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We should expect much from the EU, but it’s national policies that really matter

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by Duncan Liefferink

The basic message in Tony Juniper’s stimulating article is that the EU should do more to tackle today’s most pressing environmental problems. Sustainability and competitiveness should be treated as two sides of the same coin. In essence, that view appears sound but, while we should expect much from the EU we shouldn't expect too much.

It is claimed that the driving force behind no less than 85% of all environmental rules and laws in the UK is the EU. Similar percentages circulate in other member states. Recent research in the Netherlands suggests that between 60% and 70% of Dutch environmental legislation has been influenced by Europe in one way or another. But after taking into account the actual importance and material impact of this influence, the figure is likely to be no more than about 20%.

This looks like a fairly healthy state of affairs as there are at least two good reasons for leaving member states considerable room to manoeuvre in this area. First, it's a way – quite possibly the only way – to cope with national diversity. Given the large economic, social, cultural, political and legal-institutional differences between the member states, it is crucial to strike the right balance between uniformity and fairness on the one hand and national circumstances on the other. Second, member states often serve as testing grounds for new policies. As a matter of fact, the majority of the EU's environmental policies originate from national initiatives which, by various mechanisms ranging from careful lobbying to blunt provocation, have become elevated to the EU level.

National policies remain at the heart of the EU’s quest for sustainability. This approach looks even more relevant given the full range of measures that will be required for dealing with such complex problems as climate change. Mr. Juniper mainly focuses on reducing emissions in production. However, the necessary reduction of greenhouse gas emissions by up to 90% within the next few decades can hardly be attained by industrial energy saving and clean technologies alone. Without arguing for a return to the stone-age, changes in consumer behaviour and life styles are inevitable – that, for instance, will cover such matters as the energy consumption of cars and their use. This in turn involves a consideration of policies relating to such areas as infrastructure and housing – similar points can be made with regards to food, clothing or holidays.

The EU's authority in such matters is limited – and rightly so! Not many Europeans would be keen for Brussels to interfere so directly with such important aspects of their private lives. These difficult areas can be much more effectively debated, weighed and fine-tuned at the national level – such an approach will more effectively take into account local cultural and socio-economic issues. This, of course, doesn't exclude the possibility that especially successful elements of such policies can be broadened to the EU level at a later stage.

The EU should certainly continue to strengthen its efforts in the environmental field while seeking a better match between economic development and sustainability. But this needs to be achieved in a way which does not undermine the contribution that individual member states can and must make.