

The European Community and environmental protection

European File

In recent years, public opinion has become increasingly aware of the deteriorating quality of the environment and the need for remedial action. It is rare that we are not faced with one sort of pollution or another in our daily lives. The level of public awareness has been further reinforced by some spectacular catastrophes. The accidents involving the *Amoco Cadiz*, the *Eleni V*, the *Bételgeuse* and the *Tanio* have illustrated the danger of sea pollution from oil. The Seveso accident in Italy demonstrated the risks inherent in the processing of dangerous substances in industry. Finally, the economic crisis makes the thoughtless waste of raw materials even more absurd because their sources are not all inexhaustible, and since wastage and pollution are partly interlinked. Also, Europeans in the Community produce close to 5 million tonnes of waste, a large part of which could be avoided or re-used. The economic crisis has also highlighted the need for policies which aim less at increasing the quantity of goods available but more at increasing the quality of life.¹

Nature, fortunately, is no longer considered as an immutable element beyond the control of man. It is clear that all the things we dump in the environment return in one form or another. Atmospheric pollutants are dispersed by the wind and then brought down to earth again with the rain. Pesticides, herbicides or fertilizers, when extensively or indiscriminately used, can have serious consequences on wildlife, water-courses, soil composition, etc., and therefore on man. Toxic wastes — particularly lead, mercury and other heavy metals — contaminate micro-organisms. They then enter the food chain, e.g.

¹ This file updates and replaces No 4/79.

in grass, and find their way to man by way of animal meat, as well as by way of the sea and in rivers. In the Mediterranean — the holiday playground of over 30 million Europeans — the level of pollution is reaching disturbing levels. Also the Rhine and the Scheldt have been turned almost into sewers, and have become less and less attractive as sources for man's water supply.

Pollution is particularly acute in cities and these house more than 75% of the Community's population (compared to 60% in 1950). Suburbs are extending and frequently merging into each other, particularly within the Paris-London-Ruhr industrial triangle. These great concentrations of men and industry encourage pollution. Living and working conditions have deteriorated in these areas due to noise and, as long ago as 1970, 15% of the population was exposed to noise levels in excess of the tolerable limit of 65 decibels, and also to contaminated air, to filth, to congestion and often to the ugliness of new housing projects.

The expansion of our cities has been accompanied by internal dislocation due to the growth of offices, automobiles and certain urban renewal programmes. Rural areas are being eroded at the periphery of conurbations, and certain particularly pleasant regions are being nibbled away through the construction of second residences.

The cost of all this is decidedly very great : the deterioration of natural resources and raw materials; the loss of time, energy and money involved in, for example, traffic jams; the erosion of certain social and cultural values, and sometimes the growth of violence. This brief and partial outline demonstrates the importance of the environmental policies introduced by the Community and Member States in recent years.

Why have a Community policy ?

The necessity of a European environmental policy was agreed by the Community's Heads of State or Government at the Paris Summit on 19 October 1972. The first action programme drawn up by the European Commission was adopted in 1973; the second, covering the period 1977-81, is well under way and a third is at the discussion stage.

Why deal with the environment at the European level ?

- Firstly because, in signing the European Treaties, Community countries have agreed to work together to improve the living conditions for all their citizens. Economic progress, it is now realized, does not have any sense unless it leads to an improvement in the quality of life, which is itself largely conditioned by the environment. Policies developed at the European level for manufacturers must be balanced by policies for consumers and for the environment, etc.
- Secondly, because one of the objectives of a European policy is to ensure the rational management of our natural heritage. This policy should lead to savings and a better use of our renewable and above all non-renewable raw materials which are economic assets of increasing importance and common to all mankind now and in the future. In

this way, it contributes directly, following the terms of the Treaty of Rome, towards an 'harmonious' economic development. .

- A European policy can help define common concepts, objectives and principles to help harmonize national policies when these, taken in isolation, could, through the setting of standards, the granting of subsidies to companies, etc., cause barriers to trade or distortions of competition which work against the correct operation of the Common Market. Such harmonization, of course, is not without its difficulties.
- A European policy can also bring greater effectiveness to national actions. Firstly because pollution does not stop at national frontiers : the Rhine flows through four European countries; numerous European lakes and water-courses are shared by two or more States; air polluted by sulphur dioxide traverses all of Europe; a country which protects migratory birds is wasting its time if its neighbours massacre them. Secondly, through exchanges between specialists and officials at all levels, the pooling or coordination of frequently expensive scientific research can add momentum. In many cases the Community has been able to extend to member countries the benefits of certain national initiatives, and has enabled good results to be achieved rapidly for the benefit of all.
- Finally, by acting in concert, Community countries strengthen their position in international affairs. Thus the Community negotiates the rules applicable to toxic products on an equal basis with the Americans; it coordinates the activities of Member States in a number of international bodies.

The results

Community action in the environmental area is very extensive. It covers all natural resources (natural environment, energy, raw materials) which are harmed or over-exploited by economic and social development, and also the quality of the living environment which is itself strongly influenced by the respect for natural resources. Work in progress revolves around two principle axes : the battle against pollution and nuisances and, increasingly, the improvement of the management of the countryside, of the environment and of resources. The means employed range from scientific study and research to the adoption of directives which oblige Member States to draw up their own laws or regulations to ensure respect for Community provisions (some sixty European directives have already been approved and numerous others are at the discussion stage).

