

# PROGRESS TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

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## Summary

The regional cooperation which forms the basis of the European Union (EU) and its relationships with its neighbors and potential new members has meant that in relation to environment and sustainable development, policies have been introduced on a broader and deeper level than would otherwise have been the case at a national level. The EU's Fifth Environment Action Programme (FAP), "Towards Sustainability," marked a major evolution in approach by setting in place a framework comprehensive regional program for moving towards sustainable development. It provides an important example of successful regional cooperation on sustainable development.

The main factors for success have been:

1. *Development of regional and national sustainability plans and strategies.* The development of the FAP as a coherent EU-wide plan has led to the development or improvement of national and sub-regional plans, both within the EU and in its neighbors. These have provided conceptual frameworks to guide development in a wide range of sectors. It has also provided an opportunity to engage key

- economic sectors and different partners in European society to facilitate integration of environmental considerations in policy developments at EU and national levels.
2. *Clarification of roles and responsibilities.* The process of implementing a strategic plan has required the definition of new roles and responsibilities in civil society at all stages in the policy process, on the basis of new consultation processes. Equally the engagement of business and industry has been critical.
  3. *Integration.* Progress has been made in integration between sectors, between levels of governance, and between different economic actors. A new emphasis has been placed on building the concept of integration into constitutional arrangements as a means to facilitate sustainable development and on engaging governments at the highest level.
  4. *Instruments.* The EU has analyzed, experimented with, and introduced a wide range of policy and other instruments as a means to facilitate progress on sustainable development, not just for the sake of the environment but also because it has recognized its importance for social development.
  5. *Awareness raising/attitude changing.* Waning public interest in sustainable development is a concern but new approaches are being developed and success stories highlighted.
  6. *Responsibilities/partnership/participation.* A considerable amount of concrete positive work on sustainable development is being carried out at the local level in Europe which has developed best practice in terms of multi-stakeholder approaches and innovative initiatives. New roles and responsibilities are being defined at regional, national, and local levels.

Some early results of this approach are emerging, as shown in the 1999 European State of the Environment Report and the 1999 Global Assessment of EU policy. These also indicate the size of the problems still to be tackled. What has been achieved in the 1990s will provide a platform for a new sustainability program for the EU as it moves into the twenty-first century. The EU will be in a position to give a very positive lead to the rest of the world.

## **1. Introduction**

The European Union is a unique approach to the problems of government in 15 European countries (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Finland, France, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom). From the outset the member states delegated powers to the then European Community (EC) that went beyond the powers of any other international organization. These included the preparation of a body of EC, now EU, law which is supreme over the national law of individual member states. The environment is an area where policy and legislative competence is shared between the Union level and the national level.

As a result, the regional cooperation that forms the basis of the EU and its relationship with its near neighbors and potential new members has meant that, in relation to the environment and sustainable development, policies have been introduced that are more innovative, affect more countries, and brought about more improvement to the

European environment, than would otherwise have been the case if action had only been developed at the national level.

In the 1970s and 1980s four European Environment Action Programs, developed in the context of the EC, had set in place more than 200 pieces of legislation at the European level which required individual member states (the UK, France, Germany, etc.) to take action in the following areas: pollution of the atmosphere, water, and soil; waste management; safeguards in relation to chemicals and biotechnology; product standards; protection of nature; and the introduction of environmental impact assessments. Without European action it is doubtful if some European countries would have developed their environmental policies so rapidly. However, the 1992 European State of the Environment Report prepared by the European Commission showed a slow but relentless deterioration of the general state of the European environment. It followed an analysis by European heads of state and government at their summit in Dublin in June 1990, which concluded that an approach to environmental issues based solely on legislation would not be able to deal with the expected growth in activity and development arising from the creation of a single European internal market and European economic and monetary union. The development of a single market, in particular, would impose even greater burdens on natural resources, the environment, and ultimately the quality of life. The measures that had been adopted were also not geared to the expected impact of increased competition in the international marketplace.

Equally the political and economic changes occurring in central and eastern Europe following the collapse of communism and the continuing development of relations with the EC's partners in the European Economic Area (Norway, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Switzerland) meant that action on the environment by the EC and its individual member states, as well as by its partners, needed to be developed on a much more coordinated basis. The heads of state and government concluded that action should be developed on the principles of sustainable development and preventive and precautionary action. This in turn was to be a shared responsibility between the EC and its member states. The European Commission was asked to take this into account in the preparation of a new environmental action program.

