

The European Policy Regarding the Improvement of the Urban Environment

Lecturer Ruxandra Irina POPESCU, Ph.D.

Faculty of Management, Academy of Economic Studies Bucharest, Romania

Abstract: *Until the early 1990s, a small part of the European legislation regarding the lasting development was focused on the cities or the urban development models. On the other hand, specialists were analyzing the environment crisis problems at the global level, the ecological economy and were criticizing the international development models, and the attempt to modify the value system.*

In the last year's architects and designers started to pay increasing attention to the influence of lasting development to the urban models. Some of the experts emphasized the urban design and the physical planning. Others were preoccupied about the ecological planning related to the air, water and natural ecosystem quality. A number of specialists emphasized the social problems and the injustice inside the urban communities and underlined the inevitable relation between social problems and environment.

Keywords: *the Action Program for the Environment, lasting development, the low quality of air, the intensification of traffic, agglomeration, the expansion of peripheral areas*

Introduction

There is an agreement among specialists regarding the basic elements that make cities habitable – a healthy environment, decent dwellings, safe public places, uncrowded streets, parks and other leisure places. And these elements contribute to a lasting development too.

For almost nine centuries, the basic problems were food, shelter and health. Meanwhile, in the postindustrial period, the emphasis was on the quality of life. It was not enough to give up the unwholesome cities and outskirts, suffocated by cars and with lack of co-ordination, parks, pavements, local stores, vitality and sense. The question was “how can we make these places green, safe, comfortable? How can we transform these urban sights in full of character areas and growing communities? All these concerns kept in mind the obligation of making these urban areas habitable for a long time.

Starting with these issues, the European Union proposed the improvement of the urban environment strategy, to help the member states and the regional and local authorities to improve the environment performances in their cities, stimulating a more efficient implementation of legislation and environment policies at the local level, through the exchange of experience and the best practices between European local authorities.

1. Context

The protection of the environment is a problem that interests and affects all citizens. Due to the increasing damages brought to the environment, the willingness to make sacrifices for the improvement of the environment grew considerably.

An investigation made to the EU (Euro barometer, March 2008) revealed the fact that more than 95% of European citizens think that the protection of the environment is important¹. Approximately, 80% sustain that the environment affects the quality of their life and through own

¹ Only the unemployment, the fight for poverty and organized crime and keeping the peace were higher quoted.

efforts, they can contribute to its protection. The Euro barometer survey showed that, in the Europeans opinion, **the six most serious environment problems are:** *the changes in the climate, the pollution of air and water, the human made disasters, the use of chemical substances in regular products and the use of genetically changed organisms (OMG) in agriculture*².

So, the citizens of Europe expect EU to play an active role in the protection and preservation of the environment, both internally, in the European legislation, and externally, through the involvement of the Community in different international treaties. The environment commissar, Stavros Dimans, said that: “Most of the Europeans say that EU should do more for the environment and the decisions that regard the environment should be adopted at the European level. The overwhelming majority of Europeans think that an harmonious environment legislation is necessary at the European level and that EU should help other countries to improve the environment standards”³.

Starting from the “Global estimation of the fifth Action Program for Environment: and from the Report regarding the state of environment in Europe: “The environment in EU at the end of the century”, elaborated by the European Environment Agency, **The European Committee prepared the sixth Action Program for the Environment.** The document synthesizes **the environment policies that must be implemented**, being completed by the European Committee as a **program** named: “**Our future, our choice**” (2000-2010). This proposed:

- **the improvement of the existing environment law implementation process.** The Committee wanted to intensify the legal actions through the European Justice Court and to periodically inform the public about the progress made by the member states in implementing the environment legislation using the strategy “Name, fame and shame”.
- **a better integration of the environment policies in other community policies.** All the initiatives regarding the community policies should be seriously evaluated from the environment implications point of view.
- **the “market” co-operation**, taking account of the consumers’ interest and the private medium:
 - producers shouldn’t just be punished for mistakes, but rewarded for good practices too;
 - costumers need information (for example: The European Eco-Label Scheme) to be capable to choose less harmful products for the environment;
 - the public subventions that are dangerous for the environment must be stopped and the industry has to innovate and develop new clean technologies;
 - the citizen’s implication that affects the environment through his daily activities: using a larger transparence for the decision making process and offering practical information about protecting the environment.
- **a better territorial planning.** The Committee must develop a database regarding the use of territory and offer information about the best practices.

