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**COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN
PARLIAMENT AND THE COUNCIL**

**Final evaluation of Regulation (EC) No 614/2007 concerning the Financial Instrument
for the Environment (LIFE+)**

COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND THE COUNCIL

Final evaluation of Regulation (EC) No 614/2007 concerning the Financial Instrument for the Environment (LIFE+)

1. INTRODUCTION

The LIFE Programme is the EU's only financial instrument having as its sole focus the implementation of Union policy and legislation for the environment. It was launched in 1992 and is now in its fourth programming period under the LIFE+ Regulation (EC) N°614/2007.¹ This Regulation covers the period 2007-2013 and foresees a financial envelope of €2.17 billion.

Three types of interventions are possible under LIFE+:

- **Action grants**, representing 78% of the budget. Grants are awarded in three programme strands: Nature & Biodiversity, Environment Policy & Governance, and Information & Communication;
- **Operating grants for NGOs**, representing 3% of the budget;
- **Public procurement contracts** for service provision, representing 19% of the budget.

According to Art.15 (2) & (3) of the Regulation, the Commission prepared:

- a mid-term review, submitted to the European Parliament and the LIFE+ Committee in September 2010;²
- a proposal for a successor Programme to LIFE+, submitted to the European Parliament and the Council in December 2011;³

In December 2012, the Commission published the outcome of a study with conclusions and recommendations on the LIFE+ programme and its implementation.⁴

The evidence and opinions collected and analysed in the final evaluation demonstrated that there have not been any major changes in the nature and implementation of the LIFE+ Programme or in the quality of its results since the mid-term evaluation of 2010. Thus the conclusions of the mid-term evaluation are still generally valid. However, the final evaluation presents evidence of continued improvements in Programme implementation since the

¹ OJ L 149, 09.06.2007.

² <http://ec.europa.eu/environment/life/publications/lifepublications/evaluation/index.htm#mte2010>

³ http://ec.europa.eu/environment/life/about/documents/COMM_PDF_COM_2011_0874_F_EN.pdf?reference=IP/11/1526&format=PDF&aged=0&language=EN&guiLanguage=en

⁴ http://ec.europa.eu/environment/life/about/documents/121214_conclusions.pdf

previous evaluations.⁵ In the following sections, this Communication presents the observed achievements, as well as the remaining challenges and weaknesses in the LIFE Programme. The Commission's proposal for a successor instrument for 2014-20 already seeks to address the identified challenges and weaknesses.

2. ACHIEVEMENTS AND CHALLENGES

2.1. Achievements

LIFE+ has served as an effective tool to promote the implementation of the priorities established in the 6th Environmental Action Programme (6EAP)⁶. The Programme has played a significant role in increasing awareness of, good governance for, and public participation in the implementation of EU environment policy and legislation. The evaluations confirm that LIFE+ has been "a successful instrument with significant EU added value".⁷

Over the twenty years of the Programme and in addition to "quantified benefits estimated at some €600 million a year", LIFE has led to

- **Improved conservation and restoration** of some 4.7 million hectares of land;
- **Improved water quality** over an area of approximately 3 million hectares;
- **More healthy air quality** for some 12 million people;
- **waste prevention** of some 300,000 tonnes and recycling of a further 1 million tonnes;
- 1.13 million tonnes **reductions of CO2 emissions** per year.

These achievements have been accomplished through the implementation of almost 50,000 project actions, including the acquisition of 194 million hectares of land for the implementation of the Natura2000 network, over 95,000 training sessions, 6.1 million people targeted by communications, and 1.2 million pupils and students involved.

EU added value

The EU added value of LIFE+ derives from its ability to act as a platform for the exchange of best practice and knowledge-sharing, allowing actors across the EU to learn from each others'

⁵ See: EPEC (2008) available at https://ec.europa.eu/dgs/environment/pdf/epec_report_life.pdf; SEC (2008) 2633 FINAL COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT on the implementation of the programme for financial support to European non-governmental organisations primarily active in the field of environment protection; COWI (2009) Ex-Post Evaluation of Projects and Activities Financed under the LIFE Programme; EC Court of Auditors (2009) Special Report 11/2009 on "The sustainability and the Commission's management of the LIFE-Nature Projects"; Arcadis (2010) Mid-term evaluation of the Implementation of the LIFE+ Regulation; and SEC (2011) 1541 Final COMMISSION STAFF WORKING PAPER IMPACT ASSESSMENT accompanying the document on the Proposal for a Regulation on the establishment of a Programme for the Environment and Climate Action (LIFE).

