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Results and opportunities in biodiversity policy field after the Hungarian Presidency with a view to the Polish Presidency

Global biodiversity crisis is the main environmental problem today besides climate change. It has serious negative effects on the society: biodiversity underpins ecosystem services, which contribute to human wellbeing through the provision of food, water, timber, and stable climate, prevention from disasters, recreational opportunities and spiritual values. In order to avoid the substantial deterioration of human wellbeing, the needed structural changes through a holistic approach (considering the underlying causes of biodiversity loss) is still missing from the current biodiversity, as well as the overarching resource and land use policies.

Recognising the challenge caused by the biodiversity crisis, past and current Presidencies had different approaches to address the problem. Focusing on two main underlying pressures behind biodiversity loss – resource and land use – CEEweb examined the efforts and formulated proposals within the following key themes in light of the Hungarian and Polish Presidencies.

Protecting the EU's biodiversity and contributing to tackle global biodiversity challenges

One important milestone under the Hungarian EU Presidency was that the Environmental Council adopted the Council Conclusions on the EU 2020 Biodiversity Strategy and its targets on 21 June. However, MSs could not unite in giving a firm and clear support for the identified actions under the subtargets.

CEEweb's view:

It is greatly disappointing that the Environmental Council did not give a clear support for the actions in the Strategy. Especially considering that the full Strategy, even if it is an important signal of good intentions, does not have the real power to stop biodiversity loss and it is not ambitious enough. Many of the targets are not measurable and no targets are given under the financing measures which is a serious gap. There are too few concrete milestones that set out the way to 2020 and there is no clear timeframe for revising and the evaluating milestones. If the EU is seriously committed to halt biodiversity loss by 2020 these gaps need to be addressed by the Presidencies and MSs.

Thus it is crucial now, that the Polish Presidency puts special emphasis on the implementation framework, in order to ensure that the Strategy becomes action. Besides, as important negotiations on the future EU policy reforms in the fields of agriculture, fisheries, resource efficiency, regional policy and the EU budget will take place, the Polish Presidency has a special responsibility to ensure that biodiversity is duly integrated and maintaining ecosystem services is in the heart of future policies. Specifically in the field of agriculture, no EU payments for farming practices with negative externalities shall be made, while the cross-compliance mechanism should be strengthened also including water management issues according WFD, and forest- and agri-environmental schemes as well as Natura 2000 payments should be enhanced.

Read the common position of the European Habitats Forum about the Strategy:

http://www.ceeweb.org/viewpoint/documents/EHF_Bidi_Strategy.pdf

Ensuring the fair share of biodiversity benefits

The Nagoya Protocol on Access to Genetic Resources and the Fair and Equitable Sharing of Benefits Arising from their Utilization was adopted in October 2010 at CBD COP10. The Hungarian Presidency made a huge effort to realize the signature of Protocol by the EU as well as its 12 Member States (Austria, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Luxemburg, the Netherlands, Sweden and United Kingdom) in June, 2011. The Protocol will enter into force 90 days after the fiftieth instrument of ratification.

CEEweb's view:

It will be particularly interesting to develop mechanisms, to ensure that at least one part of the resources generated through the implementation of the Protocol is channelled back to concrete biodiversity conservation purposes. CEEweb urges the Polish Presidency to pay due attention to resource mobilization – also in light of the ratification process and the implementation of the Nagoya Protocol.

Screening options for effective financing of biodiversity

It was the Hungarian Presidency's role to start the development of the EU position on the Innovative Financial Mechanisms and indicators on the implementation of the resource mobilization strategy under the CBD to provide guidance to the CBD Secretariat. In order to prepare the EU submission, the Hungarian Presidency organized expert meetings and held an expert workshop on Innovative Financial Mechanism. As a result of the meetings and negotiations two submissions were compiled and submitted to the CBD Secretariat on Indicators and on Innovative Financial Mechanisms.

CEEweb's view:

It is crucial that the available time will be best used to prepare the decision on resource mobilization for the COP 11 in 2012. Therefore, the Polish EU Presidency should continue the efforts and possibly organise another meeting for experts from and outside the EU to further discuss the topic of Innovative Financial Mechanisms by assessing the response prepared by the CBD Secretariat. However, it is imperative to prepare a "sustainability check" to assess the potential mechanisms in order to avoid and mitigate any potential negative effects on biodiversity shifted in space or time.

Resource efficiency

The resource efficiency communication by the European Commission was published in January and the Roadmap is expected to be published this autumn. Therefore, no Council Conclusions related to resource efficiency have been adopted so far.