Also, **four priority areas** that define the action directions of the environment policy, were identified:

- a) the changes in the climate;
- b) protection of nature and biodiversity;
- c) health in relation to the environment;
- d) conservation of natural resources and offals administration.

² Approximately 58% of the European citizens are reserved when it comes to OMG, and 21% are in favor of using it.

³ Approximately two thirds of the European citizens prefer that the environmental decisions to be taken with the EU and not nationally. Most of them say that a homogeneous European environment legislation should exist (82%), that EU should support other countries in the improvement of the environment standards process (80%) and that EU should give more funds for the environment protection (78%). Approximately 78% of Europeans find useful the creation of an European group of civil protection to combat the possible natural disasters’ effects in their countries.

The Environment Action Program (PAM) 6 also foresees the development of **seven thematic strategies**, that correspond to some important aspects of environment protection, like: the ground protection, the water environment protection and preservation, the use of pesticides in the lasting development context, the air pollution, the urban environment, recycling the offals, the resource administration and use, in the lasting development context.

The strategy to improve the urban environment was elaborated by EU to help the member states and the regional and local authorities to improve the environment performances, in their cities, encouraging the more efficient implementation of law and environment policies at the local level, through exchange of experience and the best practices between local European authorities.

2. The objectives of the European strategy of urban environment

The environment challenges which the cities confront with, have significant consequences for human health, the quality of life for the urban citizens and the economical performance of the cities.

Towns imply many environment issues, but also economical opportunities, business and investment, so they require a strategy that can improve the quality of urban environment (if it's implemented to all administrative levels) contribute to "*transforming Europe in a more attractive place for work and investment*" (objective of the Lisbon Agenda).

The strategy regarding urban environment proposed itself to "*contribute to a better quality of life through an integrated approach for the urban areas and to a higher level for the quality of life and social welfare of citizens, by securing an environment in which the pollution level doesn't generate harmful effects to the human health and environment and through the urban lasting development*"⁴.

The member states can support the general objectives of the bettering of the urban environment policy and by promoting a strong co-operation and co-ordination between the relevant administrative institutions, because the environment issues often require co-operation between administrations to reach successful solutions. Because of this, the European Committee prepared the 2001 strategy, through a large consulting process, that included all member states, local and regional authorities, ONG, academic institutions, urban networks and population.

3. The most important environment issues that cities are confronting with

The European urban areas confront with some **challenges of environment**, like:

- *the low quality of air;*
- *the increasing traffic;*
- *agglomeration;*
- *extension of the peripheral areas;*
- *the increasing level of noise;*
- *low quality of the built environment;*
- *gas emission with greenhouse effect;*
- *generation of garbage and used water;*

These problems are caused by different changes:

- *in the residents' way of life* (increasing dependence of personal cars, increasing number of individual households, increasing use of resources by each habitant);
- *demographic*, of which one has to be aware when solution for urban environment improvement are developed (increasing activity in cities, improvement of life and work

⁴ COM (2005) 718 final, Commission of the European Communities, *Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament on Thematic Strategy on the Urban Environment*, Brussels, 2006

conditions, investment attraction, reduction of the negative impact of cities for the environment).

Environment problems in the urban areas are complex, because their causes are interdependent. The local initiatives of resolving a problem can generate new problems in other areas and can enter in conflict with national or regional policies⁵. For example, the policies for improving the quality of air by acquiring some “clean” buses, ecologic, can be threatened by the development of private transport, as a consequence of adopting new decisions of efficient using of field (for example, construction of parking areas in downtown).

