



## **Briefing: Integrating Biodiversity within Cohesion Policy**

*09 August 2011*

### KEY SUMMARY OF POINTS

- 1) The principal pressure to habitat loss is habitat fragmentation, degradation and destruction due to change in land use and land management. Nearly 30 % of the EU land is fragmented, mostly due to urban sprawl and infrastructure development. Agricultural intensification is also an important contributor to habitat fragmentation but is often secondary to the above mentioned of developments.
- 2) The Cohesion Policy must ensure the inclusion of biodiversity in all Operation Programmes (OPs). Biodiversity must be set as funding thematic priority to achieve this objective.
- 3) Cohesion Policy must ensure that its funds will make a very significant contribution to financing Natura 2000 and its management by including a reference to the Prioritised Action Frameworks (PAFs) in the regulation and ensuring the coherence of Operational Programmes and PAFs
- 4) Cohesion policy must ensure the connectivity of Europe's landscape by having strict conditionality for all major infrastructure projects to respect environmental law and to promote the use of Green Infrastructure as a strategy to restore connectivity at a large scale. Green Infrastructure must be mentioned in the new regulations as an area of interventions and proper Indicators for land consumption (following the no net loss principle) should be obligatory for monitoring.

### BACKGROUND

Ecosystems, biodiversity, and natural resources underpin societies, economies, and individual well-being. However, these values are often overlooked or poorly understood. The natural capital stock is being degraded without an understanding of the loss of its value. The missed opportunities to invest in this natural capital contribute to the biodiversity crisis that is becoming more evident and more pressing by the day. The degradation of ecosystem services:

soils, air, water and biological resources, can negatively impact on public health, food security, consumer choice and business opportunities.

Ecological coherence and connectivity play an important role in ensuring the normal functioning of ecosystems, and this is essential for providing ecosystem services such as biodiversity, air quality, carbon sequestration, flood management, water treatment, local climate conditions, soil erosion prevention etc...

The main pressures and drivers causing biodiversity loss are well known and include habitat loss or change, introduced species, pollution, over-exploitation, and climate change. The principal pressure is habitat fragmentation, degradation and destruction due to land-use change. Nearly 30 % of the fragmented EU land is, mostly due to urban sprawl and infrastructure development. Urban sprawl for example affects land change elsewhere through the transformation of urban-rural linkages. Infrastructure development involves both settlement expansion as well as the expansion of transport networks.

Despite many improvements in legislation to better protect biodiversity, reduce pollution, and improve water quality, urban sprawl is still increasing and the construction of new transport infrastructure is continuing at a rapid pace. As a consequence, fragmentation of landscapes is rising and the remaining ecological network provides less and less connectivity.

#### CURRENT PROBLEMS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In its Multi-annual Financial Framework Communication<sup>1</sup>, the Commission proposed for Cohesion policy to have a stronger focus on the Europe 2020 priorities, *“achieved through a strong focus on results and conditionality, including in relation to environmental objectives. These objectives include promoting the implementation of the environmental acquis (water, waste, marine, nitrates, Industrial Emissions Directive, air quality, flood legislation) and funding the related environmental infrastructure; **protecting and restoring biodiversity and ecosystem services, including through the development of green infrastructures and reducing and***

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<sup>1</sup> European Commission (2011), A Budget for Europe 2020, COM(2011)500 final

*preventing desertification. Environmental proofing will be strengthened as part of cohesion policy.”*

The new 2020 target aims at halting the loss of biodiversity and the degradation of ecosystems services in the EU by 2020. A reformed Cohesion Policy needs to therefore ensure the achievements of the biodiversity 2020 target, in line with the biodiversity strategy adopted by the council in July 2011. Biodiversity is already funded to a limited extent under the current Cohesion Policy, where the majority of Operational Programmes identify biodiversity as an important issue. However, the lack of coherence with the current biodiversity action plan, the lack of clear and useable biodiversity indicators, mean that the role of Cohesion Policy in achieving the EU’s 2010 target of halting the loss of biodiversity has been limited at best.

Cohesion Policy needs a more strategic approach when funding for biodiversity. Currently, biodiversity has the potential to be included in all programmes, but this potential has not been realised. The Cohesion regulation needs to set the framework for programmes to ensure the inclusion of biodiversity, and therefore ensuring that biodiversity is a funding thematic priority even if it is not the first priority and the main focus of the programme. The regulation should also ensure that OP will reference measures that contribute directly or indirectly to biodiversity and Natura 2000 via a transparent financial coding system.

ACHIEVING BIODIVERSITY PRIORITIES: NATURA 2000 AND GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE
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The practical centrepiece of the EU’s nature and biodiversity policy is Natura 2000 which is a network of nature conservation areas across Europe, covering around 18 % of the total area. Although the Natura 2000 network is protected under EU directives, it still faces several threats from lack of policy coherence. For example, the current Trans European Network for Transport (TEN-T) could potentially threaten up to 1,000 Natura 2000 sites in Europe.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the reality is more serious since the number does not assess the impacts of these developments on connectivity between sites and the possibility for species to move throughout the landscape. However, with careful planning, many potential conflicts could be avoided.

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<sup>2</sup> BirdLife International, EEB, WWF, Transport and Environment and CEE Bankwatch, 2008. TEN-T and Natura 2000: the way forward. [http://www.birdlife.org/eu/pdfs/TEN\\_T\\_report2008\\_final.pdf](http://www.birdlife.org/eu/pdfs/TEN_T_report2008_final.pdf)

Natura 2000 is currently funded through the Cohesion policy in the context of sustainable socio-economic development and territorial cohesion within the EU. However, there is currently no direct and strategic link to financing Natura 2000 and its management. Hence, the EU must ensure that Cohesion Policy is coherent with the Prioritised Action Frameworks, a tool which will set financial plans and requirements from the different European funding to follow the integrated funding approach for the Natura 2000 network within Member States.

Beyond Natura 2000, Cohesion policy has the potential to set out the ecological coherence of European landscape through green infrastructure. As one of the sub target of the recently adopted Biodiversity Strategy, green infrastructure could be one of the main tools to tackle threats to biodiversity resulting from habitat fragmentation, land-use change and loss of habitats by kicking off a trend reversal, building on existing small scale restoration projects foreseen in the River Basin Management Plans under the WFD. Green infrastructure is based around core areas, ecological corridors, buffer zones and restoration areas, and includes the socio-economic aspects of the rural and peri-urban environment and ecosystem services. Furthermore, green infrastructure is one of the most essential tools in tackling climate change impacts, offering several win-win situations with biodiversity and landscape conservation. Therefore, Cohesion policy must ensure the connectivity of Europe's landscape by having strict conditionality for all major infrastructure projects to respect environmental law and to promote the use of Green Infrastructure as a strategy to restore connectivity at a large scale. Furthermore, Green Infrastructure must be mentioned in the new regulations as an area of interventions and proper Indicators for land consumption (following the no net loss principle) should be obligatory for monitoring.

Cohesion Policy must ensure that the most important problem for biodiversity, competing demands for space, do not result in the fragmentation of habitats and loss of ecosystem functions. The EU adopted a target by 2020 target, not to continue as business as usual, but to not only halt the loss of biodiversity but to restore it. It is critical for Cohesion Policy to become part of this solution.

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