decisions by policy-makers and institutions at EU level, as well as in the Member States, to which the EAP also applies.
- 3.3 The EESC also welcomes the publication of the seventh EAP because, by adopting it in a binding Decision, the Council and Parliament are together making it clear that the environmental situation remains very serious, that there are significant deficiencies in the implementation of European environment law, and that many of the efforts made to date to solve current and future problems have been inadequate.
- 3.4 In terms of content, the programme essentially reiterates what has already been set out in the Commission's environment policy communications, strategies, flagship initiatives and roadmaps, although the decision of the Council and of the Parliament does give it greater political emphasis.

¹ EESC opinion on the *7th Environment Action Programme and follow-up to the 6th EAP* [O.J. C 191, 29.6.2012, p. 1.](#)

- 3.5 The draft seventh EAP is characterised less by clarity and more by a lack of specifics, however, both in general and on individual points. If the aim of a programme according to its title is to allow us to live well "within the limits of our planet", it must offer at least a rudimentary description of those limits and explain in greater detail the link between specific policy measures and their impact on social and economic activity in Europe. Unfortunately, the seventh EAP does not do this.
- 3.6 In the areas where more detail is given, the programme fails to set out specific responsibilities and review criteria that would make it possible to monitor achievement of the objectives and implementation of the measures.
- 3.7 The seventh EAP is therefore more a report on the environmental situation than a genuine policy document or action programme. This is a disappointment for the EESC, which in its exploratory opinion on the *Seventh EAP*, but also as far back as 2004 in its exploratory opinion on *Assessing the EU sustainable development strategy*², called for precisely such clear and specific flagship programmes.
- 3.8 The Committee is concerned that the vitally necessary environment-policy outlook beyond 2020 falls far too short. It has already become clear that a planning horizon of 2020 is too short in energy and climate policy. It is not evident from the seventh EAP whether the objectives and measures proposed for 2020 are appropriate and sufficient to make the vision of "living well, within the limits of our planet" by 2050 a realistically achievable goal. There needs to be at least an indicative plan of future goals for 2030 and 2040, as further stages on the way to achieving this vision by 2050. Moreover, the 2020 horizon is too short to provide security for long-term investments in the green economy.
- 3.9 The alignment of the time horizon for environmental action planning with the Europe 2020 strategy and the associated flagship initiatives is welcome in principle; the timescale also coincides with the 2014-2020 financial framework, which would be a major advantage if the necessary links could be established. Although one of the nine listed priorities is to secure the necessary investment for environment policy, only very vague references are made to the EU's medium-term financial planning when outlining requirements, to say nothing of the fact that the seventh EAP comes too late to have any impact on the latter.
- 3.10 The nine *priority objectives* identified in the seventh EAP are open to criticism. For example, the "urban environment" is a subject that came up repeatedly in previous EAPs. The considerable importance of "urban environment policy" notwithstanding, the EU's influence in this area is relatively slight. It has much more influence over transport policy, the particular relevance of which to climate protection has been repeatedly stressed by the Commission. Despite this, transport policy is barely mentioned in the proposed seventh EAP.

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EESC opinion on the *Assessing the EU sustainable development strategy*, [O.J. C 117, 30.4.2004, pp. 22-37](#).

