

Assessment and management of environmental noise

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The Commission presents a report on the implementation of Directive 2002/49/EC (Environmental Noise Directive). The report assesses in particular the need for further EU actions on environmental noise and a review of the acoustic environment quality in the EU based on the data reported by Member States. It notes that the implementation of the Directive has just recently entered into an active phase regarding noise mapping and action planning. This first implementation report identifies significant achievements but also several difficulties and areas for improvement. However, the full potential of the END has not been harvested yet. The action plans are only now being implemented and have not created the effects envisaged yet.

Environmental noise remains a significant problem across the EU with significant health impacts. Based on the information that has become available about the health impacts of noise, it appears that further actions should be considered to reduce the number of people affected by harmful noise levels. The assessment relating to the first round of noise mapping suggests that around **40 million people across the EU are exposed to noise above 50 dB** from roads within agglomerations during the night. More than 25 million people are exposed to noise at the same level from major roads outside agglomerations. These numbers are expected to be revised upwards as more noise maps are received and/or assessed.

Noise indicators and limit values: the Directive introduced noise indicators for reporting but does not set any legally binding EU-wide noise limit values or targets. Most Member States have set legally binding noise limit values and others have guideline values in place. The noise maps revealed that noise limit values were often transgressed without sufficient measures having been implemented. There was some evidence that the implementation of measures to control noise or to insulate exposed populations, in some countries, was not linked to whether a value is binding or not.

Another issue was the wide range of limit, trigger and guideline values. Only a limited number of Member States specifically indicated that they had used health-based assessments or drew on WHO health-based assessments in establishing noise limit values. Due to often different bases, concepts and levels of differentiation, it was difficult to summarise and compare the different levels in the Member States.

Improving implementation: the analysis of the first stage of implementation of the END has revealed potential areas for improvement and the Commission intends to present a work programme to the Noise Committee on the following issues:

- **Finalising the harmonised framework for mapping methods:** despite the improvements of comparability of strategic noise mapping, the situation is far from ideal. The assessments have shown that it remains difficult to present comparable figures on the number of people being exposed to excessive noise levels. Difficulties relate to differing ways in data collection, quality and availability and assessment methods used. The harmonisation framework of the methods will ultimately lead to the required level of comparability.
- **Developing EU implementation guidance:** many aspects of the Directive leave certain room for different interpretation. Many Member States suggested that these issues could be addressed through dedicated action assisting in the implementation and compliance at EU level, such as the development of guidance documents, the information exchange of best practices or the organisation for specific workshops and training courses.

- **Improving synergies between air quality and noise management:** the potential for closer co-ordination and integration of air quality and noise management has been suggested frequently. The implementation of the Ambient Air Quality Directive (2008/50/EC) and its predecessors requires similar elements, e.g. the data collection in agglomerations, improvement of assessment methods, and preparation of action plans. These aspects could be explored further.
- **Facilitating reporting issues:** the Directive has several cyclical reporting obligations which, in some cases, create an additional administrative burden without generating the necessary added value for EU action. The streamlining of reporting and the electronic reporting processes could be further optimised.

Issues for further consideration: these include the following:

- **Trigger or target values:** Member States introduced a wide variety of approaches establishing significantly different protection levels for EU citizens. However, the setting of mandatory noise limit/target values at EU level would touch upon subsidiarity issues by limiting the flexibility of national and local authorities to adapt the level of protection to their specific situations. Other options could be the establishment of EU noise trigger values, minimum requirements or EU recommendations.
- **Noise indicators:** Member States are required to use specified noise indicators of Lden and Lnight and report the noise exposure of the population of 55 dB and 50 dB or more, respectively. However, the current reporting neglects the fact that there is a considerable share of EU population exposed to noise pollution at lower levels which are still likely to cause harmful effects on health. According to the latest WHO recommendations, reporting bands of the indicator values of Lnight should be lowered to 40 dB, Lnight in order to achieve a much more realistic assessment of noise pollution impacts across the EU.
- **Enforcement:** the Directive is lacking a clear enforcement regime where action plans are directly linked to exceedances in noise levels and possible penalties even in the cases when Member States have legally binding limit values at national level. The assessment presented by the noise maps revealed that noise limit values appeared often to be infringed without consequences.
- **Technical definitions:** a number of possible technical improvement were identified including clarifications of the definitions and obligations related to agglomerations, quiet areas, major roads, industrial noise and action plans. Furthermore, the question of measurement points remained a concern including flexibility regarding the measurement height which caused concern in some Member States because of their specific building structures.
- **Administrative burden:** there is scope for streamlining and facilitating the reporting timetable.

The Commission **will consider further actions** as described in this report in relation to implementation improvements and possible measures on noise source reduction. In addition, harmonisation of the assessment methodological framework is under preparation. This report will be the basis for further discussions with Member States and other stakeholders to explore the possibilities of improving the effectiveness of the noise legislation.

Independently of this consultation process, it needs to be borne in mind that a more comprehensive and realistic assessment of the effectiveness of the END can only be made after the second round of noise mapping when the knowledge on noise pollution will have improved further.