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INITIAL REFLECTIONS ON THE SECOND ACTION PROGRAMME
OF THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES ON THE ENVIRONMENT

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Following on from the decisions taken at the Paris Summit Meeting (October 1972), the Council approved an Environment Policy for the Community in November 1973 the aim of which was to "improve the setting and quality of life, and the surroundings and living conditions of the peoples of the Community".

The objective of this policy was to "help to bring expansion into the service of man by procuring for him an environment providing the best conditions of life, and reconcile this expansion with the increasingly imperative need to preserve the natural environment"*.

By adopting such objectives in a period of favourable economic activity, the Community and the Member States demonstrated that, from this period onwards, they would be taking into account new considerations and values such as the fragile nature of the natural environment, the "finiteness" of natural resources, the shortcomings of a society whose only criterion for development was technological progress and the accumulation of material goods, and the interdependency of national policies which dealt with these problems.

* More specifically the policy adopted set out to:

- prevent, reduce and as far as possible eliminate pollution and nuisances,
- maintain a satisfactory ecological balance and ensure the protection of the biosphere,
- ensure the sound management and avoid any exploitation of resources or of nature which cause significant damage to the ecological balance,
- guide development in accordance with quality requirements, especially by improving working conditions and the settings of life,
- ensure that more account is taken of environmental aspects in town planning and land use,
- seek common solutions to environment problems with States outside the Community, particularly in international organizations.

Since that time and despite the economic difficulties encountered, these preoccupations have scarcely lessened. Attacks on the natural environment continue to make themselves deeply felt. The fate of future generations is still a major preoccupation of Europeans and the achievement of better living and working conditions remains one of their major aspirations.

The energy crisis highlighted the vulnerability of the European economy as regards the supply of some non-regenerating raw materials and focussed attention on the need to avoid the type of wastage that goes hand in hand with a highly consumer-oriented society.

The Commission also believes that a Community environment policy which, without prejudicing the action taken at national and international level, sets out to improve living conditions and protect our natural heritage without creating barriers to trade or distortions of competition, is needed as much, if not more, today than it was in the past.

The Commission believes that the policy to be pursued in this field over the next five years should centre around three key areas:

In the first instance it should ensure that the action undertaken during the first programme be continued and if necessary stepped up. In particular some projects which were planned in the first programme still have to be decided upon by the Council. Delays have in fact occurred which may be put down either to the complex nature of the dossiers or to the slowness of procedure*.

Secondly, it should define more clearly the content of certain guiding principles such as the need to take preventative action as soon as possible, fix common long-term objectives, and finally to coordinate national programmes and harmonize policies on the basis of common long-term thinking. In particular, this coordination should make it easier to define which actions should be given priority at Community level.

In the third place, it should focus attention on changes in the economy which are due in part to a reaction against the very types of excess which the policy is trying to counteract. In this way it should help in the fight against all types of wastage which accompanies expansion. Likewise it should become more closely associated with development policies for third world countries.

* cf. State of Progress of the Action Programme on the Environment at 1 May 1975 - Doc. SEC(75) 1774.

1. Pursuing action already undertaken

An environment policy, whilst heeding present economic realities, must not be swayed by fashion or by short-term economic trends.

Meanwhile a number of activities planned in the first programme are yet to be undertaken, pursued or put into practice.

(a) As regards the fight against pollution and nuisances, these activities must be continued in accordance with the three principles contained in the first programme, namely:

- the objective evaluation of the risks from pollution;
- protection of man and the natural environment;
- the reduction of nuisances at source.

Much work and research is still needed to provide an objective evaluation of the risks from pollution. As in the past, the aim is to gain greater insight into the real short and long-term effects of the major pollutants on man and his environment and to draw up criteria, i.e., the relationships between the concentration of a pollutant and its effect. Criteria of this kind have therefore been proposed by the Community in respect of SO₂, Co and lead. Further criteria are to be proposed and adopted for other pollutants mentioned in the first programme and those referred to as belonging to the "second category", a final list of which has recently been adopted.

The defining of quality objectives and, where appropriate, quality standards is the clearest indication of the concern to protect man and the natural environment.

Quality objectives for water have been adopted for surface water used to produce drinking water.

In February 1975 the Commission forwarded a proposal for a Directive on the quality of bathing water. Other proposals are being drawn up concerning the quality of water required for fish and shellfish breeding, irrigation and certain industrial uses.

Work should be continued on the definition of quality objectives for the various environmental media (water, air, soil) as should the development of common methods to determine the measures necessary to achieve and maintain present and future quality objectives.