⁶ OJ L 242, 10.09.2002

experiences and thus address environmental problems more effectively. In the Nature & Biodiversity strand for example, LIFE+ has helped creating collaborative platforms that enhanced partnerships thereby facilitating the transfer of best practice between stakeholders and decision-makers. LIFE+ also allows for a better distribution of responsibility and solidarity in preserving the EU common environmental good. It acts as a catalyst, providing one-off investments to eliminate initial barriers to EU environmental and climate policy implementation, and testing new approaches. The mid-term evaluation indicated that LIFE "continues to be relevant as it is the only EU financial instrument specifically focused on the environment".⁸

The high level of EU added value delivered under the Regulation has been achieved by ensuring that:

- Action grant projects were of high quality individually, and their impact was multiplied through dissemination and sharing of project results, reaching a maximum number of policy makers and stakeholders across the EU;
- NGOs financed were enabled to play an effective role in making and implementing policy;
- Public procurement was well planned and aligned with formally agreed priorities.

However, the EU added value was somewhat compromised by the system of national allocations leading to compromises in the quality of projects financed, and by overly broad priorities which led to insufficient focus on targeted needs and priorities. Since the list of LIFE+ priorities was defined in the Regulation, it has not been possible during programme implementation to introduce requirements restricting project finance to specific policy needs and priorities.

Selection process and project monitoring

The rigorous evaluation and selection process for LIFE+ projects has ensured that funded projects are well-designed and therefore likely to be successful. External teams with an in-depth knowledge of the language and context of the projects have provided regular on-site support and monitoring. Project beneficiaries feel that they have been well supported by both this external monitoring team and by the Commission Technical and Financial Desk Officers.⁹

NGOs Operating grants

The aim of this component of the LIFE+ programme is to enable environmental NGOs with a European vocation to contribute to a balanced stakeholder involvement in the EU policy process. Operating Grants have enabled NGOs to participate in EU working groups, produce

⁷ http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/biodiversity/comm2006/pdf/2020/1_EN_impact_assesment_part1_v4.pdf

⁸ SEC (2010) 1120 COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND THE COUNCIL, Mid-term review of the LIFE+ Regulation, p.5

⁹ MTR, p.9

information and analysis papers, engage in awareness-raising and consultative activities, and carry out long-term projects. The evaluations confirm the continued relevance of this intervention and concluded that the NGOs selected made a necessary contribution to EU policy.

Public procurement

The Commission uses public procurement to undertake supporting studies and evaluations, to hold meetings, workshops and seminars, and to develop and maintain computer systems (e.g. LIFE website or Natura2000 information system). This component of the LIFE+ Programme has also been used to assist the Commission with information, publication and dissemination activities that are central to its policy objective. Such contracts have played an important role in achieving the Programme's objectives despite their comparably small size in the LIFE+ budget. The evaluations show that the expenditure through public procurement has been appropriate and has responded to the needs of the policy. Outputs have included high profile communication and outreach; although it is hard to assess the real full impact of such measures, they were delivered in line with the required quality criteria and based on strategic need.

2.2. Challenges and actions within the current framework

2.2.1. Action grants

Strategy and coherence

The LIFE+ Programme has been evaluated as being relevant and needed as it is creating EU added value for EU environmental policy development and implementation.¹⁰ However, the Programme's objectives are not always clear and sometimes lack coherence with other EU policies. The lack of a clear strategic approach and critical mass has been identified as a drawback of the Programme, stemming mainly from limitations in the Regulation. Consequently, implementation of the LIFE+ programme has not been able to reflect the evolution of developing EU policy priorities, especially for the Environment and Information & Communication strands. Better strategic and multi-annual planning, and improved flexibility concerning the choice and complementarity of financial instruments were recommended in the evaluations as a way forward. Furthermore, evaluations concluded that the environment and governance strand of LIFE+ should focus more on implementation of EU environment legislation and the creation of multipliers.

According to Art.9 of the Regulation, LIFE+ should not finance activities that could be financed by other EU funds; this prevents using several EU instruments for the financing of one single project. However, more synergies and coherence with national, regional, and local programmes in Member States would have been beneficial.

¹⁰ SEC (2010) 1120 COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND THE COUNCIL, Mid-term review of the LIFE+ Regulation, p.10

Restrictions on funding activities outside the EU have reduced the effectiveness of the Programme in addressing EU environmental problems that are driven by factors outside of EU borders.

