



# The Role of the Environment Action Programmes of European Union in the Development of EU Environmental Policy

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## Abstract

The European Union by its sui generis character of supranational structure having its own law and institutions as a power above national states, has aimed the integration target while developing environmental policies like other policy fields. 1970s were the awareness period of environmental degradation for the sake of economic development in the world. That period also became awakening years for the European Union from the perspective of environmental protection. EU Member States have become to take common actions in environmental issues like other many fields. The Second World War did not only damage human and economic capacity of the European Continent but also deteriorated the European environment. Not much later of the establishment of the European Economic Community, EU introduced many legal and administrative arrangements from preventive to protective.

Environment action programmes have been the basis for the European Union in order to develop its environmental policies. EU has introduced seven environment action programmes so far. Each of them covers a specific period of time. While the first programme was covering the period of 1973 – 1976, the final (seventh) programme covers the period of 2014 – 2020.

## Key words

Environment, Environment Action Programme, European Union

## 1. INTRODUCTION

As a power above national states with own law and institutions of European Union (EU), with the nature of supranational, has pursued a goal of integration on forming environmental policies just as in other fields [1]. 1970s that a period of realizing of the destruction of environmental values worldwide in sake of economic development are “awakening” years in EU in terms of environmental protection. EU countries, as on many issues, have begun to move together on the environment. The main reasons of this are as follows:

- Adopting different environmental policies and standards by member states, lead to unfair competition, thus creating obstacles to the realization of the common market
- Improving the living conditions and raising the quality of life in Member States on a common level
- Understanding of the obligation to act together by interdependence of neighbouring countries and the spread of pollution from a country to another one with a transboundary character [2].

In parallel with global developments, EU prepared “Environment Action Programmes” in which shed light on the principles and priorities of environmental policy are determined so that will be a roadmap for the years ahead. Although there is no binding effect, Environment Action Programmes reveal main principles of the policy to be followed in union wide and are being guidance for prospective legislation [3].

## **2. ENVIRONMENT ACTION PROGRAMMES**

In the EU, six action programmes have been conducted so far. The duration of the Sixth Environment Action Programme was expired in July 2012 [4]. European Commission prepared the proposal of the Seventh Environment Programme, and Parliament and Council approved the Programme. Seventh Environment Programme which will be valid until December 31 2020 was published in the Official Journal the EU on 28 December 2013.

### **2.1. First Environment Action Programme (1973-1976)**

Just after "United Nations Conference on Human Environment" which was held on June 5-16, 1972, Heads of State or Government of the EU member countries who came together in Paris on October 19-20, 1972 requested from relevant institutions to prepare "Environment Action Programmes" until July 31, 1973 by making a statement for the first time about environmental protection. The Programme that was prepared by Commission, namely “First Environment Action Programme” was adopted by Council on November 22, 1973 and has been put into force with the approval of the Member States [5].

First Environmental Action Programme revealed purposes and principles of the Environmental Policy of the Union and gave a long list of numerous measures should be taken at Community level. This programme searched out a solution on especially important and serious pollution problems.

Some of the targets set in the First Environmental Action Programme could be summarized as follows:

- Reducing and if possible, preventing the pressure on environment,
- Preserving ecological balance and biosphere,
- Avoiding use natural resources in such a way damage to ecological balance,
- Improving the working and living conditions,
- Further consideration on environment in urban and regional planning,
- Seeking common solutions on environmental problems with non-member states of Union and in particular international organizations [6].

It is understood that this programme that specifies general purpose of environmental policy as improving the life quality of individuals and their environment and living conditions, was determined in accordance with principles set in Stockholm Conference such as preventing the pollution at source, including the environmental concerns to all planning and decision- making processes, admitting the principle of “polluter pays”, taking into consideration of the impact of union policy on developing countries and developing the international cooperation [7].

### **2.2. Second Environment Action Programme (1977-1981)**

Second Environment Action Programme that was launched in 1977 is a continuation of the First Programme. In the section of purposes and principles of this programme, the purposes and principles of the First Programme was adopted and the view of which issues should be continued are reducing, preventing and if possible abolishing the pollution; disallowing use in such a way damage to ecological balance; further consideration on environment in urban and regional planning and cooperation with international organizations, was given place. Likewise in Second Programme, it was provided that the characteristic of environmental policy became inhibitor rather than troubleshooter by requesting on environmental policy the implementation of environmental impact assessment (EIA) [8].

