

Final EU budget leaves environment in the dust

Title

Now that the European Parliament has cast its final vote approving the European Budget for 2014-2020, it's time to take inventory of where environmental ambitions have survived and where they have been left in the dust.

A big disappointment resulting from the EU budget negotiations is the continued lack of investment in the Life programme, which is the EU's main financial instrument supporting environmental and nature conservation projects. The EU budget represents just 1% of the EU's GDP, and under the new budget, Life is to receive a mere 0.3% of this 1%. Not only does Life provide support for nature programs, evidence also shows that it is an incredibly efficient and significant tool for local communities in terms of jobs and quality of life. The EU has therefore missed out on a major opportunity. On the bright side, BirdLife Europe and other NGOs have managed to prevent the scrapping of LIFE completely, which was initially muted in some circles, and have seen a marginal increase in the budget that has brought some important improvements to the rules governing the fund.

A much more shocking blunder has been the Common Agriculture Policy, which will still absorb almost 40% of the budget, but ultimately will continue delivering nothing to society. Harmful farming practices will continue to be subsidised while Europe's most sustainable farmers will be starved of support. Furthermore, the budget allocation to Rural Development, which includes valuable environmental schemes, has been disproportionately cut and the supposed ring fencing of 30% of direct payments to 'greening' commitments has been made almost irrelevant due to a long series of exemptions and loopholes.

Another important issue was the allocation of direct external funding under development aid. Through advocacy work, BirdLife Europe, CI Europe and other NGO's were able to protect direct funding for the environment and ensure that least developed countries receive sufficient aid to continue their environmental programmes. Also, some progress has been made in securing conservation funding for the Overseas Countries and Territories (mainly biodiversity rich oceanic islands administered by France, the UK and the Netherlands).

Finally, in cohesion policy funding, climate action has been increased by 61% and biodiversity has been included as one of the spending priorities. This policy supports poorer regions of the EU, allowing them to catch up with economic, social and environmental standards. In the past, this money has been grossly misused by Member States. The new legislation includes more environmental language to direct the spending choices decided at national level. However, it remains to be seen how this will be translated into practice by the Member States.

Overall, the new budget allows Member States to increase their focus on the environment, but it offers no solid guarantees that they will accept this call to action.

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