

The European Community and environmental protection

European File

For too long economic growth was based on the belief that natural resources were free and inexhaustible. The need for ecological balance was scorned. Over-intensive and badly planned developments — whether urban, industrial or agricultural — wasted scarce resources and generated pollution — which often threatened to damage our health. But public awareness of the dangers has finally been aroused. Spectacular disasters, such as the Seveso accident in Italy and the oil slicks caused by the sinking of giant tankers have brought home the desperate need for preservation of the environment. At the same time, the economic crisis has shown the absurdity of thoughtless waste of resources and raw materials. ¹

The need for a Community environment policy was proclaimed by the Heads of State or Government at their Paris summit in October 1972. A first action programme, drawn up by the European Commission, was adopted in 1973, followed by a second in 1977. The third programme, to cover the period 1983-86, was approved in February 1983.

Buy why deal with the environment at European level?

- Firstly, because the European Treaties commit Member States to work together to develop their economies in harmony and to promote balanced and steady growth. In the modern world, this mission cannot be accomplished without a rational use of resources and without protecting the environment. Natural resources are both the

¹ This *European File* updates and replaces No 2/81.

foundation and the limitation for economic and social development. They are the well-springs for the quality of life, without which economic advance is futile.

- Secondly, because the natural environment does not recognize frontiers. Industrial waste from Seveso (and a hundred other places) travels across Europe. So do air streams polluted by sulphur dioxide. Many lakes and water courses cross national boundaries. It would be pointless for one country to protect migratory birds, if they are massacred in the next country. The Community is not attempting to assert central control over actions better organized at national or local level. But the Community is well placed to solve problems for which national legislation is too limited and action on a world scale is difficult to enforce. Moreover, exchanges between national experts and administrators and joint or coordinated research encourage speedy progress, save money and often obtain the quickest and best results.
- Divergent national environment policies could create anomalies which would impede the common market for goods and services. The establishment of differing standards prevents the free movement of goods. Varying financial burdens on business distort competition. A Europe-wide policy, on the other hand, helps to create a large market and to equip firms to deal with international competition.
- Environmental policy has a fundamental importance, independent of the vagaries of the economic climate. It aims to safeguard future development potential by preventing the despoilation of natural resources. But, at a time of recession, such a policy acquires a new importance. It can help the Community to accomplish a number of its major objectives: the reduction of unemployment, through the creation of jobs and the stimulation of industries producing the latest equipment or using modern processes (it is estimated that 300 000 jobs were created in the Federal Republic of Germany in this way between 1975 and 1979); the sharpening of the competitive edge of the European economy by promoting new technologies and reducing direct and indirect costs caused by nuisances and waste; the elimination of obstacles to the use of energy sources other than oil; and the encouragement of the development of lesser-favoured regions, especially Mediterranean areas influenced by the enlargement of the Community.

Towards an overall prevention strategy

The European environmental policy has three major objectives: to protect human health; to ensure the continued existence, in sufficient quantity and quality, of all resources on which life depends: water, air, open spaces, climate, raw materials, the urban environment and our natural heritage; finally, to preserve and, where possible, restore the natural environment and the habitats needed by both fauna and flora. The interdependence of these different resources means that the Community has to adopt a global strategy. Increasingly, this strategy must be one of prevention. The fight against pollution and the destruction of scarce resources is less costly, more effective and more conducive to healthy economic development if environmental considerations are taken into account from the beginning of the planning and decision-making process. This applies equally to agriculture, energy, industry, transport and tourism. The Community must therefore encourage:

- The promotion of scientific research which will prepare the ground for the necessary action. Work already undertaken in Community laboratories and, jointly, in those of Member States has included the study of air and water pollution and the treatment and use of wastes, the analysis of organic micro-pollutants, the detection of atmospheric pollutants and the study of their effect on humans, as well as research into chemicals, heavy metals and noise. Other work has been carried out on the protection of soils and agricultural resources and the management of towns and natural parks. The Community's Joint Research Centre is studying the ecological impact of conventional power stations and certain chemical products. It is also working on agricultural resources and the teledetection of pollutants. Recent research subjects have included climatology and improved ways of forecasting the weather; the recycling of wastes and 'clean' technologies; the protection and management of the natural environment; the improvement of information services (especially information banks on chemical products); and general research into the interaction between people and their environment. In 1982, the Community budget gave 17 million ECU for research of this kind. ¹

- The improvement of information, training and the awareness of environmental problems. The European Commission publishes reports on the state of the environment, research results, reports by documentation centres and experts and warns of incidents of pollution which could affect surface waters and the atmosphere. The Commission is also preparing an 'ecological map' which will allow environmental considerations to be balanced against economic and social needs in decisions on change of use of land and in developing national and Community policies for various sectors of the economy. The Community also organizes conferences for specialist interests, especially in industry. Close relations have been established with the non-governmental organizations grouped in the European Environment Bureau. Finally, a pilot network of primary schools has been experimenting for six years with new methods of teaching on the subject of environmental problems. The experiment is soon to be extended to secondary schools.