First two environment action programmes of the European Union included targets for the purposes of providing immediate solutions to serious problems which were emerged as a result of pollution and can be described as restorative policies [9].

### **2.3. Third Environment Action Programme (1982-1986)**

The third Environment Action Programme which was enacted in 1983 clarified its environmental approach and accelerated the development of that policy thinking. In this programme is based on a conservative approach and environmental resources has been recognized as the most important element of further economic and social development. Under this protective ideas and approaches, it is aimed to prevent the emergence of potential environmental problems. Therefore, it emphasized that it is an integral part of economic planning and operation of environmental needs. In this programme, in environmental policy, it is necessary to solve the problems with existing

pollution prevention at the source. In addition, the requirement of rational use of natural resources as well as protection, indicating that the basic policy of conserving natural resources is emphasized [10].

In the introduction part of the programme, by considering the protection of the Mediterranean for the first time, it was stated that the protection of the Mediterranean would contribute to peace in the region as well as economic, social and cultural values.

#### **2.4. Fourth Environment Action Programme (1987-1992)**

In the fourth Environment Action Programme, covering the period 1987-1992, The Single European Act, which entered into force on 1 July 1987, the projected foreseeing the development and implementation of the Union's environmental policy it was emphasized that environmental protection is a requirement of the economic and social development. Some of the topics that have been elaborated in detail in this programme are given below:

- The development of policies on the environment and avoid any kind of pollution that endanger human health
- Identification of appropriate strategies in the management of natural resources
- Moving to international cooperation in environmental protection
- Effective implementation of the EIA Directive dated 1985 and the development of appropriate tools, such as raising the awareness of the public

The fourth programme is of particular importance in terms of the coverage period provided for the creation of the European internal market. Because one of the barriers (technical barriers) in the internal market was about the environment. Therefore, in the fourth programme, it was emphasized that to produce high quality products and services and without creating pollution is required both the creation of the European internal market and to be competitive in international markets [11].

#### **2.5. Fifth Environment Action Programme (1993-2000)**

With the main theme "Towards Sustainability" and implemented during the period 1993-2000, the basic framework of the Fifth Environment Action Programme was determined by the idea of integration of the environment to economic and social development policies. It is also main idea of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development which was held in Rio in 1992. Objectives of the Fifth Programme can be outlined as follows:

- The principle of sustainable development,
- Responsibility is shared by all sectors,
- Industrial, energy, transport, placing a special emphasis on agriculture and tourism sectors,

With the aim of the realization of the sectoral integration with the most important elements are prominent in Action Programme, the first four programmes discussed in this programme while maintaining the validity of legal instruments as the basis, so far these are the protection of the environment by emphasizing that they are not at the desired level of effective legal instruments economic instruments for environmental management as well as environmental impact assessments, management systems and product policies such as the implementation of new approaches is foreseen. For this purpose the traditional measure and control tool in the Union's environmental policies and the fifth programme, it is seen to be a shift to market-based economic instruments, such as carbon taxes and voluntary agreements (Eco-label) [12].

- Basic environmental issues covered in this programme include:
- Climate change,
- Acidification and air quality,
- Nature conservation and biodiversity,
- Management of water resources,
- The urban environment,
- Coastal areas,
- Waste management.

In the Fifth Action Programme, local governments were considered important especially in terms of environmental protection authority. Citizens, non-governmental organizations, professional associations, private sector representatives were considered as actors of environmental policy [13].

In addition to these issues in the programme, issues on risks arising from industry and chemicals such as industrial accidents, nuclear safety, radiation protection and environmental emergencies goals and principles have been identified. The most important feature of this new strategy; All decisions relating to the Union's

environmental and sustainable development, and implementation of action, ensuring the widest possible degree of citizen participation and the decisions of the transparency principle is expected to take place in an appropriate manner. For this purpose, it is seen that there has been special attention to shared responsibility in general among the Union/national or regional government/local or regional government/entrepreneurs/consumers [14]. In the fifth programme, the concept of sustainable development has also been raised for the first time.

