

Cohesion policy and the environment



- Cohesion policy aims to promote harmonious development across the EU by pursuing actions leading to strengthening of economic, social and territorial cohesion, in particular by reducing disparities between the levels of development of the various regions and the backwardness of the least favoured regions;
- Cohesion policy represents the largest single source of EU financing for environmental projects;
- The European Commission, national and regional authorities develop, deliver and fund policies, projects and actions in partnership;
- There are a number of funding mechanisms to promote cohesion. Resources have increased considerably in recent years and there is an increasing focus on environmental aims;
- All cohesion actions must respect environmental legislation and contribute to the EU's overall sustainable development;
- Funding supports investments in large-scale infrastructure developments. These should provide long-term benefits and include projects such as water and waste treatment plants;
- Funding also supports investment in education and training, helping local authorities, workers and companies to take greater account of environmental protection. The promotion of eco-innovation and new "green-collar" jobs are priorities, especially in small and medium enterprises;
- Projects help all countries and regions across the EU to comply with environmental regulations and build their capacities in this sector;
- Investments can stimulate eco-innovation, sustainable energy and low-carbon transport choices, as well as pushing forward new approaches to environmental problems.

Section 1: Background

The EU pursues a series of actions to promote the economic and social development of all its Member States and the regions within them, under what is known as cohesion policy. This includes now under the Lisbon Treaty the new Territorial Cohesion goal. With the overall aim to reduce disparities between different regions, there are three main funding mechanisms – the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and European Social Fund (ESF) – which make up the so-called Structural Funds – and the Cohesion Fund.

The ERDF provides funding for infrastructure and productive investment, and the ESF supports capacity building in institutions and organisations, as well as education and training measures to improve people's potential.

Meanwhile, the Cohesion Fund aims to improve transport links and the environment in the least economically developed regions of the EU: including all the new Member States, and areas of Spain, Portugal and Greece.

The majority of funding for environmental projects goes to long-term and large-scale investments in infrastructure, such as improvements in water supply and the treatment of solid and liquid waste. However, all projects funded through cohesion policy, including in areas such as transport, have to be environmentally sustainable.

Funding for projects is shared between the EU and Member States, and the European Commission works in partnership with national governments and regional authorities.

The resources available have increased significantly since 1988 and environmental considerations have become increasingly important.

Section 2: Cohesion policy and the environment

Cohesion policy provides financial support for countries to comply with EU environmental legislation requiring appropriate environmental infrastructure, respond to new environmental challenges, and develop innovative approaches, human and organisational resources.

These goals are realised through the long-term investments needed to develop infrastructure through the ERDF and Cohesion Fund. Around €104 billion will go towards environment-related actions, out of a total budget of €344 billion for cohesion policy for 2007-13. Around €44 billion of this is for direct environmental investments in areas such as water and waste treatment, improvements in air quality, nature and biodiversity protection, natural risk prevention, pollution control and the rehabilitation of industrial sites. A further €60 billion indirectly supports

environmental improvements, for example by developing greener transport, sustainable energy and urban rehabilitation.

Meanwhile, the ESF, with its focus on 'investing in people', also contributes to sustainable development. Relevant actions include: environmental awareness raising efforts; promoting workers' adaptability; improving education and training systems; and strengthening national, regional and local decision-making structures.

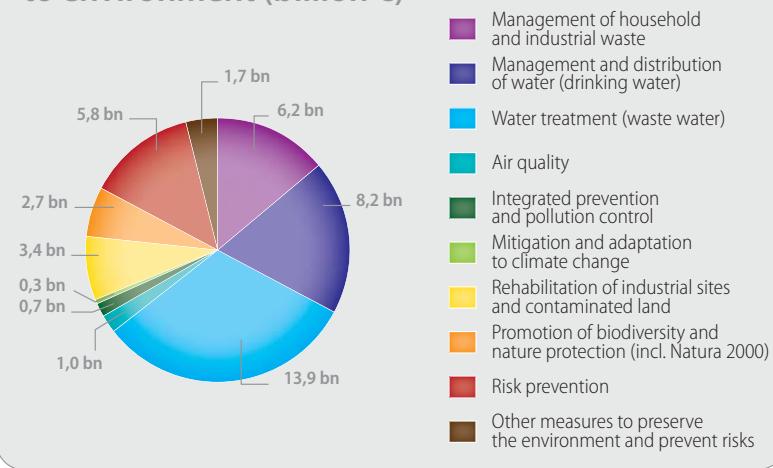
Cohesion policy helps to integrate environmental concerns into other policy areas and economic sectors, such as through investments in clean energies, sustainable urban transport and urban development projects.

A more invisible benefit of cohesion policy is the improvement of governance through enhancing cross-cutting approaches and the building of national and regional networks to catalyse environmental integration into cohesion actions, such as the Regions for Sustainable Change network, as well as the European Network of Environmental and Managing Authorities.

Cohesion policy is a key lever to deliver the "smart, sustainable and inclusive" growth that is at the heart of the EU's overall long-term strategy, Europe 2020, supporting practical actions that are adapted to the specific conditions in different countries and regions, such as improving resource efficiency.

The EU's Sustainable Development Strategy – renewed in 2006 – emphasises action to combat climate change and support sustainable energies, boost eco-innovation, and stop the decline in biodiversity. These areas should be important elements in cohesion policy both now and after 2013.