The Commission continues its effort to better integrate the outputs of action grants into policy development and implementation within the limitations of the current LIFE+ framework. The Guide for applicants has been substantially revised, especially for the Environment & Governance component, in order to provide more focus and better guidance to the potential beneficiaries, within the constraints of the LIFE+ Regulation.

The Commission has made sure that no LIFE+ project also received support from other EU instruments, thus respecting the provisions of the LIFE+ Regulation. However, the project selection process did favour projects demonstrating synergies with other funds or showing an integrated approach in the use of different funds by establishing selection criteria in the manner which leads to additional assessment points for such projects.

The Commission has also acted upon the evaluation recommendations by proposing a new type of project, the "Integrated Projects" under the LIFE+ successor; integrated project would have a greater focus on the implementation of EU policy, over a longer period and with mobilisation of additional funding.

The proposed new programme would also introduce the possibility to finance actions outside of the EU where necessary to achieve EU environmental or climate objectives.

Administrative burden

The administrative burden of LIFE+ has increased over time due to stricter application and reporting requirements, particularly related to financial administration, and thus efficiency concerns have been raised. The split of the LIFE+ unit into two separate units in 2009 also appears to have increased the administrative burden for individual desk officers.

The Commission has made efforts to simplify the procedures and proposed measures for the LIFE+ successor to lower the administrative burden.

Application and selection process

Procedures for project application and selection were evaluated as being too long and complex, needing simplification.

An online application form was introduced in 2011 to address these concerns. The first pilot year showed some initial teething problems, including problems with discrepancies between electronic and hard-copies, which needed to be resolved manually.

The Commission has organised workshops for potential applicants after each call for proposals to explain the application process and increase the quality of applications. These workshops have been especially focussed on countries with a low number, and/or success

rate, of applicants. The Commission has also continued reinforcing and improving dissemination activities, and increased efforts to attract non-traditional LIFE applicants, especially for Biodiversity and new themes under Environment & Governance.

The Commission has shortened the duration of the project selection procedure without reducing its quality. The e-application system has been functioning well since the 2012 call for proposals and the Commission is looking at possibilities to expand the use of electronic reporting in project monitoring.

Project results and integration

The evaluations propose that the Commission should carry out more ex-post visits to the projects, even if this is not required by the Regulation. A more systematic ex-post monitoring system would be an improvement on current arrangements, as it would provide evidence of which projects genuinely achieve long lasting benefits. This would help ensure that project results are better utilised and integrated into policy making. More generally know-how transfer should be improved, especially at EU-level.

The Commission is now carrying out more systematic ex-post visits, to assess project sustainability and extract policy lessons. It has also increased its efforts to integrate project results into policy development and implementation in the context of workshops and panel discussions involving project beneficiaries and policy developers. The policy-project links in the Nature & Biodiversity strand are already strong but more efforts could still be made in the next Programming period, particularly in relation to the Environment & Governance strand.

Communication and outreach

Evaluations have recommended that the horizontal outreach and communication of the LIFE Programme could be improved and the dissemination of project results and knowledge, especially at EU level should be reinforced.

Several improvements have been made. The most externally visible of these is the updated and improved LIFE homepage on the internet.

The Commission regularly publishes thematic brochures to show how LIFE projects address environmental issues; three synthesis studies on water, waste, and air & noise have been conducted and published.

The Commission has promoted networking by organising regional and EU-wide meetings of projects to share experience and technical knowledge.

Especially in the Nature & Biodiversity strand, there has been strong cooperation and knowledge sharing among beneficiaries, which has also contributed to building scientific knowledge about nature conservation and biodiversity thus contributing more widely to the implementation of Birds and Habitats Directives.

National organisations and management

National Contact Points play an important role in ensuring consistency, complementarity and coordination of the LIFE+ Programme with national programmes. However, the coordination with other, mainly national, sources of funds still seems insufficient. National Contact Points indicate that there is scope for mobilising more resources nationally through LIFE+.

National strategies are seen as important to promote, disseminate and deliver the Programme within individual Member States.

Each Member State has submitted a very different number of proposals, partly due to previous experience with LIFE in the Member State and partly to the assistance provided by National Contact Points. This leads to an uneven distribution of funding between the Member States. Italy, Spain and Germany continue receiving substantial amounts of LIFE+ support while some of the newest Member States have had a lower rate of success.

The Commission carries out training sessions to enhance the National Contact Points' role in assisting applicants and beneficiaries, and has developed guidelines on communication activities.

