

# Sustainable development: environmental aspects

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The European Parliament adopted a resolution based on the own-initiative report drafted by Anne **FERREIRA** (PES, FR) on the environmental aspects of sustainable development. Parliament recalled that the Johannesburg summit in September 2002 identified five essential areas where concrete results are needed: health, energy, agriculture and biodiversity, ecosystem management, water and sanitation. Despite the undertakings made at the Rio and Johannesburg summits respectively, the signatory States have not taken measures to reverse the current tendency to overexploit resources and pollute the environment, or the climate change which is the most visible results of this failure.

It was also recalled that the number of natural climatic disasters has more than doubled in Europe since the 1990s and global warming is set to continue. A new definition of growth is needed, based on responsible, efficient use of natural resources and a change in patterns of production and consumption. Parliament welcomed the fact that the Commission is taking stock of the sustainable development strategy in accordance with its undertaking and welcomed the sustainable development guidelines adopted by the European Council in June 2005. However, it was regrettable that the revision of the sustainable development policy was not carried out in combination with the mid-term review of the Lisbon strategy. It was also regrettable that most of the orientations contained in the second part of the Commission communication fail to respond to the magnitude of the challenges noted in the first part of the communication. Parliament concurred with the Commission's observation that tendencies running counter to sustainable development have become worse, whether they consist in overexploitation and pollution of natural resources, loss of biodiversity, aggravation of climate change, inequality and poverty, or the accumulation of public debt, both in the EU and in third countries.

**Climate change, transport, clean energy sources and control of energy consumption:** Parliament stated its concern about the following:

- there is a risk that the Union will not attain the Kyoto protocol objectives for 2012, due to the absence of suitable measures to curb the rise in road transport;
- the large increase in air transport and polluting emissions in that sector. The Commission is urged to create a pilot emission trading scheme for the aviation sector for the period 2008-2012, covering all flights to and from any EU airport;
- solutions are required designed to achieve a substantial reduction in atmospheric pollution and greenhouse gas emissions in the EU by 30% of 1990 levels by 2020 and 80% by 2050, recent reports having confirmed that countering climate change requires a larger reduction in emissions in Europe and the rest of the world;
- there must be measures to stabilise distribution among modes of transport at the 1998 level by 2010;
- Europe's current use of natural resources is exceeding biological capacity by more than double; Europe is making disproportionate demands on existing terrestrial and marine natural resources;
- most Member States depend heavily on fossil fuels and nuclear energy for their energy supplies, and promotion of biofuels is urgently required.

**Management of natural resources:** Parliament stated as follows:

- it called on the Member States, especially those in the west and south of Europe, and the sectors concerned, in particular the agricultural and tourism sectors, to undertake measures to reduce water abstraction and guarantee water supplies for the various areas of human activity;
- the EU must try to achieve the ambitious objective of reversing by 2010 the loss of biodiversity in Europe and the world. Many species of fauna and flora are threatened with extinction. The Commission is asked to present a European action plan, endowed with the necessary budget to fulfil the objectives of protecting and restoring ecosystems and biological diversity in the EU and third countries. Further action is also necessary to fully integrate biodiversity protection into agriculture, regional development, fisheries and development policy;
- Parliament deplored the increase in the overall volume of waste, particularly packaging and asked for new provisions aimed at reducing at source the production of waste in the medium to long term.

**Land use:** Parliament asked for the integration of soil protection into the Community's environmental measures. It drew attention to the final outcome of any soil degradation, namely desertification, which is affecting large parts of the Union and has obvious effects in terms of poverty, loss of biodiversity, water quality and climate change. Parliament recalled the vital role of forests in soil fixation, avoidance of erosion, CO<sub>2</sub> absorption and flood prevention. Pollution and increasingly difficult access to natural resources and raw materials constitute a threat to the maintenance of biodiversity, and will result in a rise in prices, the magnitude of which will destabilise economic and social systems. Parliament noted with regret the lack of any adequate response to this situation by the Commission and the EU.

**Public health:** Parliament deplored the gap between the assessment of the consequences of environmental degradation on health, on the one hand, and the insufficiently bold measures proposed by the Commission in its European Environment & Health Action Plan 2004-2010, on the other.

**International:** Parliament called on Member States to extend debt cancellation to more developing countries. Environmental protection measures and mechanisms for the transfer of environmentally friendly technologies should accompany this debt cancellation programme. The revised strategy must clearly state that its objective is reform of the WTO such as will make trade subordinate to sustainable development objectives and international commitments to environmental preservation and respect for the international conventions in the social field. Whilst Parliament welcomed the outcome achieved at the Montreal Conference, it called on particularly the United States to ratify the Kyoto Protocol, which now has the force of law. It also stressed the strong links between poverty and the environment and the fact that the poorest are often the principal victims of environmental degradation. Specific initiatives need to be taken to address these poverty and environment linkages.

**Market instruments as incentives:** Parliament noted the Commission's proposal to supplement the traditional regulatory instruments with market instruments such as cost internalisation, ecotaxes, subsidies and the emission quota trading system. It emphasised support for ecotaxes since they are essential tools for an effective pollution reduction policy. Market instruments, although necessary, are not in themselves sufficient in order to pursue a policy of reducing pollution and protecting the environment. The Commission must develop targeted proposals.

**Innovations:** Parliament endorsed the Commission's proposal to invest in innovation in the area of more environmentally friendly technologies, with scientific and technical research being required to take account of environmental and social issues. It called on the EU to take the necessary decisions so that it can become the world's foremost resource- and energy-saving economy. Achieving those objectives would bring about greater autonomy and security in terms of resources and energy supplies, while also uncoupling economic growth from the exploitation of natural resources.

**Application of the principles of sustainable development:** The "polluter pays" and precautionary principles must be affirmed as the regulatory principles underpinning public policy on public health, food safety and consumer and environmental protection.

**Informing and mobilising citizens and businesses:** Protecting the environment calls at the same time for information, awareness-raising and education. The strategy must be the result of a transparent process involving the citizens of Europe. The Aarhus Convention on access to information must be fully implemented. Furthermore, Parliament called for the development of environmental education to give it a full place on primary school curricula, and to put in place information and awareness-raising programmes directed at adults.

**Thematic strategies:** Parliament was delighted that the first thematic strategies have finally been presented. It felt, however, that a good number of them, particularly the reform of the CAP and fisheries policy, do not take enough account of sustainable development objectives and continue to favour intensive production methods.

In conclusion, Parliament called for the financial perspective for 2007-2013 to make sufficient provision for appropriate action to be taken at every level to combat unsustainable trends such as poverty, social exclusion and the consequences of the ageing of society. The revised strategy implies above all a real change in our modes of production and consumption, and involves reconsidering the aims of our economic activity. Failure to act will come at an increasingly high price, will have ever more considerable direct consequences, and will make it even more difficult to implement the EU's objectives as regards social progress, health and environmental protection, generating an intolerable burden for future generations.