CEEweb's view:

Increasing resource efficiency is important for achieving biodiversity objectives (as one pressure behind biodiversity loss is resource use), as long as it leads to reduced resource use. However, much scientific evidence suggests that the rebound effect threatens this objective. The rebound effect occurs when some or all of the savings from below cost efficiency increase (when efficiency improvements pay for themselves) are cancelled out (or even exceeded) due to various reasons. It can be a direct (e.g. turning up the heating in a newly insulated house) or indirect (e.g. starting new investments from the realised savings) effect on either a consumer or firm level. On a macro-economic level, improved below cost efficiency drives economic productivity overall, resulting in more rapid economic growth and resource consumption. Recently, the global economy as a whole showed significant improvements in resource efficiency. On the other hand, the total resource consumption of the global economy continued to increase.

Thus CEEweb is advocating to take a different angle in the resource efficiency debates and introduce a ceiling to resource use, which shall be followed by gradual reduction. Some possible tools for introducing a resource use limit was also discussed at the Green Week satellite event in Budapest on resource efficiency and resource use (see the outcomes of the meeting at: http://www.ceeweb.org/Green_Week/index.htm) In addition to serving environmental goals the presented resource quota schemes also provide opportunity for strengthening social justice.

7th Environmental Action Programme

EU Environmental Action Programmes have provided a framework for environmental policy development and implementation since 1973. Considering the worrying environmental trends and the challenge it poses both for society and economy, environmental policy must be kept high on the political agenda with a coherent and comprehensive policy framework. Even though the expiry of the 6th EAP is getting near, there is still no common understanding and agreement on its follow up.

CEEweb's view:

In depth discussions should start on the 7th EAP as soon as possible among the MSs and EU institutions in order to make the best use of the available time until the end of 2012. The future 7th EAP shall be put on a different basis than the previous EAPs so that it can provide a coherent framework for holistic policies, where future sectoral policy reforms can take place. The 7th EAP shall be based on the DPSIR (drivers-pressures-state-impact-response) framework similarly to the Strategic Plan of the CBD.

The Polish presidency shall put this issue high on its political agenda and initiate discussions on the development process and the basic structure of the 7th EAP.

Greening the EU budget 2014-2020

Much discussion will take place about the next financial perspective of the EU during the Polish Presidency, which will largely determine how successfully the EU can address the various challenges between 2014-2020 in the different sectors.

CEEweb's view:

The EU budget shall follow a new logic, where revenues are collected from activities with negative externalities and expenses support activities generating positive externalities. Instead of collecting revenues based on the GNI, the per capita carbon footprint shall be the basis of the financial contributions. Such a system is self-sustaining until it eliminates the problems and achieves the targets. After that the burden of payment by MSs also ceases to exist.

Consequently the EU shall not spend public money for activities that are proved to generate negative externalities to the society. The role of the different EU funds should be clarified from environmental point of view, i.e. which funds serve addressing the drivers behind environmental problems and thus the prevention of environmental degradation and which funds serve the mitigation of the environmental damage. Evidently the Structural and Cohesion Funds shall serve the prevention, and Life+ shall serve the mitigation of environmental damage. In this regard the amount of Life+ is insignificant compared to the justified needs. At the same time EU spending that contributes to higher pressure on biodiversity and ecosystem services overall shall not be allowed. Infrastructure development aiming at private transport, as well as green investments from EU money shall be forbidden.

The further loss and degradation of ecosystems with EU funding shall be stopped in order to ensure the maintenance of ecosystem services. For this aim agricultural and rural development spending shall not serve opposite goals and land use limits shall be introduced.

The programmes and projects submitted for EU funding shall be screened from sustainability point of view, going beyond the presently applied formal requirements. A specific impact assessment scheme shall be developed and rigorously applied. In addition more attention should be paid to the ex post evaluations and to the sustainability evaluations of the EU budget.

Discussions on the EU budget under the Polish Presidency should incorporate these points.

Conclusion

The Hungarian Presidency made clear efforts in the above fields, but the results are not all positive. The ambiguous adoption of the 2020 Biodiversity Strategy in the Council clearly left its mark on this half-year term. In addition, contrary to most previous Presidencies, there was not any priority

biodiversity topic, where the Hungarian Presidency aimed to influence the long term EU policy process in a targeted way for instance through organising a high-level conference.

The Polish Presidency will have a great responsibility in fully integrating biodiversity issues in the upcoming negotiations on the future EU budget and sectoral policy reforms. It should not miss this important opportunity, but cooperate with the following Presidencies to make biodiversity integration happen. The Polish Presidency should stand for solutions, which tackle the drivers of biodiversity loss and lead to the substantial reform of natural resource use and land use policies in order to decrease the total environmental pressure and thus achieve significant improvements in the state of species, habitats and ecosystems. An absolute limit and eventual reduction of resource use and a transition of all land use types towards sustainability is needed, which should trigger open discussions of innovative ideas as soon as possible on EU level. For this latter the planned conference on spatial planning and nature conservation under the Polish Presidency could provide a brilliant opportunity.