## **2. A New Approach**

The European Program of Policy and Action in relation to the Environment and Sustainable Development, "Towards Sustainability" (Fifth Action Programme (FAP) 1993–2000), adopted by the European Commission in 1992 and subsequently endorsed by the European Parliament and European Council, marked a new approach which differed fundamentally from that applied by the previous four Action Programmes. The main features of the new approach in providing a framework for action at both the European and national levels were:

- the introduction of the concept of sustainable development as outlined in the Brundtland Report "Our Common Future" in 1989;
- a focus on economic agents and activities as the causes of environmental problems;

- an endeavor to initiate changes in economic trends and practices so as to ensure sustainable socioeconomic development for future generations;
- the achievement of such changes through the optimum involvement of all sectors of society in Europe in a spirit of shared responsibility based on self interest.

It includes the following elements:

- (a) integrating the environment into other policy areas;
- (b) identifying five key target policy areas responsible for major environmental impacts—agriculture, energy, industry, transport, and tourism;
- (c) pinpointing priority environmental issues—climate and ozone depletion, acidification and air quality, nature protection and biodiversity, water, urban environment, noise, coastal zones, and waste management;
- (d) changing attitudes and patterns of production and consumption;
- (e) encouraging partnership and shared responsibility;
- (f) recognizing the different roles and responsibilities of different “actors” in European society;
- (g) broadening the range of instruments, in particular to include economic and voluntary tools;
- (h) improving the application and enforcement of legislation;
- (i) defining the international dimension of European sustainability efforts.

The FAP had available as a model the new approach developed in the Dutch National Environmental Plan and the concepts being discussed in the run-up to the 1992 Rio Earth Summit. For each of the main issues, long-term objectives were set out as an indication of the sense of direction or thrust to be applied in the pursuit of sustainable development. Certain performance targets were indicated for the period up to the year 2000 and a representative selection of actions was prescribed with a view to achieving these targets. These objectives and targets did not constitute legal commitments but, rather, performance levels or achievements to be aimed at to attain a sustainable development path. Neither did all the actions indicated require legislation at Community or national level. Some were intended for the local level, others for companies, and others for individuals.

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## **Biographical Sketches**

**Robert Hull** holds a degree in history from the University of Leicester in the UK and an MBA from the Manchester Business School. He is currently director of the Joint Services of the European Economic and Social Committee and the European Committee of the Regions in Brussels. Having worked in the European Commission on foreign policy questions and then on the creation of the European single market, Mr. Hull was adviser to the Director General for the Environment, responsible for policy coordination from 1990 to 1994. He was co-chairman of the European Network on Implementation and Enforcement of Environmental Legislation and a member of the first Environmental Advisory Committee of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. From 1994 to 1998 Mr. Hull was head of division for Environment Policy Coordination, Integration of Environment into other Policies and Environment Action Programmes in the European Commission, responsible for pioneering new approaches to the environment and sustainable development at the European level. During that time he was secretary of the European Commission's Consultative Forum on the Environment and Sustainable Development and of the Environment Policy Review Group. He is the author of a number of articles on European policy on the environment and sustainable development and on lobbying issues.

**Robert Donkers** holds Master degrees in economics and in public and international law from the Erasmus University, Rotterdam. He is married with three children. He held several positions in the Dutch administration (*inter alia* deputy director for International Environmental Affairs in the Dutch Ministry of the Environment and EU Environment Attaché for the Netherlands in Brussels) before joining the Environment Directorate-General of the European Commission in 1990. Until April 1999, he was responsible for strategic planning, including the development of indicators and state of the environment reports. He is coauthor of the Fifth EC Environment Action Programme (1993–2000) "Towards Sustainability" and was coordinator of the Review of the Fifth Environment Action Programme (1995–1998). The Fifth Program includes a strategy to integrate environmental issues into other policies. Since April 1, 1999, Mr. Donkers has been deputy head of the Chemical Substances Unit, responsible for the coordination of the development of a new EU Chemicals strategy and international negotiations for the future United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) Convention on Persistent Organic Substances. He is visiting lecturer at a number of universities in Europe and the US and Member of the Board of the International Network of Green Planners.