4. Implicated actors in the urban environment improving policy

Local authorities have a decisive role in implementing the environment law and improving the environment performances of European urban areas. These authorities are the closest actors of the local problems and can play an important role in public warning and encouragement of behaviour changes.

The local actions are essential, but regional, national and European public authorities must be proactive. EU can support cities by promoting good European practices and there can be many achieves by encouraging the effective communication and the exchange of experience between urban areas. There are, in this way, many solutions in some cities, but they are not sufficiently known and implemented.

EU had harmonized the objectives of the strategy with other community programs and offers support for investment, demonstrative and research projects about the main issues of the urban environment (like: investment in urban transport or reuse of abandoned ground).

The success of the actions will depend on local authorities and state’s capacity to exploit the offered opportunities at European level to improve the environment performances of their cities.

5. Actions of the improvement of the urban environment policy

The main actions of the urban environment policy regard:

- **Support for the integrated environment management and for the lasting urban transport plans** are based both on the experience of cities and on the research and optic of experts and contributes to the insurance of total implementation of the European legislation. Also, it provides new sources of information for preparing and implementing the action plans.

- **Coaching and training.** A number of community programs (“Face to face”, “LIFE+Regulation”) ensure opportunities for training and developing the capacity of local authorities to implement the environment policy, some specific abilities for adopting an integrated approach of management, implying intersectorial co-operation, training about the specific environment legislation, effective participation of the public and encouraging the change of citizen’s behaviour.

- **Support for exchange of experience at European level.** European Union established an European frame-program for exchange of experience regarding the urban environment, with the member states, by implementing the cohesion policy⁶ for 2007-2013. The relation is based on a pilot focus network, concentrated on urban issues (“European Knowledge Platform”), that offers advices to European local authorities. EU also ensures, support for demonstrative projects about urban environment problems and for exchange of experience and good practices between local and regional authorities, through: LIFE+Regulation program, cohesion policy and Research Frame-Program.

⁵ MEMO/06/9, *Questions and Answers on the Thematic Strategy on the Urban Environment*, Brussels, 2006

⁶ The Cohesion Policy has to reduce economical and social disparities between poor and developed regions.

- **The Committee portal for local authorities.** Nowadays, communication, scientific discoveries, relevant studies and guides for local authorities are available on various web-sites of the Committee, which makes difficult to find information. So, it's necessary to create a portal for European local authorities to ensure a better access to recent information and to improve the informative flux.

- **Create a database to observe the progresses.** With the support of European Environment Agency and in co-operation with the member states, EU tries to improve the information about urban environment issues at the European level without rising the responsibility of local, regional or national authorities, for evaluating the environment performances of European urban areas over time. This thing will be realized with the help of INSPIRE⁷ (Substructure for Spatial Information in Europe), GEO (Earth Observation Group) and GMES (Global Monitorizing for Environment and Security – observation of Earth through satellite).

6. Priorities of urban environment European policy

Thorough the European strategy of improving the urban environment, that takes account of the economical and social related problems, EU wants to consolidate the contribution of the environment policy to the lasting development of urban areas, concentrating around some **themes⁸: urban management, co-ordinate approach, urban transport, constructions, field management, remaking of the natural system, lasting economy.**

A. Lasting urban management

The policies that are applied to the urban areas often act isolated one from another because of the natural specific of the covering areas (buildings, infrastructure, transport, energy, waste etc.) and because these are coordinated by different administrative departments. So, a more stabile work frame at European level is necessary to develop the environment management of big European cities. So, each capital and each town over 100.000 habitants should adopt a management plan for the entire urban area, which objectives should be correlated with the impact over the environment. Also, they should implement an environment management system to administrate this process and to achieve the established objectives.