## **2.6. Sixth Environment Action Programme (2001-2010)[15]**

The slogan of Sixth Environment Action Programme, which was planned to span between years of 2001-2010 but concluded in July 2012, was defined as “Environment 2010: Our future, Our Choice”. At a first glance it seems to have a longer term rather than its predecessors, as it’s designed to cover a 10 years but lasted 12.5 years. The Programme emphasise that it doesn’t just target to preserve the environment for ourselves and future generations but also aims to improve citizens’ life standards. Targets were set in four different areas to meet demands for basic environmental priorities by this programme. Some of these targets were scheduled. These areas are as below:

**1. Climate Change:** To be a part of Kyoto Protocol in 2002 and to fulfil the commitments of decreasing the amount of greenhouse gases by %8 related to their 1990 levels between years of 2008-2012 according to 1998 Council Decisions. To reach this target, it is envisioned to take reducing measures in main sectors like energy, industry, transportation and fields like building heating systems, agriculture and waste management. In the evaluation of Sixth Programme which can be found in Commissions webpage for Draft of Seventh Programme, it is stated that this objective will be exceeded by 2012.

**2. Nature and Biodiversity:** Protection and restoration of natural systems functions, preserving biodiversity both in the Union and global level, protection of soil against erosion and pollution. Again, the evaluation of Sixth Programme stated that total ratio of Natura 2000 sites in comparison with total Union area were reached to %17, yet target for decreasing loss of biodiversity couldn’t be reached by 2010 and “Soil Framework Directive” couldn’t come into force.

**3. Environment and Health:** To achieve a quality of the environment which does not give rise to significant impacts on, or risks to, human health and environment. In the evaluation of the Programme, it was stated that “2004-2010 Environment and Health Action Plan” was helpful for raising public awareness for air, water pollution and chemicals; comprehensive legislation have been implemented about chemicals, pesticides and water; and there is a decrease in levels of SO<sub>2</sub> (sulphur dioxide), NO<sub>x</sub> (nitrogen oxides) and amount of lead in air.

**4. Natural Resources and Wastes:** To ensure that the consumption of renewable and non-renewable resources does not exceed the carrying capacity of the environment. Preventing wastes and increasing efficiency of resource consumption for economic development in the first place. In the evaluation of the programme, it was stated that the bond between waste policy and resource policy have been strengthened; waste management gained strength and policies for sustainable consumption and productivity are successful.

In the new Programme some strategic approaches defined to make a progress in these related fields. These are shortly:

- Showing an innovative approach in environment policy and seeking new ways for cooperation with the large segment of the society,
- Improving implementation of current environment legislations,
- Deepening the harmonization of environment policy with other policies,
- Developing further sustainable production methods and consumption habits,
- Providing qualified and accessible information to shape (and affect) citizens conception and behaviour about environment
- Ensuring protection and improvement of environment in Member States’ decisions in the field of land usage and management

This new Programme represents the environment stage of Union’s sustainable development strategy, and also emphasises that all parts of society must actively involve and take responsibility to develop innovative, applicable and sustainable solutions regarding to encountered environmental problems.

Another issue taken into account by Sixth Environment Action Programme was that Environment 2010 will include a time phase which new member states will join EU. As Central and Eastern European Countries with Malta and Greek Cypriot State becoming Member States, EU will gain an additional population of 170 million and enlarge its land area by %58. This situation brings up a special condition that, these new Member States will have unexploited natural structure and rich biodiversity in addition with new environmental problems which EU will need to overcome. In this regard, it is foreseen that this new programme shall have an important function to solve environment problems of new Member States which will join to the Union.

## 2.7. Seventh Environment Action Programme (2014-2020)[16]

The slogan of the 7th Environment Action Programme is "Living Well Within the Limits of Our Planet", and it aims 31 December 2020, adopted by the European Parliament and Council, and published in the Official Journal of the EU on 28 December 2013. It can be seen that, the economic crisis and the employment problem encountered in many EU Member States became very important in developing this programme.