- 3.11 For the EESC, it would make sense to strategically incorporate civil society into the EAP in the form of a separate *priority objective* (see 4.4.9).
- 3.12 Trade policy also has a direct bearing on European environment and sustainability policy, such that it could be prioritised at the same level as the "urban environment"³.
- 3.13 The Committee would point out that when the Commission presented the "resource-efficient Europe" flagship initiative, it stressed that achieving the necessary changes would require not only technological improvements and changes in the behaviour of producers and consumers, but also "a significant transition in energy, industrial, agricultural and transport systems". The seventh EAP will fall short if it repeatedly calls for environmental needs to be reflected in other policy fields, without showing how a "significant transition" in certain economic sectors towards a sustainable economy and lifestyles can be achieved.
- 3.14 Nor does the EAP take the opportunity to give more detail on the importance of resource and environmental protection to economic development and the creation of new and skilled jobs. Here the EESC refers to its previous opinions⁴. The interactions between environment, social, development and economic policy, which are the key dimension of sustainability, need to be better highlighted.
- 3.15 It is thus also clear that the significance and role of the seventh EAP must be to describe much more clearly the path away from conventional environment policy focusing on end-of-pipe technology and towards sustainable development. The Europe 2020 strategy expires at the same time as this seventh EAP. The EESC has already repeatedly said that the Europe 2020 strategy cannot be a substitute for a European sustainability strategy that defines the goals and strategies for sustainable development in Europe, with a long-term planning horizon and balanced consideration of the economic, social and environmental dimensions. It invites the Council and Parliament to set the objective in the seventh EAP of developing a new overarching EU sustainability strategy, as called for by the Council of Environment Ministers in its conclusions on the United Nations Rio+20 sustainable development conference (Point 3 of the Conclusions on Rio+20: Outcome and follow-up to the UCSD 2012 Summit; 3194th Environment Council meeting; Luxembourg, 25 October 2012). This would bring real added value to the seventh EAP.

4. **Specific comments**

- 4.1 Here the EESC only wishes to comment on those of the nine priority objectives that it regards as particularly important.

³ EESC opinion on the *Trade, Growth and World Affairs: Trade Policy as a core component of the EU's 2020 strategy* [O.J. C 43, 15.2.2012, p. 73-78](#).

⁴ EESC Opinion on the *Towards a job rich recovery* [O.J. C 11, 15.1.2013, pp. 65-70](#).

4.2 **Priority objective 1: to protect, conserve and enhance the EU's natural capital**

4.2.1 The seventh EAP should make it clear that implementation of the Commission's proposals for greening agriculture and fisheries in connection with CAP and CFP reform is vital to maintaining natural capital.

4.2.2 The proposed seventh EAP quite rightly also calls for soil to be better protected. The rise in soil pollution, soil degradation and land-take in Europe remains a matter for concern. In the EESC's view, legislative action is needed at European level to reverse the negative trend, and the Council should therefore resume discussions on the soil protection directive as soon as possible. In addition, by means of a thematic strategy the European Commission should encourage Member States to reduce the serious problem of land being used for transport and housing purposes and to step up efforts to protect agricultural and forestry land.

4.3 **Priority objective 2: to turn the EU into a resource-efficient, green and competitive low-carbon economy**

4.3.1 With the "resource-efficient Europe" flagship initiative, the Commission put using natural resources more efficiently at the centre of its policy, setting out key milestones for 2020 in the associated roadmap. It is regrettable that the objectives set out in point 41 only dimly reflect important milestones.

4.3.2 In particular, the (complete) decoupling of economic growth and adverse environmental impacts should be included in the objectives, as should the aim of agreeing by 2020 on ambitious resource-efficiency targets and reliable indicators that will guide public and private decision-makers in the transition to a resource-efficient economy⁵. The Committee also reiterates its call for the Ecodesign Directive to be used to phase out unsustainable products by extending its scope to cover improving resource efficiency in materials as well as energy efficiency⁶.

4.4 **Priority objective 4: to maximise the benefits of EU environment legislation**

4.4.1 Evaluation of the sixth EAP has made it abundantly clear that deficiencies in the implementation of existing environment law are the most serious obstacle to much-needed progress in environmental protection. It is therefore to be welcomed that improving the implementation of the EU environment *acquis* at Member State level is made a top priority in the seventh EAP.

