



EurActiv | EU News & policy debates, across languages

EN
FR
DE

[Login](#) / [Sign up](#)



A wider view: Shifting paradigms in the buildings sector

Like 2

Share 6

Tweet 23

[A⁺](#) [A](#) [A⁻](#)

— 26/06/2013 - 08:12

SPECIAL REPORT



<http://www.euractiv.com/special-report-building-way-out-crisis> / **The debate on what kinds of buildings we should live and work in is shifting, with construction experts and EU policymakers moving**

away from focusing simply on energy efficiency to a broader appreciation of sustainable buildings, taking into account their environmental, social and economic impact.

On the European policy-making level, this change in emphasis is being led by the European Commission's environment department, which is currently working on a new policy paper (Communication) on Sustainable Buildings.

Speaking at an event on 25 June during EU Sustainable Energy Week, Pavel Misiga, a head of unit at the Commission's environment division, announced that the Communication, which is still in its early stages, would focus on resource use in both residential and non-residential sectors (excluding industrial buildings and infrastructure).

It will focus on how to improve the environmental sustainability of buildings – moving beyond the current policy debates on energy efficiency – to look at embodied energy in buildings, water usage, construction materials and waste. Embodied energy takes account of all the energy required to produce a product, which helps to determine its impact on climate change.

“The objective is to reduce the environmental impacts of buildings, and we expect economic benefits for society and for the construction sector,” said Misiga.

Looking at the whole lifecycle of buildings

When it comes to emissions, which is a key EU policy priority for 2020 and beyond, the choices over which materials are used in buildings can have a major impact beyond energy efficiency. For example, an investment of €100,000 would save 75 tonnes of CO₂ over 20 years, while the same investment in low carbon concrete would save 663 tonnes of CO₂ immediately.

The difficulty facing both construction companies on the supply side and consumers on the demand side is knowing how to choose between the many technologies and materials, and what is the best choice for sustainability.

“We need knowledge and tools to decide what the right materials are to use in buildings,” affirmed Misiga.

Companies in the sustainable construction sector are also pushing for a wider perspective when it comes to the buildings of the future, and would like policymakers to take into account other issues such as the air quality in buildings, or the amount of daylight that can be harnessed. Supporters of such measures argue this would lead to better health and wellbeing for buildings' occupants, given that in OECD countries, people spend about 90% of their lives inside buildings.

“The holistic approach is gaining more and more ground. We have to look at the whole lifecycle [of buildings]”, Lone Feifer, programme director for Sustainable Living in Buildings at Velux, the roof window manufacturer, told EurActiv.

Velux argues that looking only at energy-efficiency at the expense of other approaches in sustainable buildings is “one-sided”.

Feifer said that within the last one to two years there has been more interest in looking at buildings from a whole lifecycle perspective. “We feel as manufacturers that we get asked about that a lot more”, said Feifer, who adds that “some very-forward looking public procurement agencies” are already taking such factors into account when it comes to buildings, as are some environmental impact assessments of buildings.

Feifer would like to see this perspective incorporated into the CEN/TC 350, a common European standard for sustainable construction works.

Mixed reactions to Commission plans

Misiga told EurActiv that the public consultation on the new communication on sustainable buildings would be launched on 1 July, and that he hoped it would be ready by the first quarter of 2014. He conceded that so far, reaction from industry to this new initiative was mixed:

“It’s mixed, because part of the industry says [it is] another initiative [they will] have to comply with it. It will involve costs and changes, so we certainly don’t need it now. There are other stakeholders who are very positive. We have support from member states and from investors,” said Misiga, who formerly worked with the environment minister of his native Slovakia.

He argued that it was important to develop a standard framework for sustainable buildings to reduce risks for investors, who see the overall move to sustainability in buildings but risk investing in a product now that nobody wants in 20 years’ time.

EuroACE, the European Alliance of Companies for Energy Efficiency in Buildings, agrees that investors would benefit from a more holistic approach towards sustainable buildings across the EU.

“I do support the DG Environment view that a holistic approach to buildings should be taken. The building is a system of products and components put together: the design and conception of the building, its orientation, how it is constructed, and how the components and the equipment in the building work together”, Adrian Joyce, secretary-general at EuroACE, told EurActiv.

Joyce echoed industry sentiment that the current glut of different EU regulations was strangling innovation in the construction sector.

"Many regulations work against each other...the construction sector is among the most highly regulated in Europe, and our members suffer from the high number of different regulations at the national and European level," said Joyce.

"When a new product comes to market, they have to go through a number of different certification schemes, that's a big cost. Many good products are not reaching certain markets. It would be much better to have a European system that somehow took account of different climatic zones, but that it was one approach, and only one fee [to be paid by manufacturers]," he said.

TIMELINE:

- **First quarter of 2014:** European Commission (DG Environment) expected to publish new policy paper (Communication) on Sustainable Buildings.

EXTERNAL LINKS:**Commission**

- European Sustainable Energy Week 2013: [Website \(http://eusew.eu/\)](http://eusew.eu/)

Selwa Calderbank (<http://www.euractiv.com/bylines/selwa-calderbank>)

Sections:

[BUILDING THE WAY OUT OF THE CRISIS \(HTTP://WWW.EURACTIV.COM/SECTIONS/BUILDING-WAY-OUT-CRISIS\)](http://www.euractiv.com/sections/building-way-out-crisis)

[ENERGY \(HTTP://WWW.EURACTIV.COM/SECTIONS/ENERGY\)](http://www.euractiv.com/sections/energy)

[SUSTAINABLE DEV. \(HTTP://WWW.EURACTIV.COM/SECTIONS/SUSTAINABLE-DEV\)](http://www.euractiv.com/sections/sustainable-dev)

Topics: [GREEN BUILDINGS \(HTTP://WWW.EURACTIV.COM/TOPICS/GREEN-BUILDINGS\)](http://www.euractiv.com/topics/green-buildings)