It is stated that the programme is based on polluter pays principle, precautionary principle, preventive action principle and the principle of environmental pollution should be rectified at source.

The need for public institutions in all levels to work together with business world and social cooperatives, civil society and individual citizens in implementation of the programme is emphasized.

It is stated that the implementation the programme will be monitored by the Commission. It is envisaged that this monitoring will be before 2020, should be based on the Environment Status Report of European Environment Agency and sharing these information's with the public opinion.

The 7th Environment Action Programme has been prepared by taking into account the four issues listed below:

1. Although there are developments in some areas, the important environment problems still exist.
2. The Europe 2020 Smart Sustainable Inclusive Growth Strategy, which guides the development of Union's 2020 Policies, is ratified.
3. Many Member States are in economic crisis so that the need for the structural reforms will bring new opportunities for European Union transition to an inclusive green economy
4. The Rio+20 emphasized the importance of global extent.

The 7th Environment Action Programme aims to contribute an environment policy where the Union's natural capital is protecting and enhancing, the health and welfare of the citizens is protecting and the resource-efficient low-carbon economy is envisaged. With determining 9 priority objectives for EU and Member States to achieve, the Programme determines an inclusive framework for the 2020 environment policy. These 9 priority objectives are listed below.

### 1. To protect, conserve and enhance the Union's natural capital

It is stated in the programme that, the natural capital includes ecosystems that provide essential goods and services, from fertile soil and multi-functional forests to productive land and seas, from good quality fresh water and clean air to pollination, food control and climate regulation and protection against natural disasters. It is also emphasized in the programme that, according to current considerations, the biological diversity of EU has decreased and many ecosystems have experienced serious damages. It is stated in the programme that, the water quality, marine environment, air quality, soil quality are not at the desired levels. So, the listed actions are envisaged in the programme by 2020:

- The decrease in biological diversity and the damage in ecosystems will be stopped and ecosystems will be protected and enhanced
- The impacts of the pressures on clean, transboundary and coastal waters will be decreased to a great extent
- The pressures on sea waters will be decreased
- The impact of air pollution on ecosystems and biological diversity will be decreased
- The Land at the Union level will be managed sustainably, the soil will be protected enough and the polluted areas will be cleaned.
- The nitrogen cycle will be managed more sustainable and resource-efficient
- The forests will be protected.

### 2. To turn the Union into a resource-efficient, green and competitive low-carbon economy

It is seen as the most important objective that reflects the soul of 7th Environment Action Programme. A solution is sought by using the sources efficiently and effectively within the frame of the "competitive" and "innovation approaches, for the economic crisis in the Union and the unemployment problem in parallel with this. For this purpose, with referring to the Union's "2020 Resource-Efficient European Strategy"; by means of using all resources, separating the economic growth from resources and energy usage and its environmental impacts, decreasing the greenhouse gas emissions, strengthen the efficiency, innovation, competitiveness and promoting more energy security; transition of the economy is envisaged. So that, the issues listed below are emphasized:

- To improve environmental technologies where innovation that uses resources efficiently and effectively is required for a competitive economy in the context of rising resource prices and raw material supply constraints.
- Transformation to a low carbon and resource- efficient economy will bring new job opportunities. For example, the renewables sector alone is expected to generate more than 400 000 new jobs by 2020.

- The need for urgent improvements of efficiency in order to achieve Union's objectives of reducing greenhouse gas emissions 20 % below 1990 levels by 2020, enhancing renewable energy percentage to %20 and meeting the 20 % energy efficiency.
- Since 80 % of environmental impacts arising from the product itself, originate in its design phase, the European Union policy should ensure that priority products placed on the EU market are 'eco-designed' with a view to optimizing resource and material efficiency, and taking into account the recyclability, recycled content and long product lifespan.
- Reach the target of applying green procurement percentage to at least 50 % of public tenders.
- The recyclable types of the wastes generated should gain to economy before going to the landfills. On average, 40 % of solid waste is prepared for re-use or recycled. More than 70 % of solid waste generated in some member countries is recycled, whereas in some member countries landfill 75 % of their municipal waste. In this way, resources will be used better, new markets will be opened, new employments will be created and the dependency on raw material importation will be reduced.
- Resource efficiency should be taken as one of priority subjects in the water sector. In spite of the impact of drought and water scarcity experienced in many regions in Europe, an estimated 20-40 % of Europe's available water is being wasted through leakages in the distribution system.