- The promotion of procedures which will ensure that environmental considerations are taken into account before decisions, likely to influence the environment, are taken. European directives on dangerous substances already lay down rules for authorization and examination before the substances are marketed. The European Commission has drawn up a proposal to make all planning permission for large industrial and infrastructure developments subject to a prior study of their environmental impact. ² The Commission hopes to extend this process gradually to other public and private activities, such as changes in land use, programmes of economic and regional development, and the introduction of new products, laws or technologies.

- The monitoring of the implementation of decisions already taken and the strengthening of the cohesiveness of Community and national environment policies. In addition to its

¹ 1 ECU (European currency unit) = about £ 0.58, Ir. £ 0.72 or US \$ 0.89 (at exchange rates current on 17 June 1983).

² This is already taken into account in the loan decisions of the European Investment Bank and other Community financial instruments.

research activities, the Community has implemented a number of legal steps in this direction. More than 60 directives have been agreed. They oblige Member States to introduce laws or regulations which implement Community decisions. The Community must now ensure that these laws and regulations are applied and that they are adapted to new technologies and new problems.

- The provision of financial resources. To reduce pollution and prevent distortion of competition, the Community decided in 1975 that the polluter must pay the costs of preventing or removing the nuisance he has caused. But the European Commission has allowed, as a temporary measure under strict conditions, public aid for the suppression of pollution in an attempt to relieve the financial burden on industry at a time of recession. The Commission also hopes to see an increase in the funds given by the Community itself for the improvement of the environment. The cash already comes from the agricultural and regional funds as well as the European Investment Bank.¹ New budgetary credits of about 10 million ECU a year will help to enforce Community legislation and finance pilot projects on new, non-polluting technologies.

European environmental policy has two major themes: the fight against pollution and nuisances and, increasingly, the improvement of our management of land, the environment and natural resources. It also plays a significant international role.

(a) The fight against pollution and nuisances

- Cleaner water: a number of European directives deal with the protection of surface and underground, fresh and salt water. Quality standards have been set for bathing water, drinking water, fresh water fisheries and water for shellfish farming. The discharge of dangerous substances, listed as 'black' or 'grey' according to their toxicity, must receive prior authorization and quantities and quality standards must be strictly controlled. Another directive deals with the control and gradual reduction of titanium dioxide waste, the origin of the 'red sludge' which damages marine life. In addition, the Community has two systems for information exchange. One concerns the pollution of fresh water. The other aims to control and reduce pollution caused by oil spills. Further action is needed to protect water from pollution, especially in sensitive areas covered by international conventions, to which the Community belongs, such as those covering the Rhine, the North Sea and the Mediterranean.
- Cleaner air: European directives limit atmospheric pollution by motor vehicles, the level of sulphur in heating oil and the lead content of petrol. Other directives set out quality objectives and pollution limits for sulphur dioxide and suspended particles. In the latter case, national monitoring services are linked by an information exchange procedure. In addition, the Community has ratified an international convention on long-distance cross-frontier pollution. Further action is needed to control the 'acid rain'

¹ A number of infrastructure projects have been financed in this way, including purification, protection and cleansing stations in the Bay of Naples and other coastal areas. The European Regional Development Fund spends an average of 150 million ECU a year on projects of this kind. The EIB has given loans totalling 1 500 million ECU since 1958 (not including projects linked with other schemes falling under different headings).

which threatens human health, forests and our architectural heritage. The Commission has tabled a draft directive on the control of industrial pollution. It also intends to encourage cleaner uses of the coal-based fuels which are needed to reduce the Community's dependence on imported oil.

- **Less noise:** European directives lay down methods for measuring the amount of noise made by building-site machinery and fix maximum noise levels for cars, lorries, motor-cycles, tractors, subsonic aircraft and helicopters. Possible future developments include study of the link between noise reduction and energy saving, the effect of machinery vibration on old buildings and the definition of physical indicators which would allow the evaluation of the level of sound in any particular environment.
- **Better control of chemical products:** in 1982 the Community published the European Core Inventory, listing 34 000 chemical substances already on the market. It also launched a procedure for evaluating and checking new products before they are sold commercially. Directives exist which fix standards of biodegradability for detergents, and classification, packaging and labelling standards for pesticides, solvents and paints. The Community has also taken action to curb the use of dangerous substances: PCB, certain phytopharmaceutical preparations, fluorocarbons in aerosols, which destroy the ozone layer around the Earth which protects us from ultraviolet radiation, etc. Other measures, drawn up after the Seveso accident, aim to give advance warning of the accident danger from certain industrial activities and limit their effect by laying down safety standards and contingency plans.

Alongside these specific programmes, the Community intends to improve the coordination of environmental action to avoid the transfer of pollution through partial solutions. In particular, the Community must draw up a list of the most threatened sites and ancient monuments as the first step towards checking the destruction of Europe's cultural heritage by pollution of all kinds.

