

ACCESS TO ENVIRONMENTAL INFORMATION – AN EFFICIENT MECHANISM FOR ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

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Abstract

On the basis of Directive 2003/4/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 28 January 2003 on public access to environmental information and repealing Council Directive 90/313/EEC and a public opinion survey among citizens of the 27 European countries, initiated by the Environment Directorate-General, this study tries to clarify why the citizens needs to be informed and to have access to environmental information.

Key words: citizens, protecting, environment.

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades the nature of environmental challenges has changed considerably at any level: globally and also nationally. Nonetheless, the global nature of environmental problems has long been known, as issues such as pollution, loss of biodiversity, global warming, ozone depletion and tropical deforestation do not respect international borders. One can argue, however, that it is only in recent years that these problems have become widespread matters of concern among the general public.

Two tendencies can be linked to this phenomenon. Firstly, there is an ever greater need for a global response to global problems. This is already underway in numerous international environmental agreements and legislation. Secondly, citizens are becoming more aware of both the potential effects of these problems in their daily lives and the role they could play in protecting their environment. In this context, the Environment Directorate-General decided to commission a public opinion survey to measure the opinions, attitudes and behaviour of Europeans towards the environment.

The survey tackled the following broad themes:

- Attitudes towards the environment, meaning first associations with it issues and main concerns;
- Private relationship with the environment, especially attitudes and behaviour with environment;

- Personal concepts on environment policies, meaning here the acceptability of sustainable development approaches, preferred policies, support for a European environment policy and the role of the EU as its executor;
- Information on the environment: feeling of being informed, topics for which there is a lack of information, sources of information.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The state of the environment certainly plays an important role in Europeans' lives. This study brings the analysis into the public sphere. It examines firstly how the environment is positioned among other factors that influence the daily lives of Europeans; secondly, the preferred actions, such as restrictions and incentives, that should be taken for tackling environmental problems; and finally the role of the EU in environmental protection. One of the considerations about sustainable development is that environmental and social factors should be given equal consideration with economic factors when making decisions. The concept also involves seeing these three elements as inseparable and interdependent components of human progress: state of the environment, economic factors and social factors.

When looking at the results country by country (table 1), we see that all these factors are seen to influence the "quality of life" by the absolute majority of respondents in each country.

Table 1

Factors influence for "quality of life"
(source: Special Eurobarometer Report 295, 2008)

% Influence	State of the environment	Economic factors	Social factors
EU27	80%	84%	76%
BE	79%	85%	82%
BG	75%	88%	82%
CZ	85%	93%	88%
DK	90%	87%	92%
DE	68%	78%	58%
EE	77%	89%	83%
EL	98%	99%	94%
ES	82%	88%	80%
FR	78%	79%	71%
IE	76%	79%	72%
IT	86%	89%	85%
CY	95%	97%	91%
LV	80%	92%	87%
LT	76%	88%	82%
LU	81%	75%	74%
HU	84%	92%	90%
MT	92%	82%	78%
NL	73%	77%	88%
AT	78%	77%	81%
PL	84%	91%	81%
PT	90%	92%	85%
RO	80%	86%	82%
SI	80%	88%	84%
SK	83%	89%	85%
FI	84%	87%	79%
SE	83%	85%	87%
UK	75%	76%	71%

xx%= the highest percentage in country
xx%= the highest percentage per item

According with these results, we observed that economic factors are seen as most influential in nearly every country but we can observe some exceptions to this pattern in countries like Malta and Luxembourg, when citizens considered that the state of the environment influences their lives outnumbers those who mention economic or social factors. At the other extreme, in Denmark, the Netherlands, Sweden and Austria, social factors are seen to have the strongest influence on the quality of life.

At variance of the countries listed above, but equally with the most European citizens, the Romanian citizens also believed that the economic factor is that one who has primacy in what is called “quality of life”.

The discrepancies between opinions exist because of lack and because of appropriate ignorance about the health environment at a time, also because of the heavy living conditions in different countries in Europe, but mainly because the environment information reach to the citizens heavily.

What is important for a simple citizen to know about this issue? Firstly, it’s important to realize that to have information in any domain and about anything represent power. Secondly, in this issue of the environmental information it’s good to know that having this information means to have access to the idea of environmental factors, to activities or measures including even administrative measures which affect or may affect our environment, to reports on the legislation application on the protection of the environment, and not in the last sense to have access to the state of human health and safety.

