Parliamentary Assembly
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COUNCIL OF EUROPE
CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Recommendation 1284 (1996)[1]

European environment policy (1994-95)

Parliamentary Assembly

1. Nearly four years after the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (Rio de Janeiro, June 1992), it has to be recognised that actual measures taken to promote the sustainable development of the planet fall far short of the commitments made by the 179 governments present and of the expectations raised.

2. In spite of this, the fact that the Earth Summit was able to raise the international community's awareness of the problems facing our planet and to make the concept of sustainable development a real issue is to be welcomed.

3. The "Environment for Europe" process should be regarded as one of its first achievements, when considering that, so far, three pan-European conferences of ministers of the environment have been held within this framework, the most recent in Sofia from 23 to 25 October 1995.

4. The Assembly welcomes the fact that the "Environment for Europe" process offers ministers of the environment the opportunity to work together at pan-European level to implement Agenda 21.

5. In effect, it is essential that national (and even regional and local) policies should fit into a wider but structured framework, which could find expression in the "Environment for Europe" process.

6. In particular, the Assembly is pleased that these pan-European ministerial conferences on the environment have concentrated a great deal of their efforts on tackling the serious environmental problems of the countries of central and eastern Europe and have advocated financial solutions which, while contributing to environmental protection, do not undermine the transition of these countries towards a market economy and satisfactory economic and social development.

7. In this respect, the Environmental Action Programme for central and eastern Europe (EAP), launched at the 2nd Conference in Lucerne in 1993 (the initial results of which were assessed at the Sofia Conference), has the advantage of providing a shared methodology. Although it is regrettable that its implementation has been a little slow, it should be appreciated that it did offer a valuable forum for political decision-makers both in central and eastern and western Europe.

8. The Council of Europe made an important contribution to the Sofia Conference in the form of the Pan-European Strategy on Biological and Landscape Diversity, which was adopted by its Committee of Ministers.

9. In this respect, it is important that the Council of Europe, in co-operation with the other international organisations concerned, be able to contribute its wide experience in this field to the action plans of the "strategy".

10. Moreover, while the Assembly is aware of the extent of environmental degradation in the countries of central and eastern Europe, it considers it important to remember that the state of the environment in western European countries is not satisfactory either and that _ on the contrary _ it requires governments to take practical action and to commit themselves to creating a political framework for sustainable development.

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1. Assembly debate on 23 January 1996 (3rd Sitting) (see Doc. 7441, report of the Committee on the Environment, Regional Planning and Local Authorities, rapporteur: Mrs Robert). Text adopted by the Assembly on 23 January 1996 (3rd Sitting).

11. Furthermore, in this context, the Assembly believes that the Dobris assessment on the state of the environment in Europe, prepared by the European Environment Agency, is a fundamental tool for the pan-European environment policy. Nevertheless, it emphasises the need to monitor the harmonisation of information gathering systems to ensure maximum comparability and to enable the agency to carry out its task as effectively as possible.

12. The Assembly is pleased that the ministers at their meeting in Sofia approved the Ecological Programme for Europe (EPE), the European version of Agenda 21 adopted in Rio, and which sets guidelines for sustainable development in the region.

13. The Assembly underlines the fact that the ministers were concerned that the EPE's main recommendations be incorporated in the conference's final declaration, which they requested be implemented as widely as possible, bearing in mind the need for different approaches.

14. The Assembly reiterates its belief that the success of any decision on environmental protection depends on the understanding and acceptance of the latter by all the groups concerned, such as local authorities, business and industry and the public.

15. Consequently, access to information and dialogue with the different partners is fundamental to this process, and here parliamentary institutions (national parliaments as well as European assemblies) have an important role to play, in establishing fruitful relationships with them and in particular with non-governmental organisations.

16. The three ministerial conferences held to date have demonstrated how the experience and particular strengths of each of the organisations involved in the "Environment for Europe" process could help to create a common synergy. It is therefore important that these organisations contribute to the conception and implementation of a pan-European environment policy.

17. The Assembly accordingly recommends that the Committee of Ministers:

17.1. organise the Council of Europe's intergovernmental sector on the environment in such a way as to enable the Organisation to play its full part in implementing the Pan-European Strategy on Biological and Landscape Diversity and in order to achieve this asks it:

a. to grant the Steering Committee for the Conservation and Management of the Environment and Natural Habitats (CDPE) the appropriate means for the implementation of the plan of action 1996-2001, defined by the strategy;

b. to increase the resources available to the Standing Committee of the Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats, to enable it to successfully fulfil its task as defined by the strategy in relation to the promotion of threatened species;

c. to include in the work programme of the steering committees involved, training and information programmes aimed equally at the general public, business and industry, school children and students;

d. to invite the Steering Committee on Local and Regional Authorities (CDLR) and the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe (CLRAE) to include in their work programme activities reflecting the role local and regional authorities could play in the "Environment for Europe" process;

e. to instruct the European Committee on Legal Co-operation (CDCJ) to examine the possibility of preparing, in co-operation with the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UN-ECE), a convention on information access and public participation in decision-making processes concerning the environment;

17.2. invite the governments of member states:

a. to take practical steps to implement the commitments made in the Sofia Declaration;

b. to participate fully in the work of the European Environmental Agency;

c. to take the necessary action to reduce carbon dioxide emissions in accordance with the Rio Convention on climatic change;

d. considering the grave health problems caused by fine particle pollution resulting from transportation and energy production, to take immediate action on reducing fine particle pollution;

e. to take practical steps to implement conventions relating to the environment and to ratify - or sign - conventions to which they are not yet parties, for example the Council of Europe's Convention on Civil Liability for Damage Resulting from Activities Dangerous to the Environment;

f. to include in their national accounting systems the costs incurred by the use and exhaustion of resources and by environmental damage, thereby instituting a system of environmental accounting, which is a prerequisite for achieving sustainable development;

g. in this regard, to take account of the real costs of different energy sources and to introduce energy policies which systematically give priority to improving energy efficiency, the economic use of renewable energies and the development of new technologies which allow cleaner use of fossil fuels;

h. to revise agricultural practices at local, regional and national levels in order to protect water, soil and the environment in general.