(b) The protection and management of land, the environment and natural resources

- **Rational management of land:** land is one of the most limited and sought-after natural resources in the Community. The way it is used very largely conditions the quality of the environment. Over 80% of the Community consists of agricultural land and forests. Protective action taken by the Community has included controlling the use of effluents from intensive animal rearing, the protection of plant species, studying the ecological impact of large drainage and irrigation schemes and limiting the use of pesticides, including an outright ban on a number of products. The Commission has published a number of reports on forestry policy, which must aim to strike a balance between the rational use of land and the traditional uses of forests. The problems of coastal areas, mountainous regions and nature reserves have been given special attention. At the same time, the Community has taken special measures under its agricultural policy to help the Mediterranean area, including grants for reafforestation and the improvement of soils. Similar help has been given to mountainous regions, where the preservation of a certain number of farms is vital to the protection of the environment. These efforts

must be redoubled in order to protect the most threatened areas or preserve areas of particular ecological or natural importance. A five years action programme with a budget of 100 million ECU has just been proposed by the Commission to increase the protection of forests against fire and acid rain.

- The rational management of water resources: the future availability of water supplies is beginning to become a matter of concern in some areas. The Community is preparing reports on the total supplies available and underground water resources.
- The conservation of fauna and flora: the rich, genetic variety of nature is threatened by the growing scarcity and even the extinction of certain species. The Community has banned the importation of products from whales and other cetaceans, as well as from baby seals. It has adopted a directive protecting the habitats of 74 species of birds, limiting the hunting and sale of other species and forbidding capture on a large scale. More needs to be done. A Europe-wide network of habitats must be identified and protected to guarantee the survival of the most threatened species.
- The management of waste and the promotion of 'clean' technologies: 5 million tonnes of solid waste is generated in the Community every day. It is a source of pollution. It can be poisonous. And it contains large quantities of costly, imported raw materials. European procedures and standards have therefore been established for reducing and recycling waste, especially used oil and toxic or dangerous substances. The transportation of the latter from one member country to another is the subject of a recent Community draft regulation which would prevent a repetition of the controversy which surrounded the transport of barrels of dioxin from Seveso in 1983. Research programmes have also been launched to find ways of reducing the quantity of non-recoverable waste and promoting the recycling of urban and industrial waste and its use for agricultural or energy-generating purposes. Specific recommendations have been made on the re-use of old paper and cardboard, of which the Community is a large net importer. Since prevention is better than cure, the Commission is also drawing up an inventory and promoting the spread of 'clean' technologies, which cause little or no pollution, generate less waste and consume less energy and raw materials.

(c) Action at international level

- Environmental problems often go far beyond the frontiers of the Community, which has supported a number of international conventions on the protection of fauna, flora, the atmosphere and fresh and sea water. The Community coordinates the position of its Member States in various international bodies. It exchanges information with countries throughout the world and has undertaken joint research programmes with a number of non-Community countries in Europe. These efforts must be intensified, especially in the conservation of scarce resources and in tackling the problems of the Mediterranean and the North Sea.
- Special mention must also be made of the Third World where environmental protection is increasingly seen as an essential pre-condition for development. Through its various

cooperation agreements, the Community is strengthening its financial and technical aid for the struggle against desertification, for the preservation of tropical forests, for better management of water supplies and for the establishment of forms of agriculture and energy supply compatible with the protection of the environment.



The Community environmental policy has achieved significant results over a comparatively short period of time. It is the intention of the European Commission to extend the policy, on the basis of research, analysis and detailed consultations, whenever Community action appears capable of filling a vacuum at national or international level. Commission proposals will carefully weigh the economic and social considerations. In so far as it is possible, the precise cost and the benefit of all planned actions will be worked out in advance. The different economic and ecological situations of the Member States will be taken into account to avoid the creation of disproportionate burdens in the implementation of the European policy.

Priority areas for future action laid down by ministers include: integration of environmental considerations into other Community policies; the carrying out of impact studies before decisions are taken; the prevention or the reduction of pollution and nuisances in the atmosphere, water or soil; the battle against noise nuisances; the control of dangerous chemical substances and wastes; the promotion of 'clean' technologies; the development of cooperation to combat cross-frontier pollution; the consideration of the special problems of the Mediterranean and other important Community regions with particular difficulties; and, finally, cooperation with developing countries.

The recession should be seen as an occasion for strengthening, not limiting, action to protect the environment. These efforts must be all-embracing and, increasingly, in the area of prevention, rather than cure. To achieve these aims, the Community needs not only the support of its citizens but also their active involvement. Environmental policy must be seen as a public programme, which aims to foster a better balanced and more harmonious economic development and to involve ordinary people in its implementation. In short, its intention is to achieve a genuine improvement in the quality of life ■



The contents of this publication do not necessarily reflect the official views of the institutions of the Community.

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