

Community action programme promoting non-governmental organisations primarily active in the field of environmental protection (2002-2006)

2001/0139(COD) - 09/10/2008

The aim of this report is to communicate on the Commission's experience from the implementation of the programme for operating grants to European environmental NGOs in the period 2002-2007. Between 2002 and 2006, the legal basis for this grant aid was Decision 466/2002/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council laying down a Community action programme promoting non-governmental organisations primarily active in the field of environmental protection for the period 2002-2006. This has been replaced by provision included in the single financial instrument for the environment, LIFE+ (2007-2013) which has provided the legal basis for funding since 2007.

This document is based on the findings of the 2005 external evaluation, information from the monitoring of NGO performance 2002-2006 and an internal survey among DG Environment policy units carried out in April 2008. It includes a description of the programme and its functioning, an overview of the types of organisations funded, and an assessment of the outputs of the NGOs and the relevance of the programme.

Main assessment of the programme

1. NGO outputs

1.1. Problem identification and definition of policy options: to support policy work NGOs, like other stakeholder groups, are systematically invited by DG Environment to participate in various working groups, scientific expert groups, advisory groups and preparatory and implementation committees. They fill the functions of providing specific expertise, balance to other interests and a grassroots' perspective. They also undertake research and studies resulting in scientific information that can feed into the policy process. The surveys undertaken among DG Environment policy units have shown that most units have experience with NGOs regularly giving this type of input in their policy areas and they underline the role of NGOs as important counterweights to other stakeholders with financial interests.

1.2. Policy definition and political debate: the participation of NGOs in consultations and policy debate contributes to a balanced and broad stakeholder representation. Being European networks, the funded NGOs coordinate the positions of their members, providing the Commission with one single interlocutor and giving a voice to a large number of local organisations which would otherwise have difficulties reaching to EU decision-makers. Examples of activities are lobbying and preparation of coordinated press releases, position papers and memoranda to EU presidencies. NGOs also reply regularly to public consultations providing useful input and perspective to the policy process.

1.3. Policy implementation: with their networks and specific expertise, NGOs are effective in promoting implementation of EU policy on the ground. They communicate EU environmental policy to their members at regional and national level and they serve as watchdogs for implementation by, for example, drawing attention to cases of non-compliance and publishing black lists and reports.

1.4. Awareness raising: NGOs carry out activities in view of raising awareness of the public and decision-makers e.g. through campaigns, events and awards, which often attract high press coverage, production and translation of information material, as well as environmental education targeting various groups such as children, officials and professionals. In this regard, NGOs have the advantage of being close to the

ground and given their high credibility with the public, they have good potential to achieve effective awareness and outreach. NGOs are also actively raising awareness and promoting EU environmental policy beyond EU borders.

1.5. Organisational development: a separate objective of the funding programme is to contribute to capacity building of the beneficiaries and their networks in order to enable them to become a more effective interlocutor in the policy dialogue. In the evaluation of the programme carried out in 2005, it was found that, since the programme started in 1997, there has been an increase in staff, better organisational structures, improved professionalism and a more co-ordinated action on EU policy-making among the beneficiaries. EU funding has made it possible for NGOs to increase the volume and quality of their contributions and their communication activities. There has also been an increase in the involvement of small regional or local associations thanks to improved network structures, co-ordination and capacity building.

2. Relevance of the programme

2.1. Need to support NGOs: without funding from the programme, the majority of beneficiaries would need to substantially reduce their activities, including the contributions to the EU policy process. NGOs stress that demands on environmental organisations, their European structures and their offices in Brussels have grown considerably, including demands from citizens and requests from the EU institutions for input and expertise. Insufficient resources force them to make priorities and be selective. Generally, the total budget available for the programme is not sufficient to fund all meriting applications. Furthermore, in order to provide support to a wide range of organisations who present programmes evaluated as being of high quality, funding to individual NGOs has been reduced compared to initial requests. This reduction has been in the order of 25 %. The final decision is a result of the need to achieve a balance of supporting a sufficient range of NGOs and the desire to avoid an excessive reduction of the initially presented programmes.

2.2. Validity of rationale: the rationale of the programme is given by the 6th Environmental Action Programme (6EAP) and the White Paper on European Governance and comes down to *greater involvement of civil society in EU policy process*. In the area of environment, NGOs make a significant contribution to ensuring the involvement of civil society and they are needed to provide a sound balance in relation to the interests of other actors with more resources and financial interests.

2.3. Added value of EU funding: one clear added value of providing funding at EU level is the increased effectiveness in civil society dialogue. By encouraging the creation of NGO networks, the programme provides the Commission with a more cost-effective way of dealing with civil society since one NGO represents the co-ordinated views of all national member organisations. This means that the Commission has only one or a few interlocutors in the NGO community instead of many uncoordinated positions, resulting in important savings of resources.

A second important aspect is that the selection of the beneficiaries is based on the priorities of the 6EAP. The funding programme thereby ensures that NGO input is given to the areas of importance at European level.

Thirdly, without funding at EU level it would not be possible to guarantee the presence of European NGOs as stakeholders in the EU policy process. National NGOs may be less suited and competent to work with EU institutions and they tend to have a different focus.