Summary of the RUBICODE Review on:

"Effectiveness and Appropriateness of Conservation Policies"

R.H.G. Jongman, G. Bela, G. Pataki, L. Scholten, Á. Mérő and C. Mertens

RUBICODE has produced an analysis of institutional structure and responsibilities in the field of biodiversity conservation policy, considering in particular the ways in which ecosystem services are included.

Current European Union and Member State Policies have a common basis in the Birds Directive and the Habitats and Species Directive. These two Directives are the focus of site and species protection in the EU, and the objectives and messages have to be translated into national actions and carried out within national institutional structures. All EU Member States have their own structure for the organisation of biodiversity policy, implementing the European Directives within national and/or regional political structures. In some Member States, NGOs play an important role in land management and policy setting, while in other Member States NGOs have a limited role.

Agriculture is crucial for European biodiversity: roughly 40% of land is agriculturally cultivated, and farmers are perhaps the most important land managers. Farming practices significantly impact all levels of biodiversity: landscape, species and genetic. Farmland that provides habitat for a diverse range of flora and fauna can be called High Nature Value (HNV) farmland; 15-25% of the European countryside can be considered HNV farmland.

The main threats to biodiversity (especially farmland biodiversity) in rural areas are land abandonment, intensification and land use change. Much farmland biodiversity depends on semi-natural grasslands. Extensive farming practices are important to prevent land receding into the succession process, but intensification is a problem in many areas. Often marginal lands with low market value are threatened by afforestation. The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) strongly influences the agricultural measures and funding in the EU Member States. All EU Member States are obliged to present the subsidy schemes of the second pillar for their country in a Rural Development Programme (RDP). The second pillar consists of four axes, of which Axis 2 concerns "improving the environment and the countryside". Payments for ecosystem services, Natura 2000 and agri-environmental measures can protect farmland biodiversity. Implementation of these measures is very varied throughout the EU. Pillar 1, the Single Farm payments, continues to receive the lion's share of the CAP budget in most countries, except countries that joined the EU since 2004.

In interviews, biodiversity conservation was understood as going beyond species or habitat conservation, covering landscape and genetic diversity as well. Interviewees stated that a very important challenge in the near future is establishing connectivity between protected and designated areas (for example connectivity of the Natura 2000 system) as well as effective management of the Natura 2000 system. Some expressed the need for adapting the traditional concept of area protection to take better account of ecosystem dynamics and other innovative approaches. There is a need for measurable and quantifiable objectives. The Service Providing Unit (SPU) concept could help in setting more quantitative targets, and in categorising systems based on their service-providing 'value'.

At a very general level, current nature conservation policies are assessed as sufficient by most interviewees. However it is hard to make "ecosystem service" ideas come to the fore, because of difficulties in conceptualising complex relationships among biodiversity, ecosystem functions and ecosystem services. When comparing effectiveness in responding to threats, there was concern about lack of action, invasive species and decline of marine systems. Political problems were thought to hamper the effectiveness of decision making and at the level of land use planning – in particular, the lack of political will, as evidenced by the limited availability of financial resources.