(a) The battle against pollution and nuisances

- Reducing water pollution : several European directives set down the quality objectives for bathing-waters, for water to be abstracted for human consumption, and for fresh-water used for fish and shellfish breeding. The quality of bathing-water and surface freshwater is also studied and information exchanged between member countries. One important directive establishes a system of prior authorization and requires the setting of quantitative limits and quality objectives for the discharge of dangerous substances

included on a 'black' or 'grey' list according to their toxicity. A directive on the protection of surface waters has also been adopted. Sea pollution is covered by two series of provisions. One directive deals with the control and gradual reduction of titanium dioxide waste, the origin of the 'red sludge' which affects plankton. An action programme adopted in 1978, following the *Amoco Cadiz* accident, aims to control and reduce hydrocarbon discharges (the total annual level of which is as high as 6 million tonnes). In this context, accident plans conforming to common criteria should be defined together with inventories of the properties of pollutants, methods of treatment, the tankers in service (for which the existing directives already require certain safety standards).¹

- Reducing atmospheric pollution : European directives limit air 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 this latter case, the national monitoring networks are linked together in an information exchange procedure.
- Noise reduction : European directives set out the maximum noise levels for automobiles, lorries, motor-cycles, tractors and subsonic aircraft. Another directive defines methods to be used for measuring the noise emitted by factory machines.
- Controlling the impact of chemicals on the environment : several European directives set out biodegradability standards for detergents as well as classification, packaging and labelling norms for pesticides, solvents and paints. The use of several dangerous substances (PCB, certain phytopharmaceutical preparations, fluorocarbons in aerosols which destroy the ozone layer around the earth that protects us from ultraviolet radiation) has also been limited. In addition, a general pre-marketing evaluation and control procedure for new chemical substances has been established. New provisions drawn up following the Seveso accident aim to prevent the risk of major accidents in certain industrial activities and to limit their consequences by requiring the definition of safety measures and accident plans.

(b) Better management of land, environment and resources

- Better knowledge of the environment for greater protection : to what extent can the environment absorb the effects of man ? To answer this question, the Community is in the process of developing an ecological 'map' to help visualize the different data on the environment and to be able to relate these to the economic and social demands guiding decisions on rural planning, sectoral Community and national policies, etc. Other work has led to the creation of provisions requiring that all major industrial, agricultural or infrastructure projects require a prior study of their impact on the environment.
- Safeguarding natural countryside, which is one of our most limited and sought-after resources : decisions affecting land and its utilization largely condition the future quality of our environment. The Community has therefore undertaken work on this as

¹ For further details see *European file* No 6/80 : 'The European Community and water'.

varied as the use of effluents from intensive farming such as piggeries, the protection of plant species, the ecological aspects of large drainage or irrigation projects, the use of pesticides, some of which have also been banned. Two Commission reports were dedicated to forestry policy which must preserve a balance between the main function of forests and the rational use of the land. The problems of coastal zones, mountain regions and natural reserves have been given special attention. In addition, in the context of its agricultural policy, the Community has undertaken special measures aimed at the Mediterranean regions (aid for reforestation and the conversion of the land) as well as the mountain zones where the maintenance of a certain number of farms is necessary for the preservation of the environment.

- Protecting fauna and flora : many species are today on the road to extinction. A recent European directive protects the habitats of 74 particularly threatened bird species, and prohibits mass hunting. Another text aims to prohibit the importation of products derived from whales and other cetaceans also in danger of extinction.
- Intelligent management of natural resources : the Community wishes to safeguard its resources and combat the wastage which the economic crisis makes even more absurd. Studies have been undertaken, for example, on the availability of water in member countries. European directives have set up procedures and norms for the elimination and recycling of waste and, in particular, waste oils and toxic and dangerous wastes. Joint research programmes help develop the recycling of urban and industrial waste and sewage sludge as well as paper and cardboard, of which the Community is largely a net importer. And as prevention is better than cure, the European Commission is particularly interested — through the exchange of scientific and technical information — in low- or non-polluting technologies as well as those which consume less energy or raw materials.¹
- Improving the urban environment : European studies have already been undertaken or are still in progress on the development of large conurbations and ways of evaluating the quality of the environment. A new research programme will examine the impact on cities of economic and technological change, social problems, and different urban policies.
- Promoting better living and working conditions : provisions have been made for better worker protection against the industrial use of lead and asbestos. In addition, the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions in Dublin provides Community institutions, governments and the social partners with studies on the humanization of work and its environment (new forms of organization, shift work, health and safety). Other studies cover the length of work and the transport of workers.