⁵ COM(2011) 571 final, milestones 3.1.2 and 6.1. [OJ C 181, 21.6.2012, p. 163–168.](#)

⁶ EESC opinion on the *Promotion of sustainable production and consumption in the EU*, [O.J. C 191, 29.6.2012, p. 6.](#)

- 4.4.2 However, the Commission has already given top priority to improving the implementation of environment legislation in the past, without notable success. It must therefore be assumed that there are fundamental obstacles that cannot be removed simply by making the proposed improvements to inspection mechanisms, access to justice and information on environment legislation.
- 4.4.3 The decisive factor, rather, is that many Member States lack the political will to give the same high political priority to effective implementation of environment legislation and, accordingly, to give the enforcing authorities adequate resources and expert staff and provide them with the necessary political support in the event of conflict.
- 4.4.4 There are obvious parallels to the financial crisis. Just as that crisis was triggered by unsustainable use of economic resources as a result of failure to respect criteria established in the Maastricht Treaty to ensure the stability of the single currency, environmental problems can also be traced back to excessive use of resources – in this case, soil, water, air, climate, non-renewable mineral and fossil resources, etc.
- 4.4.5 The EESC feels that the response to the environmental crisis should be similar in design to the measures taken in the fiscal compact in response to the financial crisis, with clear requirements, clear indicators, checks and sanctions. The seventh EAP provides none of this: the approaches set out are not adequate to really rectify the structural implementation deficiencies described, and the proposed objectives for better application by 2020 are ill-defined and unverifiable.
- 4.4.6 The EESC believes that compliance with legislation requires effective monitoring by independent bodies, and a credible willingness to impose or accept sanctions where necessary. It therefore expects the seventh EAP to extend binding criteria for effective Member State inspections and surveillance to include the wider body of EU environment law, and to develop complementary capacity at EU level.
- 4.4.7 Moreover, the inclusion in the European Semester of monitoring progress in implementing ecological objectives, as mentioned in point 82(f), is likely to focus the attention of political leaders at EU and Member State level on this issue. As the Commission points out, mounting environmental pressures can have adverse macroeconomic effects. The Stern Review Report on the Economics of Climate Change from 2006 and the 2010 synthesis report of the TEEB initiative on The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity offer striking evidence of this.
- 4.4.8 The seventh EAP should be extended to include measures that provide incentives to comply with environment legislation. In particular, linking the allocation of EU funding to Member States and private legal entities to proof of compliance with relevant environment legislation is an effective way of encouraging compliance. For the EESC, it remains very important to use cooperative strategies and disseminate examples of best practice in order to motivate business to become involved in improving the state of the environment.

4.4.9 Ultimately, effective implementation of environmental protection means giving civil society an active role, enabling the public to take on a watchdog role. Tools to allow this were introduced into European environment law pursuant to the Aarhus Convention in particular – for example, free access to environmental information, involvement of civil society organisations in decision-making on environment law, and access to justice. The proposed seventh EAP mentions these tools, but does not discuss the role of civil society in implementing environment legislation or make further-reaching proposals. Almost all positive developments in terms of nature and the environment have come at the behest of civil society. In the view of the EESC, civil society organisations are key players in implementing the seventh EAP. Their role should be strengthened and given much more attention in the seventh EAP in the form of an additional priority objective. The catalogue of measures should be extended to include provisions on promoting action to enhance civil society engagement (e.g. local Agenda 21 partnerships or similar forums), forging partnerships and getting organised civil society more closely involved in environment or sustainability councils.

4.5 **Priority objective 6: to secure investment for environment and climate policy and get the prices right**

4.5.1 It is vital to take action to promote investment in environment and climate policy and to include ecological costs when setting prices in order to guarantee the transition to a resource-efficient, low-carbon economy. The EESC therefore welcomes the fact that the Commission has included this as a priority objective in its proposed seventh EAP. However, here too the proposed objectives for 2020 (point 82(a) and (b)) are very vague and do not provide verifiable measures of success.

4.5.2 Once again, there are vague references to phasing out environmentally harmful subsidies, just as in the 2006 sustainability strategy, which promised that a list would be published. There is a risk that EU environment policy will lose credibility if actions are repeatedly announced but not implemented. The same goes for the oft-proclaimed principle of internalising external costs and the major shift from taxation of labour towards taxation of the environment as a limited resource.

Brussels, 20 March 2013.

The President
of the
European Economic and Social Committee

Staffan Nilsson