

*Church and Society Commission of the Conference of European Churches
Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Community*

**Statement by the Director of Church and Society Commission
of the Conference of European Churches (CEC)
and the Secretary General of the Commission of the
Bishops' Conferences of the European Community (COMECE) on**

**Implementing the European Strategy
for Sustainable Development**

*Churches encourage European Commission and EU Member States to
implement the European Strategy for Sustainable Development*

Protecting the environment and preserving our natural resources for the next generations is a political challenge and a moral obligation for us all. Today the world needs an environmental conversion and the European Union should assume a leading role in this process. We therefore very much congratulate the representatives of the European Union for the positive role they played in reaching a final agreement on the Kyoto Protocol last July in Bonn. It can only be hoped that the necessary momentum has now been created to combat climate change efficiently and worldwide.

We also consider the adoption of the basic outlines of a European strategy for sustainable development as they were agreed during the European Council on 15 and 16 June in Gothenburg a ground breaking event which will lead to further development of policies at the European level that reconcile the need for economic growth with social and environmental justice. For this reason we would like to comment on this important document even if it may already have left the short-term conscience of the general public opinion.

The idea of sustainable development renews the commitment of the Europeans to achieve a model of society to which Christians can subscribe because it cares for its weakest members and respects God's creation for which we bear ultimate responsibility. In this regard an important part of the Council's decision is in our view the expression of the EU's clear commitment to demonstrate its responsibility vis-à-vis other regions of the world, as well as its commitment to substantially contribute to a global sustainable development in the context of the Union's preparations in view of the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in South Africa.

In particular we found it encouraging to read that strong economic performance must go hand in hand with sustainable use of natural resources. In our view commitment for a 'significant de-coupling of transport growth and GDP' is only the first step in recognising the need for much broader de-coupling between permanently increasing economic production and a sustainable use of energy resources and sustainable life style. We strongly support the lines in which European Council stresses the importance of de-coupling economic growth from resource use. In this regard we would be in favour of the adoption of a more precise commitment.

In our view it is essential to stress the need to get the prices right: "Getting the prices right so that they better reflect the true costs to society of different activities would provide a better incentive for consumers and producers in everyday decisions about which goods and services to make and buy." In addition to that we express our conviction that attractive examples of other life-

styles might be necessary where economic incentives have little effect. Churches feel a special challenge in this field.

A strong and positive aspect of the European strategy for sustainable development is the renewed commitment of the Union to reach the UN target of 0.7% of GDP for development assistance as soon as possible. This new engagement which underlines the positive relation between the fight against poverty worldwide and concern for the environment would have been even more powerful if the European Council had agreed on a precise timetable to reach this aim given the fact that today official development aid in a number of member states is below 0.3% GDP.

The decision of the EU summit in Gothenburg on the Strategy on sustainable development has been a focal point of the process which started some time ago and will continue with increasing urgency. In this regard it has to be said that a number of concrete proposals that were included in the European Commission's communication on the same subject were not included in the Conclusions of the European Council. The EU heads of state and government could not agree for example on the phasing out of subsidies for fossil fuels until 2010 and – starting in 2002 – for tobacco production or the adoption of a directive on the taxation of energy products in 2002. The European Council also left the important task to the Council of Ministers to identify a set of relevant indicators in the field of the environment which are needed to complement a series of economic and social indicators that form together the framework of the Lisbon strategy. In spite of that, however, there is still hope that very concrete steps may be undertaken in the near future. We expect the European Commission to come forward with proposals that will stringently apply the new strategy to European policies.

The importance of the EU Strategy for sustainable development leads us to some more general remarks as well. The success of the strategy can only be guaranteed if it is not purely a matter of political decision and bureaucratic undertaking. Its success will to a great extent depend on the support of the public. In this regard we would welcome more attention being given to involving the public and to demonstrating a willingness to share responsibility in this effort. A strong leadership in the process and a 'feeling of ownership' are of crucial importance in an undertaking of this kind. Another element is the fact that the Strategy for sustainable development can only be fully successful if it does not merely cover the present EU member states. In a few years the EU will be expanded. In this regard it is surprising that, in spite of generally very positive statements on the perspective of EU enlargement made at the Summit that part of the Council's conclusions which deals with the Strategy does not reflect this perspective. This fact is particularly important if the scope and long-term character of the Strategy are taken into consideration. Finally, the Strategy for Sustainable Development is a complex undertaking. Much stronger links

between its various parts are necessary if it is to be respected as a cohesive and internally coherent plan, which is part of the vision for the future of the EU.

We would therefore like to express our hope that the Council of Ministers in its different formations can finalise the European strategy for Sustainable Development in the very near future. Its implementation should be merely a matter of time and not of political will.

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