Finally, the state of the various environmental media in the Community should be constantly and systematically monitored and controlled using harmonized methods of measurement.

The reduction of nuisances at source should also be kept up by:

- adopting regulations on products, their specifications, their use or their disposal;
- the adoption of regulations on the discharge into the environment of certain particularly dangerous pollutants;
- the study of how to solve the problems posed by pollution from particular industries.

(b) As the first programme has already pointed out, an environment policy should not only aim at fighting pollution but also at making a positive contribution to improving the quality of the environment.

Accordingly, action should be undertaken or maintained with the particular aim of:

- improving knowledge about "the state of the environment" in the various regions of the Community;
- studying the problems posed by the availability and supply of water and the depletion of certain non-regenerating natural resources;
- seeking practical solutions to the conflict between the desire to protect and improve the environment and the requirements of economic development in regions where improvement of the quality of life is held back by regional imbalances;
- taking account of the requirements of improving and protecting the environment in land use planning, particularly in the planning of environmentally sensitive areas and of transport systems; for example, disincentives might be applied in densely populated areas;
- protecting the various forms of life (fauna, flora);
- safeguarding the natural environment, particularly by means of measures taken under the common agricultural policy.

(c) Lastly the third series of actions will concern both the fight against pollution and wastage and improvement of the environment.

Apart from research projects which form a special programme, the aim here is to educate and promote a greater sense of awareness in the public, to disseminate information on the environment and improve certain rules of law (e.g., the laws on the civil liability of polluters, harmonization of monitoring methods, etc.). This heading also includes the action which the Communities and its Member States must continue to pursue at international organization level as well as cooperation with non-member countries to "find common solutions to environmental problems".

Prominent among these actions will be the implementation of International Conventions to which the Community is a signatory.

2. Emphasizing the preventive and forward-looking nature of the measures to be taken and more fully harmonizing Community policies

(a) The first two principles of the Community environment policy adopted by the Council in November 1973 state that "the best environment policy consists in preventing pollution or nuisances at source, rather than subsequently trying to counteract their effects". "Effects on the environment should be taken into account at the earliest possible stage in all technical planning and decision-making processes" and an evaluation made of the "effects on the quality of life and on the natural environment of any measure that is adopted or contemplated at national or Community level and which is liable to affect these factors."

In order to put this principle into practice some States have introduced or are about to introduce procedures to provide an "environmental impact assessment" whereby account is taken of the effects on the environment of important investment and planning decisions or decisions concerning the marketing of particular products.

The Commission believes that such procedures should be introduced in the Community on the basis of common evaluation criteria which should be drawn up and adopted during the second programme.

(b) At its meeting on 19 July 1973, "the Council took note of the determination of Member States to ensure that the present quality of the various parts of the environment in all regions of the Community should not deteriorate, bearing in mind the often irreversible or virtually irreversible nature of certain types of pollution".

In a memorandum dated 3 April 1974 (Doc. R/899/74 - ENV. 39), the Netherlands Government set out the way in which they believed such a policy (known as a "standstill" policy) should be understood and implemented.

The Commission considers that efforts should be made to define and implement a long-term policy in the Community which would ensure that the Community's economic development is not detrimental to the natural and social environment; at the same time, the policy should aim to reduce the economic and social imbalances between the various regions of the Community.

Of the more important measures to be taken, the following might be mentioned: an improved knowledge and evaluation (on the basis of common criteria) of the environmental situation in the various regions of the Community, the purification of certain sensitive areas*, preservation as far as possible of the present quality of the environment in uncongested and hitherto scarcely polluted areas, the drawing-up of environmental impact assessments, the harmonized application of quality objectives, the fixing of standards for the most dangerous pollutants and promoting the development of new techniques less harmful to the environment.

(c) The eleventh principle of the Community environment policy (Title II of the Environment Programme) stipulates in particular that:

"Major aspects of environmental policy in individual countries must no longer be planned and implemented in isolation. On the basis of a common long-term concept, national programmes in these fields should be coordinated and national policies harmonized within the Community. Such policies should have as their aim the improvement of the quality of life .

Therefore, economic growth should not be seen in purely quantitative terms.

* Particularly certain areas of common interest such as the Rhine and the Mediterranean.

Such coordination and harmonization should in particular make it possible to increase the efficiency of the action carried out at various levels to protect and improve the environment in the Community, taking into account the regional differences existing in the Community and the requirements for the satisfactory operation of the Common Market."

