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Statement on the Protocol on Strategic Environmental Assessment
by
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Strategic Environmental Assessment is one of the main achievements of the latest years, offering an effective and concrete way to apply the principle of integration of environmental dimension in sectoral policies and to respond to the challenges of sustainable development. It allows to solve possible conflicts between economic development and protection of environment and health at a very early stage, so that public authorities can be oriented towards more sustainable choices, in the interest of present and future generations.

It's becoming clearer and clearer that it is not sufficient to apply the principle of environmental integration only to the stage of projects' approval, as already provided in most countries by the Environmental Impact Assessment procedure. Environmental sustainability should be ensured from the higher stages of planning, when many alternatives are practicable and some basic choices have not been made yet. EIA and SEA are, in this line of thinking, strictly complementary and unnecessary work could be avoided by making the best use of the information obtained during the previous assessment of the environmental effects of higher decisions.

I find of great importance to place SEA in the context of the sustainable development goals affirmed at international level, national at local level, which should be considered as the main points of reference during the assessment.

The integration of the environmental dimension in economic development will be the guiding theme on which Italy will focus during its Presidency of the European Union, starting in July this year. Our objective is to underline that the conflict between environment and development has definitively ended and that environmental protection can be seen in our perspective as a factor of economic and social development: 'environment as opportunity'. In this context SEA is crucial and will be, inter alia, one of the topic addressed by a workshop focused on the enlargement of the European Union, to be held in Trieste in July.

Internally, we have put in place some mechanisms to assess environmental effects of some planning instruments at central and local level.

At local level, it's worth mentioning the procedure that has been applied during the preparation of the Olympic games to be held in Turin in 2006. The University of Turin has been in charge of a preliminary study on the 'environmental consistency' of the plan of interventions presented by the organising committee. The study will be examined by the regional government concerned (Piemonte Region), in cooperation with the Ministry of Environment, in order to assess the feasibility of the proposed plan.

At central level, some elements of SEA have been experimentally introduced in the preparation of the "General Plan of Transports", taking into account the need to implement the Kyoto targets.

Furthermore, the SEA principles are applied in the context of the "Structural Funds" provided by the EU to promote economic development in some regions. An evaluation is carried out in order to assess the effects of the proposed interventions which are proposed to be covered by the Funds.

SEA has an important role to play in the UNECE region, where dynamic process of economic growth and increasing economic integration is under way. SEA can provide in this context for an important instrument to de-couple economic development from environmental degradation.

Today, thanks to the adoption of the Protocol, we can affirm to have an effective legal framework in place. The next effort will be its practical application and some useful elements in this regard can be derived from the EC Directive on SEA recently adopted.

There will be soon the opportunity for us to exchange our first views on the implementation of the Protocol, to share our experiences, identify good practices, address together the main difficulties in its interpretation and identify the gaps. These are in our view the priorities for the next future. We look forward that moment and hope that our work will continue to be fruitful, so that another step toward environmental sustainability and integration can be achieved.