These management plans should:

- consider the specific environment European legislation (directions related to quality of air and sound pollution);
- strengthen the cooperation between different government levels (local, regional, national) and between different departments inside the local administration;
- ensure the continuity in the municipality's environment policy no matter of succeeding administration;
- place 500 big European cities at a comparable level as far as the initiative and environment obligations are concerned;

Participation and implication of the community. One of the most important parts of the lasting urban development will be the creation of a more functional local and regional democracy, which can determine other positive transformations too. There is not a single mode – considered the best – to promote this thing. But a package of programs that concerns the local political processes,

⁷ Created by the Committee Direction 516/2006 to establish an infrastructure for spacial information in the Community and by 2/2007 Direction to establish an infrastructure for geographical information in the European Community (INSPIRE). Inspire must provide an essential control and geographical and environment information instrument, concord with the Sixth Action Environment Program's dispositions.

⁸ COM (2004) 60, European Commission, *Towards a thematic strategy on the urbanenvironment*, Brussle, 2004

producing, informing and educating the voters and promoting decision-makers can, as well, help. The participation of the community at local planning is very important, as a transparent local, state or European policy is, that must prove that decisions can be adopted and any level considering the local, regional or global development.

B. Lasting urban transport

Urban traffic has a significant impact both to the environment and health of residents and to the general quality of life in the cities:

- it is one of the principal atmospheric polluting (like ozone and NO₂);
- it is reasonable for spreading 40% of the CO₂ emission in transport;
- 80% of the sonic pollution in the urban areas comes from the road traffic;
- 2/3 of the traffic accidents in EU took place in urban areas;

According to the EU vision, each capital and over 100.000 habitants city should periodically develop, adopt, implement and revise a lasting urban transport plan, with short, medium and long term targets.

In a lasting city transport should evolve by some principles: **access to close areas, inversion of the actual transport hierarchy and reduce of demand**. These could lead to the reduction of people that need movement, resources will be used more efficiently and ways of common transport will grow.

- **Access to close areas** represents a way of solving the transport problems by bringing people closer to their daily moving areas. This objective can be realized by changing the way of using the field, for example by promoting a mix development and creating some urban centers that include houses, places of work, shops and fun places, all of these close to each other. There is no coincidence that this way of mix development tends to create more attractive regions from the habitation point of view.

- Inversion of the transport hierarchy means emphasizing the role of pedestrian circulation, that represents the most efficient way of transport and adds a plus in human presence in cities. **Planning of cyclists** also represents one of the priorities that must be placed on the top of the list, followed by **public transport**. **Cars should have less importance given in this new hierarchy** and subventions for existing cars must be reduced, even if this policy is hard to apply⁹.

- **By encouraging the reduction of people that move (“demand for move”)** the problem of agglomeration can be solved, and the quality of life could be improved without building new streets or other infrastructure (“offer” aspect). **The price mechanism** can be useful in this way (growing of taxes for parking, fuel, enrolling vehicles).

- **Reduction of air pollution**. In this way, EU proposed a complex set of necessary actions for improving the urban environment: standards applied to vehicles, like EURO 5, EURO 6, encouraging the acquisition of efficient and ecological vehicles or promoting the use of alternative gases etc. they will apply different to each area: sensitive areas by environment or low level of emission areas where there already are restrictions for polluting transport.

Also, EU intends to continue financing the CIVITAS initiative, that helps towns to:

- operate essential modifies in modal division of transport;
- promote the use of not-polluting vehicles;
- resolve the agglomeration problem.

CIVITAS supports training, exchange of information and spreading the results.

The ensuring plans of a lasting urban transport will contribute to the reduction of air and sound pollution, encouragement of cycling and walking, improving health and reducing obesity.

⁹ In EU, the number of cars tripled in the last 30 years (approximately 3 million cars in one year). It's foreseen that until 2010, European Community will register a substantial grow of its car park because the extension.