(c) The resources for a policy

- Extending scientific research : since 1973, the Community has considerably increased its research effort in the environmental area. The work undertaken deals particularly

¹ For more details see *European file* No 10/80 : 'The European Community and waste recycling'.

with water and air pollution, the processing and use of waste, the analysis of organic micro-pollutants, detection of the effects on man of atmospheric pollutants, chemicals, heavy metals, noise, etc. The safety of nuclear installations and the storage of radioactive waste are dealt with in special programmes.¹ Other studies in progress cover the safeguarding of agricultural resources and the land, and the management of cities and natural zones. This research helps prepare for legislative action backed up by methods of checking and, in certain cases, the development of the necessary equipment. New programmes have just been launched or will soon be launched both in the Community's own laboratories and in those of Member States. Between 1980 and 1983, therefore, the Community's Joint Research Centre will allocate more than 43 million EUA² to work on the ecological impact of traditional electricity power stations and certain chemicals as well as on the remote detection of pollution, and agricultural resources. The work which should be carried out with national laboratories between 1981 and 1985 (with Community participation to the tune of 50 million EUA) will concentrate on climatology and the improvement, in time, of weather forecasting methods; on the study of pollution, its cause, its effects and ways of reducing it, particularly by promoting recycling and 'clean' technologies; on the protection and management of the natural environment; on the improvement of information systems (data banks on chemicals, in particular); finally, on the study of the general relationship between man and his environment.

- Improving information and training : the European Commission produced annual reports on the state of the environment as well as several inventories of research projects, on existing environment data banks and documentation centres. Conferences, seminars, etc., aimed at environmental specialists, particularly industrial, have been organized and closer relations cemented with non-governmental organizations represented within the European Environment Bureau. In addition, the setting up of a network of pilot primary schools has enabled experiments to be made into new teaching methods for environment-related problems during the past four years.
- Increasing the financial resources : as a general rule, the polluter should pay the costs of preventing or removing environmental nuisances. This principle was adopted at the Community level in 1975. Following an amendment adopted by the European Parliament in 1979, however, the European Commission would like to have at its disposal a Community financial instrument which could help, for example, the implementation of European regulations, encourage pilot projects on new low- or non-polluting technologies, or support preservation work on the natural and human environment.

△

¹ See *European file* No 15/79 : 'Community action in nuclear safety'.

² 1 European unit of account = about UKL 0.56 or IRL 0.69 (at exchange rates current on 8 December 1980).

The Community environmental policy has four unique characteristics :

- It is orientated towards a world where pollution crosses national frontiers unabated : the Community is party to several international conventions on the protection of fauna and flora, on air, on fresh and sea-waters; it participates in the work of international organizations dealing with the environment; it exchanges information with several third countries, European, American and Asiatic; it supports projects of interest to Mediterranean countries to whom it is linked through cooperation agreements, as well as with the African, Caribbean and Pacific countries which are signatories of the Lomé Convention. In addition, certain scientific research has been jointly conducted with other West European countries.
- It is evolutionary : after originally being concentrated on the *a posteriori* reduction of pollution and nuisances, it has tended to favour the prevention — by encouraging clean technologies and the use of renewable raw materials — as well as the rational management of resources and land.
- It is multidimensional and in direct contact with various other policies affecting sectors (agriculture, industry, energy, transport, etc.) whose varied activities pose environmental problems which must increasingly be taken into consideration before any decisions are taken.
- It forms an important element of general economic policy. All the more so since, for a negligible cost (less than 0.3% of the annual rate of inflation) environmental expenditure helps to reduce damaging losses and to meet the threat presented by the growing scarcity of certain raw materials, to open the way to technical and industrial innovation and thereby to stimulate the creation of new jobs, estimated for example at 173 000 in France in 1978, and at 366 000 in Germany between 1975 and 1979.

In these times of economic crisis, the Community's environmental policy emerges therefore as an instrument for harmonious and more balanced economic growth, for saving of resources. It is responsive to social and ecological factors, it is likely to improve living conditions as well as the standard of living, and it is organized on a joint basis. The battle for a better environment involves also greater participation by citizens in the decision-making which affects their everyday lives, it requires the pooling of efforts of all at the most suitable level for the solution of each problem : international, Community, regional, local and even individual ■



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

Commission of the European Communities

Information offices (countries fully or partially English speaking*)

Ireland 39 Molesworth Street, Dublin 2 – Tel. 71 22 44

United Kingdom 20 Kensington Palace Gardens, London W8 4QQ – Tel. 727 80 90
– 4 Cathedral Road, Cardiff CF1 9SG – Tel. 37 16 31
– 7 Alva Street, Edinburgh EH2 4PH – Tel. 225 20 58
– Windsor House, 9/15 Bedford Street,
Belfast BT2 7 EG – Tel. 40 708

Canada Association House (suite 1110), 350 Sparks Street,
Ottawa Ont. K1R 7S8 – Tel. 238 64 64

USA 2100 M. Street, N.W. Suite 707,
Washington D.C 20037-USA – Tel. 202-862-9500
– 245 East 47th Street, 1 Dag Hammarskjöld Plaza,
New York, N.Y. 10017 - U.S.A. – Tel. 212-371-3804

* Offices also exist in other countries including all Member States.



Office for Official Publications
of the European Communities
Boîte postale 1003 – Luxembourg

ISSN 0379-3133

Catalogue number: CC-AD-81-002-EN-C