For this reason, the actions need to be taken under this heading by 2020 are listed below:

- The European Union will meet its 2020 climate and energy targets and is working towards reducing by 2050 Greenhouse Gas emissions by 80–95 % compared to 1990 levels. With this, the European Union puts forward a target (2050) that is beyond the year 2020 which is the completion date of this programme.
- The total environmental impact of all major sectors of the EU economy will be significantly reduced and resource efficiency will be increased.
- The total environmental impact of production and consumption in the food and mobility sectors will be reduced;
- Waste will be safely managed as a resource
- Water stress in the European Union will be prevented or significantly reduced.

### **3. To safeguard the Union's citizens from environment-related pressures and risks to health and well-being**

It is stated in this objective of the programme that, European Union environment legislation has delivered significant benefits for the health and well-being of the public; however, water pollution, air pollution and chemicals still remain among the general public's top environmental concerns in the EU. It is also stated in this objective of the programme that, a substantial proportion of the Union's population remains exposed to levels of air pollution exceeding World Health Organization (WHO) standards; Access to adequate water quality still remain as a problem in many rural areas in EU; Horizontal chemicals legislation (REACH and CLP Regulations)<sup>1</sup> provides baseline protection for human health and the environment but there is still uncertainty about the full impacts on human health and the environment of the combined effects of different chemicals, nanomaterials, chemicals that interfere with the endocrine (hormone) system (endocrine disruptors) and chemicals in products; An estimated %40 of the EU urban population exposed to noise pollution levels exceeding World Health Organization (WHO) recommended levels.

To this end, the actions need to be taken under this heading by 2020 are listed below:

- Air quality in the Union will be significantly improved
- Noise pollution in the Union will be significantly decreased
- Citizens throughout the Union benefit from high standards for safe drinking and bathing water,
- Risks for the environment and health associated with the use of hazardous substances, including chemicals in products, will be minimized.
- Safety concerns related to nanomaterials are effectively addressed

### **4. To maximize the benefits of Union environment legislation by improving implementation**

In this objective of the 7th Environment Action Programme it is stated that, according to a research made in EU in 2011, the costs associated with failure to implement legislation is around EUR 50 billion and in 2009 alone there were 451 infringement cases related to Union environment legislation. Also it is stated that there are differences between member states related to the implementation of the legislation. Hence, it is emphasized that the enhancement of implementation of EU environment legislation in member states should be one of the

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<sup>1</sup> REACH: Registration, Evaluation, Authorization and Restriction of Chemicals  
CLP: Classification, Labelling and Packaging

important priorities in coming years. So, in order to maximize the benefits of EU legislation, it is envisaged to fulfil the matters listed below, by 2020.

- Accessing the explicit knowledge related to implementation of EU environment legislation by the EU citizens
- Enhancing implementation of the determined environment legislation
- Strengthening the respect to EU environment legislation in all management levels,
- Enhancing the support and the trust to EU environment legislation by the EU citizens

#### **5. To improve the knowledge and evidence base for Union environment policy**

The visibility of EU environment policy is based on environmental monitoring, data, indicators and assessments related to the implementation of Union legislation including scientific research. Although many progresses have been made in this area, the need for the improvement of reliability in collection and quality of the environmental information and statistics is emphasized. Thus, these listed below are envisaged to fulfil by 2020.

- Policy makers and business man should have a better basis in order to enhance and implement environment and climate policies including measuring costs and benefits
- Improvement of our understanding and ability in assessing and managing newly emerged environmental and climate risks.
- Strengthening the relation between environment and science

#### **6. To secure investment for environment and climate policy and address environmental externalities**

In order to achieve the goals of this target, both private and public sectors are needed. At the same time, it is stated that many countries are struggling to cope with the economic and financial crisis and needs economic reforms and the reduction of public debts to move towards a more resource efficient and low carbon economy. Attracting investment is difficult because of the absence of price signals.

