Thematic strategy on the sustainable use of natural resources

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The European Parliament adopted a resolution based on the own-initiative report by Kartika Tamara **LIOTARD** (GUE-NGL, NL) in response to the Commission communication on a Thematic Strategy for Sustainable Use of Natural Resources. It took reluctant note of the document and regretted the lack of a clear vision on how to meet the overall objective. Parliament felt that it should be seen as a first step in a process eventually leading to a comprehensive strategy for the sustainable use of natural resources. The Commission's action platform for the study of the Sustainable Development Strategy was too cautious and limited in scope and, in its present form, it would not be able to persuade the public or political decision-makers to pursue the crucial goals for which it provides. Parliament called on the Commission to establish goals and targets at political and at sectoral level for resource efficiency, and speed up the work on appropriate tools to maintain progress. Moreover, the Thematic Strategy failed to pursue the objectives of the European Community's 6th EAP.

Parliament went on to state that pollution, the increasing scarcity of natural resources and raw materials and the increasing difficulty of gaining access to them would cause price rises on such a scale as to more or less completely destabilise the economic and social systems of the EU, and will give rise to risks of conflict. The Commission must set binding targets and timetables for natural resources in the following way:

- develop and implement best practices for every production chain; and

- achieve a quantitative greenhouse gas reduction of at least 30% by 2020 and of 80% by 2050 against 1990 levels.

The Commission was also encouraged to define best practices for the major product groups, starting with the "top-ten" (defined by the Commission), to be completed within three years. The Data Centre for Natural Resources (proposed in the Thematic Strategy) must be responsible for defining best practices. Community policies must be proposed for the purpose of fostering stakeholder interaction and promote application of life-cycle assessments (LCA) and/or other methods among companies and provide information upon request; and develop CO2 targets on a national and a sectoral basis.

The EU should take the lead in the search for innovative solutions and in promoting more efficient use of resources, and it should aim to be the world leader in eco-efficient technologies. Parliament noted that the market for sustainable products would have to grow in order to meet the increasing demand from a rapidly growing 'middle class' for consumer goods and services which respect regional and global carrying capacity. While acknowledging that working towards the sustainable use of natural resources is a long-term process, Parliament felt that a time horizon of 25 years as outlined in the Commission's communication was too long.

Parliament did not agree with the Commission that no indicators are known which would enable specific, clear and time-tabled objectives to be included in the Thematic Strategy now. Indicators which are already known include GDP (Gross Domestic Product), DMI (Direct Material Input) and DMC (Domestic Material Consumption). Other indicators as available and detailed as these would be related to various aspects of the quality of life, such as public health conditions, social inclusion, social awareness of decision-making processes and an environmental "footprint". The challenge would be to improve the quality of life by pursuing more immaterial goals with the support of information and communication

technologies, and in general less demanding technologies, and therefore reducing the pressure on natural resources.

Parliament then proposed that the Commission perform within three years an assessment regarding the possibilities and the instruments for decoupling natural resource use from economic growth. The revised Thematic Strategy should include these decoupling instruments. This approach should also be implemented in the revision of existing policies. The EU should adopt a clear target for the absolute reduction of resource use, given that the analysis in the Annex to the Thematic Strategy indicates that we need to go beyond a 3% annual resource efficiency improvement, and that halving resource use in the period 2005-2030 requires almost 6% annual resource efficiency improvement. All Community instruments and legislation must contribute overall to the conservation of natural resources and the pursuit of sustainable development in the EU and countries outside the EU. The EU should encourage the establishment of resource strategies in non-EU countries, which should also be reflected in its funds and aid policy.

Market instruments and subsidies, particularly of a fiscal nature, could be used to reduce the use of environmentally damaging resources, particularly by means of a re-allocation of subsidies and by reducing in stages, but quickly, any subsidies to unsustainable activities and supporting the introduction of ecotaxes. For example, more subsidies for small-scale hydroelectric power, as well as for wind power and solar energy, would promote the use of new technologies and improve Europe's competitive position in the world, as well as reducing dependence on fossil fuels imported from other parts of the world.

Parliament proposed that targets be set for resource use reduction in the following sectors: food, housing and transport, as according to recent studies, these cause the highest negative impacts. Agricultural policy, in particular, should be geared partly to reducing pressure on the environment by means of the sustainable use of natural resources including, but not confined to, land, water and fuels. In agriculture, genuine progress needed to be made in research into ecological production methods, regulation and monitoring relating, inter alia, to the use of fertilisers, pesticides and water, promotion of short chains, internalising external costs and attaching environmental conditions to economic support. The pioneering role of organic and sustainable farming should be acknowledged and supported.

Lastly, Parliament considered that the EU should do everything possible to provide consumers and producers with proper information on the sustainable use of natural resources, and that environmental education, particularly concerning sustainable consumption, should form part of elementary education. Producers should supply information to the public on the origin and production methods of their products and services and the production chains involved.