C. Lasting construction. The efficient use of resources. Less pollution and waste

These objectives need a higher attention given to the energy and material losses, and the wise planning of using the resources. Also a challenge could be considered the passing from an open system, where limited resources are used once by people, and then thrown away (a fact which often leads to pollution and waste), to a close system where resources are reused and recycled.

A large number of mechanisms are given to the local and regional authorities to encourage this transition:

- conservation of energy and recycling the materials are two domains in which citizens should have the initiative.
- municipal programs of recycling are a way to demonstrate the commitment of using resources in a lasting way.
- as in transports, the management programs of demand offer a big potential of reducing the resource consume. From the end of the `70s, for example, many companies of utilities in USA offered the consumers for free or at low cost, fluorescent bulbs, that consumed five times less electricity than incandescent bulbs of same power. This fact led both to the reduction of costs, and to the reduction of energy consume. Unfortunately, these programs disappeared in the `90s as many states aimed their attention to other domains, disturbing the utilities industry.
- conservation of energy in the construction industry, also produced savings of energy in many cities and countries.
- the programs of preventing pollution are developed to promote the elimination of pollution before it's created rather than removing it after it's produced.
- projects of "industrial ecosystem" try to deal with the production processes to see if the losses from an industry can be used in another.
- in the economic domain, it's tried to move the costs of pollution supported by the whole society, to the one of those who produce it – which is called the "polluter pays" principle.
- constructions could have a significant effect to the health of those who inhabit a building (Europeans spend 90% of their times inside buildings) and to the environment (the consume of energy for heat and light produces 35% of the whole emission of gases with greenhouse effect).

Lasting constructions improve the efficient energy, while CO₂ are subtracting. Local authorities must promote measures like this, by aware campaigns, by establishing and applying some standards where possible, and by adopting the best practices for buildings that they hold and for those leased by public acquisitions.

EU examines possible solutions for renovating small buildings, performance demands in the environment field regarding non-energy, labeling construction materials and implementing the strategy of preventing and recycling wastes.

- Also, EU wants to develop a methodology to evaluate the integrated environment performance of buildings (assessment of building, construction environment resistance, including the cost indicators for life cycle) to permit a comparison between Europe's buildings and encourage the exchange of good practices. All member states will be encouraged to line up and implement a national program for lasting construction.

In the spirit of this trends, at the beginning of 2008, European Committee elaborated a report in which it demanded that all new or renovated buildings must respect the energetic performance of buildings direction: "*we want that all buildings less than 1000 m² to be included in the direction*". Member states are encouraged to make use of the possibility to reduce the taxes applied to the renovation and reparation works of private buildings, made to improve the efficiency of energy.

The report also demands encouraging the use of co generating boilers (combined micro production of thermo and electric energy) because they are more efficient. Also, the establishment of minimal standards of performance for new and renovated buildings in terms of windows or window thin sheets is wanted.

D. Management of urban fields

Earth is, maybe, the most important limited resource that we have, and the current models of urban development reduce these resources in an inefficient way. Earth is, also, divided unequally, and in many places in Europe this inequality is rising.

European Union punctuates some problems related to the way of using fields in urban areas:

- urban extension (expansion of cities in the surrounding rural areas, creating areas with low density of houses and intensifying transport problems);
- large number of abandoned properties, abandoned or unused fields;
- need of protection and development of green areas.

Suitable planning of using the fields will contribute to:

- avoiding urban extension;
- reducing the loss of natural habitats;
- protecting the biodiversity and conservation of ecologic habitat;
- reducing the proportion of pulled out fields from the agricultural circle;
- extension of the urban parks system;
- promoting an equal propriety tax system;
- modifying the relation between human and ground. Especially, we need a new balance between the right of private propriety and the human responsibility for the ground. That perspective which considered Earth a good used by the humanity to gain profit, must be modified by considering Earth a value and we must make the connection between humans and the earth they live in.

