

**Policy statement on behalf of the European Commission
on the occasion of the Third Meeting of Parties to the Espoo Convention on EIA in a
Transboundary Context
Cavtat, Croatia 1-4 June 2004**

On behalf of the Commissioner for the Environment, Ms M Wallström, the European Commission delegation expresses its gratitude to the government of Croatia for hosting the Third Meeting of Parties in Cavtat.

The major achievement since MOP 2 was in agreeing a Protocol on SEA in time for signature at Kiev last year, despite at times difficult negotiations. Meeting that deadline required compromises, but the result is an instrument which has the potential to change for the better the way in which planning is undertaken. Application of the Protocol will bring advantages for democratic accountability as well as better environmental outcomes.

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Limits on resources, both financial and human, mean that now more than ever we must focus on what is essential. We should not be considering embarking on major new initiatives or putting efforts into inessentials: instead we believe that this is a time for consolidating what we have already *[done]*. Our primary task is to prepare for the coming into force of the SEA Protocol and we particularly welcome the emphasis in the work plan on improving capacity to carry out environmental assessment at a strategic level. From the Commission's point of view, Member States' compliance with EU law is clearly the first priority. But the similarities between the SEA Directive (which will be applied throughout the enlarged European Union in less than two months from now) and the SEA Protocol should help us to derive the maximum benefit from the use of finite resources. We should seek to avoid duplicating our efforts under the two Instruments and instead concentrate in our future work on complementary activities which bring real additional value. For our part, we will be glad to share the fruits of our reflections on the Directive with our Espoo partners. This will also assist in the gradual alignment of policies and practices between the EU and those of our neighbours with which we have concluded Stabilisation and Association Agreements and Partnership and Co-operation Agreements.

Despite the activity on SEA, there has been real progress under the Espoo Convention in establishing the Implementation Committee and in developing practical guidance on several aspects of the application of the Convention. In the coming years we should concentrate on applying this material to improve the way the Convention is applied.

Better implementation may not sound glamorous. But it is clear from the Review of Implementation that many Parties still have some way to go before we can be satisfied with the way the Convention is operating. The building blocks are in place. We now need to make sure they are properly used to produce high quality environmental assessments, with full and satisfactory consultation. We must also make sure that, when the Protocol comes into force, the assessments carried out under it are of high quality. Under both Instruments full and active participation by the public is a crucial guarantee not only of accountability in decision-making but also of good quality assessments. For entering into agreements is meaningless if they are not applied fully and conscientiously. This should be our priority for the coming years.