While national allocations in the Regulation do not seem to lead to a significantly more balanced distribution of projects across the EU, progress is being made in some countries through the efforts of the National Contact Points. Such successful efforts should be duplicated in other Member States.

2.2.2. NGOs Operating grants

Although the impact of individual NGOs Operating grants is more difficult to assess than that of Action grants, it has been recognised that the NGO grants programme offers high added value through a contribution to policy development and implementation. The eligibility criteria have generally been considered as appropriate, however the requirement of having members in many countries is perceived as contradictory to the provision that the support can only be given to the beneficiary and not to the members.

The earlier evaluations identified issues relating to the speed and timing of payments causing liquidity problems for the NGOs. The mid-term review recommended a shift in the timeframe of the selection procedure or a change to multiannual framework partnership agreements to address liquidity problems and improve cost efficiency.¹¹

The Commission has improved its feedback to NGOs on co-financing decisions, and some improvements have been made on payment timing, although this has been limited by the time needed for the Commission financial procedures.

¹¹ SEC (2010) 1120 COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND THE COUNCIL, Mid-term review of the LIFE+ Regulation, p.8

The Commission has strengthened the focus of yearly priorities in the last call for LIFE+, and introduced an element of external assessment to reinforce objectivity in the evaluation process. The possibility for multi-annual support was proposed for the successor instrument as a means of providing more stable support which could allow longer-term planning by the beneficiary NGOs. Enhanced involvement of network members in grant implementation will also be promoted.

3. THE FUTURE OF LIFE+

As noted above, many recommendations from the evaluations were incompatible with the existing LIFE+ Regulation, but have been taken into account when designing the future instrument.

In its Communication of 12 December 2011, submitted to the European Parliament and the Council, the Commission proposed to allocate €3.2 billion over 2014 - 2020 to a new Programme for the Environment and Climate Action – LIFE. The proposed new Programme will build on the success of the existing LIFE+ Programme but will be reformed to have a greater impact, be simpler and allow more flexibility with an increased budget.

The main changes proposed are:

- The creation of a **Climate Action sub-programme** (€800 million over the period) with three priorities: mitigation, adaptation, governance and awareness;
- **A better definition of the Environment sub-programme structure** (€2.4 billion over the period): Biodiversity; Environment; and Governance;
- The introduction of **Integrated projects (IP)** as demonstration projects to achieve environmental objectives, in particular, through the mobilisation of other available EU and/or national funds. In particular, this will guarantee a strengthened complementarity and coordination with actions supported by the ESI Funds in the areas of nature, water, waste, air quality, climate change mitigation and climate change adaptation.

The sub-programme for Environment will support efforts in the following areas:

- *"Environment and Resource Efficiency"* which will focus on more innovative solutions for better implementation of environment policy and integrating environmental objectives in other sectors;
- *"Biodiversity"* which will develop and implement best practices to halt biodiversity loss and restore ecosystem services, while keeping its primary focus on supporting Natura2000 sites, especially via Integrated projects consistent with Member States Prioritised Action Frameworks;
- *"Environmental Governance and Information"* which will promote knowledge sharing, dissemination of best practices, and better compliance, in addition to awareness raising campaigns.

The sub-programme for Climate Action covers the following areas:

- *"Climate Change Mitigation"* which will focus on reducing greenhouse gas emissions;
- *"Climate Change Adaptation"* which will focus on increasing resilience to climate change;
- *"Climate Governance and Information"* which will focus on increasing awareness communication, cooperation and dissemination on climate mitigation and adaptation actions.

Grants to finance projects will remain the Programme's main type of intervention. Operating grants for NGOs and other bodies are also proposed, and there will be scope for contributions to innovative financial instruments.

According to the Commission's proposal, LIFE 2014-2020 will adopt lighter and more flexible procedures.

4. CONCLUSION

Although the evaluations have indicated scope for some improvements in the LIFE+ Programme, on balance it is seen as effective and well managed. Where possible, the identified weaknesses have been addressed in the final phases of the present programming period. Where the LIFE+ Regulation itself embodied the weaknesses, the recommendations have been taken into account in the design of the proposed LIFE 2014-2020 Programme.

The Commission believes that the EU budget should continue to assist the Member States and the EU as a whole in developing and implementing the EU policies, both through a specific instrument for environment and also by mainstreaming environment in the more budgetarily significant financial instruments.

In view of the uneven and inadequate implementation of EU environment and climate policy, there is a continued need for a specific instrument for environment and climate intervention. The Commission proposal for new LIFE Programme aims to continue to build and develop the programme currently regulated by the successful LIFE+ Regulation.