E. Remaking of the natural system

Even if many urban areas are totally artificial – full of pavements and buildings and, often, without green areas – although there are everywhere elements of the original ecosystem that can be restored. These efforts of recovery are added to those of ecological health and urban region support. **Urban agriculture** is a domain through which nature can be brought back to the city. Biointensive models are making possible the substantial growth of food quality obtained on very small ground squares. **Urban gardens** help the reestablishment of the relation between habitants and earth. Finally, the recover of the environment is necessary urgently in the urban neighbourhoods habited by those with low incomes. **Abandoned or contaminated fields can be recovered, while vacant ones can be used as parks, houses and gardens.** Cities are considered inhabitable because they lost any connection between human and nature. **People are moving into the suburbs because they seek nature and trees and there is a spread opinion that dense areas can't be green too.** Recovery of the natural system may have as effect, healthier and more livable cities and can provide important facilities which would determine the residents of suburbs to move back to the city.

F. A lasting economy

Developing an economy, that gives importance to long term health, people and natural system, is one of the biggest challenges for a lasting development. Generally, an urban lasting economy must have **three principles** at base:

- first of all, it's preferred that the lasting economy to be “ *a healed economy*”¹⁰, that removes the social and environment damages from the past and that prevents appearance/manifestation of new problems.

- secondly, it must be a **human orientated economy**, one that meets the human needs and provides work places decently paid.

¹⁰ Hawken, P., *The Ecology of Commerce*, HarperCollins, New York, 1993

- last but not least, it must be a locally oriented economy, that emphasizes on local propriety, local control, local investments, local resource use, production for local market. This means that the development policies must totally discourage the export oriented industry, but must encourage the production of a highly intense economical activity in the community.

Lasting economy must realize these goals by a mix of market mechanisms, governmental actions and stimulants for those who adopt decisions in the social and ecologic field. An important step for a lasting economy is the gradual reduction of the processes that consume a large number of limited resources and that produce a high.

Many specialists sustained that **a locally oriented economy, that emphasizes on workers, producers, consumers and small local businesses is healthier for the local communities. A system like that promotes economic democracy, local control, diversity of propriety and social responsibility and offers an alternative model to the global market economy** foreseen by agreements on free commerce such as GATT. A global market economy driven by big corporations may have negative effects on towns because they will tend to undermine the local propriety and control, to change the small sellers with detail with standard chains of shops and to export the capital in other areas of the world.

Conclusion

How can these measures be applied in cities? On one hand, the progress will depend on these projects that will be integrated in all the existing processes of planning and development. On the other hand, some specific efforts of planning and modifies brought to the planning procedures, will be necessary. The lasting planning processes could focus, for example, on the specific urban problems and domains, like quality of air and water management.

Parallel with these **priorities**, EU proposes a co-ordination approach, which assumes:

- **integration of urban environment policy on three levels:**
 - ✓ in the most relevant community policies (transport, cohesion, health, research and technological development);
 - ✓ in the key sectors of the community environment policy (water, air, sound pollution, wastes, climate changes, nature and biodiversity);
 - ✓ at different administrative levels (European, national, regional and local);
- **identification of the European common indicators for monitoring the effects of the thematic strategy and urban environment state;**
- **support for spreading the good practices at local level.**

Bibliography

1. **HAWKEN, P.**, *The Ecology of Commerce*, HarperCollins, New York, 1993
2. *** COM (2001) 31 final, European Commission, *On the sixth environment action programme of the European Community "Environment 2010: Our future, Our choice"*, Bruxelles, 2001
3. *** COM (2004) 60, European Commission, *Towards a thematic strategy on the urban environment*, Brussle, 2004
4. *** COM (2005) 718 final, Commission of the European Communities, *Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament on Thematic Strategy on the Urban Environment*, Brussels, 2006
5. *** MEMO/2006/9, *Questions and Answers on the Thematic Strategy on the Urban Environment*, Brussels, 2006
6. *** *General report for the European Union activity for 2006 and 2007* - <http://europa.eu/generalreport>