Cohesion policy funding allocated to environment (billion €)



Environmental projects in cohesion policy

Examples of projects directly concerning the environmental sector:

The Voluntary Ecological Year, Germany (European Social Fund)

The Voluntary Ecological Year, a major vocational training scheme, enables young people to spend a year doing voluntary conservation work and gain valuable work experience. The scheme supports "learning-by-doing" programmes in real working environments for over 130 volunteers each year in the Mecklenburg-Vorpommern region of Germany.

Participation is open to young people aged between 16 and 27 years old who have finished school. Participants work in institutions in the environmental sector for a 12-month period, participating in practical conservation projects and environmentally related events.

A dedicated law provides recognition of the scheme and improves its visibility. The scheme also supports co-operation with neighbouring German and Polish regions and is expected to expand further in future.

The European Social Fund co-finances the scheme, with a budget of €7.5 million for 2007-2013, in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern. It also supports similar schemes in several other Länder (Berlin, Sachsen, Thüringen, Sachsen-Anhalt, Brandenburg and Baden-Württemberg).

The Empleaverde programme, Spain (European Social Fund)

The Biodiversity Foundation has run this national operation since 2000, launching annual calls for projects to promote better integration of environmental issues in companies' operations, to boost eco-innovation and the creation of enterprises in the environmental sector.

Actions include training courses, e-learning, seminars, information and communication campaigns, personal counselling and networking. The projects are geared mainly towards independent workers, workers in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and entrepreneurs. Special attention is given to disadvantaged workers, workers in sectors at risk of redundancy and those already in the environmental sector.

Projects may last one or two years. The total budget of each project varies between €150 000 and €615 000. They receive co-financing from the European Social Fund of between 50 and 80%.

Celje wastewater plant, Slovenia (Cohesion Fund)

Formerly all waste water in Celje – the third largest city in Slovenia with a population of 50 000 – was discharged into the Savina River, resulting in poor water quality and increasing levels of contamination.

With Slovenia's integration into the European Union, action began to build the necessary infrastructure so that water in the area would meet EU standards. Work on a new waste water treatment plant began in 2000, initially co-funded by the EU under a funding mechanism to help accession countries (the ISPA – the Instrument for Structural Policies for Pre Accession) and then transferred to the Cohesion Fund.

In the new plant, waste water from household, pre-treated industrial and hospital effluents are mechanically and biologically purified, resulting in clean water and sludge that is used as manure in farming.

The project has improved considerably the water quality and the quality of life of local inhabitants. It means Slovenia is closer to meeting the requirements of the EU Urban Waste Water Directive and the National Environmental Action Programme.

A follow-up action, also co-funded through the Cohesion Fund, aims to ensure waste water from the entire Savinja River Basin is treated.





Working together on flood protection (European Regional Development Fund)

Five EU countries worked together to boost flood protection measures around the Rhine and Meuse rivers, working on over 150 projects from 1997 to 2003, under the INTERREG Rhine-Meuse Activities programme (IRMA).

The Rhine and Meuse rivers flooded their banks twice within a thirteen-month period from 1993 to 1995. With the catchment areas of these two rivers covering 191 000km² and over 60 million inhabitants, steps to improve flood control needed co-operation between different national and regional authorities in France, Germany, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, the Belgian regions of Flanders and Wallonia, as well as Switzerland.

Measures included: those in the catchment area, such as restoration of the natural courses of tributaries; actions on river beds, including preserving and restoring water retention areas and wetlands; improvements in knowledge, co-operation and planning; and technical assistance such as the development of monitoring systems.

IRMA received €137 million from the European Regional Development Fund's INTERREG II-C initiative, 32% of the total funding.

Waste management in Western Macedonia, Greece (Cohesion Fund)

The first integrated system for management of solid waste in Greece became operational in July 2005, partly funded through the Cohesion Fund. It has improved waste management in the region of Western Macedonia considerably and increased protection of underground water reservoirs and public health.

The infrastructure includes a major sanitary landfill, a number of waste transfer stations, waste pre-treatment systems, as well as the installation of recycling and other equipment. A management body has also been established to coordinate the system.

The project received €8.5 million in EU funding, out of a total of €11.3 million.

Before the project, the region had had mounting problems with waste. Since the new system started, 207 illegal waste dumping sites have been closed and rehabilitated, also with the support of the EU cohesion policy.

Environmental integration in cohesion policy

Environmental requirements are also integrated in projects in other sectors. The following is an example in the transport sector:

Jerez-Los Barrios motorway, Spain (European Regional Development Fund)

The 78.5 kilometre-long dual carriageway between Jerez de la Frontera and Los Barrios in Andalusia in Spain has been dubbed the first 'ecological' motorway in Europe. The project was funded through the European Regional Development Fund and shows how actions to develop infrastructure and boost regional economies can also incorporate environmental aims.

Expansion of the old road was vital to the economic development of the region through better trade links for the ports of Cadiz, Algeciras and Gibraltar. However, there was the risk of high environmental impact as the road runs through the Natural Park of Los Alcornocales.

A number of innovative measures minimised the effects on the natural landscape. Viaducts, bridges and tunnels were built in order to reduce the number of embankments needed and their height.

Nearly all construction waste from the project was re-used, avoiding excessive dumping. Special passages were built to allow animals to circulate freely, as well as noise-reducing barriers.

Meanwhile, more than 190 000 bushes and 6 500 trees were planted to restore the landscape of cleared slopes.

For further information:

http://ec.europa.eu/environment/integration/cohesion_policy_en.htm

http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/index_en.htm