The need for reflecting the environmental externalities to the prices and the implementation of the polluter pay principle is stated. In this regard, the issues that should be completed by 2020 are listed below:

- Achieving the environment and climate policy objectives in a cost-effective way and supporting by adequate finance.
- Increasing the private sector funding for environment and climate-related issues.

#### **7. To improve environmental integration and policy coherence**

Although integrating environmental protection concerns into other Union policies and activities has been an Amsterdam Treaty's requirement since 1997, it has not been sufficient to reverse all environmentally negative trends in EU wide. In order to achieve many goals in this programme, there is a need for integration of environmental and climate-related considerations into other policies. Effective implementation of the Strategic Environmental Assessment Directive and Environmental Impact Assessment Directives, integration of environmental protection requirements in plans, programmes and projects will be ensured. With this, both environmental impacts will be assessed and the natural capital will be protected and increased.

In order to achieve this goal by 2020, enhancing and implementing the sectoral policies at EU wide and member state level (energy, transport, industry, communication, agriculture, livestock and etc.) in accordance with the environment and climate goals and aims is the concrete target.

#### **8. To enhance the sustainability of the Union's cities**

The Union is densely populated and by 2020, 80 % of its population is likely to live in urban and peri-urban areas. Most cities will face a common set of core environmental problems, including low air quality, high levels of noise, water scarcity, floods and storms, contaminated sites and wastes. So there is need for European cities to put environmental sustainability at the core of their urban development strategies. This is in line with the commitment made at Rio + 20 to promote an integrated approach to planning, building and managing sustainable cities and urban settlements.

In order to achieve this objective, implementation of sustainable urban planning and design policies by most of the EU cities by 2020 is defined as a concrete goal.

#### **9. To increase the Union's effectiveness in addressing regional and international environmental and climate-related challenges**

In this objective of the programme, it is stated that the issues given in other objectives are already the globally or regionally accepted objectives, so with implementing this objective, the EU will be also implementing the global and regional objectives. Some of these are listed below:

- As accepted in Rio + 20, green economy is an important tool for the realization of sustainable development, and also plays an important role for the healthy environment
- Reducing the greenhouse gas emissions %50 below 1990 levels by 2050
- The global biodiversity targets laid down under the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) need to be met by 2020 as the basis for halting and if possible reversing the loss of biodiversity worldwide,

In order to achieve this goal, the listed issues in this programme are expected to be completed by 2020:

- Integration of Rio+20 decisions into EU's foreign policies and contribute to global efforts for the implementation of accepted commitments including provisions in Rio+20 Declaration
- The EU subsidize to national, regional and international efforts in dealing with environment and climate problems and ensuring the sustainable development.

### 3. CONCLUSION

When each of the action programmes is examined, it is seen that they have brought new problems and discussion areas reflecting the specific conditions of their periods.

In the EU, within the framework of policies dedicated in each period of programme many legal arrangements have been put into force.

First two environment action programmes of the Union mostly cover the actions aiming immediate solutions of the serious problems arisen from the pollution. Restoration characteristic of this approach can also be seen in the third Programme in which preventive approach can also be seen. Fourth Programme by bringing wider perspective to the environmental protection, elaborated the environmental problems as the basic component of economic and social development. Fifth Programme focused on the issue of the responsibility should be shared by all the sectors of society. Sixth Programme was likely the follow-up of the Fifth Programme.

Development of the European Union's environmental policies has been realized by the "Environment Action Programmes" which have been introduced in serial manner. After the enactment of each of the action programme, related legal texts have been put into force at EU level. Whereas first programmes have focused on restorative and preventive characteristics of policies like mitigating the pollution in drinking water resources and in the marine, phasing out lead in gasoline, and limiting the sulphur and nitrogen oxides emissions, following programmes have mainly addressed environmental protection issues in a broader perspective like river basin management, sustainable development, cleaner production, receiving media approach etc. Environmental policy of the EU has followed the path from prevention or mitigating pollution to the rational use of natural resources and conservation them without destruction.

It can be seen that, all action programmes including the last (seventh) programme have aimed at economic growth and welfare of the EU citizens. Anthropogenic environmental protection approach is still dominant in the programmes.

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