But, not any information and their access represent, in this case, represent environmental information. In this context, as simple citizens, we will know that data and information relating to activities that does not produce effects on the environment. For example: data and information relating to relations international; commercial or industrial information confidential; personal data; the course of justice and similar actions.

The provision of environmental information held by the central authority or for the central authority is made at the request of applicants without justification of the request purpose, and the active dissemination of information (fig. 1) is achieved through policies, plans and programmes.

Information on the state, characteristics and condition that cause environmental changes are the primary element in the definition of measures for effective protection of the environment. Knowing the details of problems on which we want to address is a prerequisite for getting quick and effective solutions for resolving them. This is the reason for that in general it is believed that price information is more than money and therefore those who has own information and know to use it are able to infiltrate decision and become indispensable. In this way the public opinion becomes operational.

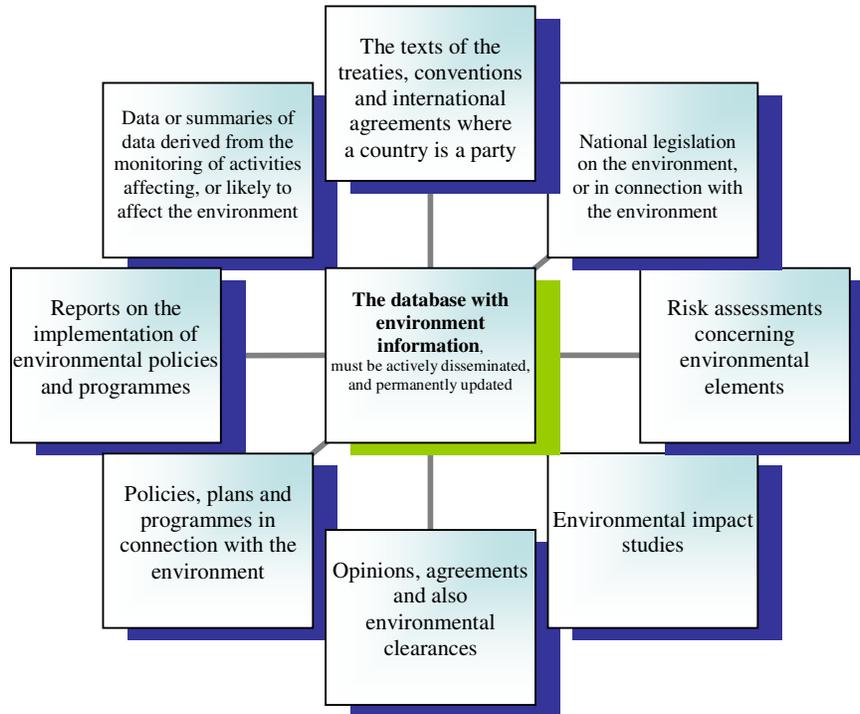


Fig.1. The scheme of access to the environment information

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In our days, environmental concepts became part of all human activities. In principle, the target of this issue has the tendency to include any form of decision making. As has been shown, environmental information and data about environment have been always perceived as imperative for environmental decision making. Therefore, it must be shown and shared with those are concerned in formulating and implementing the decision.

As Principle 10 of UN (1992) said, environmental issues has best using if all concerned citizen participate to the environmental issues and decision on its.

That's why, at national level, each individual shall have an adequate access to information concerning the environment that is held by public authorities, and, also, the opportunity to participate in decision-making processes.

In the legal and democratic context, the public access to the environmental information should be seen as part of a more general principle of public participation in environmental decision making.

However, since 1990 the target of the UN in this issue is specifically. In this acceptance, on the legal side, conventions that promulgate the access of public to the environmental information have been developed and signed. These include the European Council Directive 90/313/EEC (actualized through Directive 2003/4/EC), “Freedom of Access to Information on the Environment” and the Aarhus convention (UN/ECE, 1998). From these documents we may concluded that the improving of the access to environmental information and public participation in decision-making enhance the quality and the implementation of decisions, contribute to public awareness of environmental issues, give the public opportunity to express its concerns and enable public authorities to take due account of such concerns.

CONCLUSIONS

To clarify the need of access to environmental information should be understand as human rights. Any citizen needs to know the state of the environment and its factors, and for this it's important to know what measures or activities affecting or likely to affect the environment or designed to protect it. According with it and with legal regulations (through policies, agreements and programs), any simple citizen could have an idea about how much cost to repair an environmental problem, when it appeared.

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