It is true that the procedure for providing information on the environment adopted on 5 March 1973 has enabled the Commission and Member States to be informed in advance of the national laws, regulations and administrative provisions under preparation in the various Member States and has also meant that the Commission can request that particular national initiatives be extended to the whole of the Community.

Nevertheless, the necessarily random way in which these texts are forwarded makes it impossible to build up a full and accurate picture of the policies pursued at national or regional level, and consequently to fully ensure the coordination of national programmes and harmonization of the Community's policies as laid down in the programme.

Such coordination would make it easier for the Community to establish priorities for Community action whilst taking maximum account of the economic, social and environmental differences between Member States without adversely affecting the satisfactory operation of the Common Market.

To improve this coordination, the Commission believes that it would be beneficial if at one of their meetings Environment Ministers discussed and compared ideas among themselves and with the Commission on the environment policies pursued at national, community and international level and that, twice yearly for example the Commission invite senior officials from the national administration(s) responsible for the environment (or representatives from the Ministry dealing with environmental coordination) to meet on an informal basis with the aim of exchanging information and ideas.

3. Contributing to the reduction of wastage

It will be remembered that, well before the present energy and raw material crises, considerable importance was attached by the environment policy - drawn up in October 1973 - to the proper management of natural resources.

A well thought out environment policy does indeed have much in common with the general policy for the conservation and saving of natural resources and the reduction of wastage. Very often damage to the environment is linked to wastage; atmospheric pollution in the great urban centres is linked to the widespread use of high energy - consuming private means of transport and at the same time to poorly regulated domestic heating systems. The use of products with built-in obsolescence leads to the production of waste which scars the environment. The intensive use of chemicals in agriculture (pesticides, fertilizers) and the consequent consumption of luxury products together with the use of ~~cultivation techniques~~ ^{run} with a high short-term yield, ~~affects in the long~~ the maintenance of the natural environment and the soil's productive capacity, while the abandonment of arable land has ecological implications (erosion, changes in the water system) which must be taken into account.

The environment policy can prevent the production of waste by bringing about a reassessment of production methods and the composition of products put on the market, it will encourage the fight against the squandering of expensive resources, which are becoming depleted to the detriment of future generations. In more general terms, it must protect a rare resource namely the quality of the environment in which men live and from which they derive their livelihood.

Conversely, the fight against wastage, with the changes it implies in consumption and production habits, can have favourable repercussions on the quality of life if for example it leads to a reduction of overcrowding, pollution, noise nuisance and the spoiling of beauty spots by rubbish or inessential buildings.

The forthcoming programme must therefore give greater priority than hitherto to actions designed to save natural resources, particularly by means of measures concerning the recovery and recycling of waste, the composition and life of products and the rational use of energy and raw materials.

4. Paying closer attention to environmental aspects in the policy of cooperation with developing countries

Any overall view of environmental problems seen in terms of their three major components, namely congestion, shortage of certain resources and adverse effects on the quality of the environment means that the Community must make a careful analysis and seek solutions not only within Europe but with third countries and in particular with the developing countries.

The ~~links~~ between development and environment are indeed many and are perforce on an international scale. For the Member States and the Community the transnational dimension of environmental problems does in fact present a whole series of new constraints and opportunities. Whereas it restricts the room for manoeuvre of particular economic agents (transfer of pollutants; global effects; negative effects of the environment on competitive positions, etc.) it does provide the chance to go beyond the limits imposed by national or community territory (overcrowding, shortage of certain resources, pollution).

Present trends towards a new industrial geography should therefore be examined as to their impact on the environment and the kind of development which is involved.

This examination should not only deal with the types of industry likely to be redeployed internationally, the geographical extent of this redeployment and the procedures involved - which should take account too of regional differences (life-styles, geographical and climatic conditions) - but also the long-term consequences of industrial and agricultural development on the natural and social equilibrium.

Given the potential ease with which pollution problems might be passed on to developing countries, the Community should make clear its intention to do all it can, in cooperating with these countries, to prevent the phenomena of environmental destruction - at present afflicting the industrialized nations - from occurring in third world countries. To the extent that this coincides with the priorities of the developing countries, the Lomé Convention could take account of these considerations and make a positive contribution to the development of vast projects designed to combat erosion, the loss of soil fertility, desert formation and to improve living conditions - in particular housing.

The combination of objectives and measures set out above, which aim on the one hand to reconcile the demands of economic progress with the need to protect the natural environment and avoid wastage and on the other, to respond to the deep desire of Europeans to improve their quality of life, are sure to make a valuable contribution to the balanced and harmonious development of the European Community.