

Status quo of the decoupling debate in the European Commission: an overview

*Elke Pirgmaier, UK Sustainable Development Commission
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1. Introduction

Decoupling is a core strategy at the European level to reconcile environmental protection and continued economic growth. In order to achieve the overarching goal of absolute decoupling, a mix of policy instruments is suggested. This paper intends to give an overview of these EU policies. Furthermore, it displays the main findings of interviews with European Commission officials regarding the question how decoupling is being dealt with in the Commission.

2. European policies that tackle decoupling

Lisbon Strategy

Handled by: Secretariat General
Timeframe: 2000-2010

In 2000, the heads of the then 15 Member States agreed at the Lisbon European Council upon a new strategic goal for the EU, viz. to become “the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world” (European Council, 2000). One year later, in June 2001, the Gothenburg European Council complemented the initial goals of sustainable economic growth, more and better jobs, and greater social cohesion with an environmental pillar (see EU SDS). This environmental pillar recognises the need to decouple economic growth from the use of natural resources. Due to a disappointing growth performance in the strategy’s first half, the European Council and the Commission decided to re-focus the Lisbon agenda on growth and jobs in 2005. The political priorities of the Lisbon strategy were translated into a list of 24 Integrated Guidelines. Only one of them, viz. Guideline 11, deals with the environment: “to encourage the sustainable use of resources and strengthen the synergies between environmental protection and growth” (EC, 2005b). This means only those environmental aspects remained targeted under the Lisbon strategy that promote growth and contribute to full employment, inter alia, through the promotion of eco-efficient innovations and technologies. The business-friendly Barroso Commission was highly criticised e.g. by the Socialists, the Greens and the leftist groups in the European Parliament, for prioritising growth on the account of environmental concerns. Barroso and colleagues such as Guenther Verheugen (the head of DG Enterprise and Industry) repeatedly disclaimed criticism by stressing that SD is the overarching goal of the renewed Lisbon agenda.

For more information see http://ec.europa.eu/growthandjobs/index_en.htm

EU Sustainable Development Strategy (EU SDS)

Handled by: Secretariat General

Timeframe: 2001-continuous reviews at the beginning of each new Commission's mandate (every 5 years)

Just one year after the Lisbon process was launched, the Gothenburg European Council adopted the EU SDS in 2001 (EC, 2001a). The EU SDS quickly became known as the green counterpart of the Lisbon strategy. It provides a long-term vision for the EU and should represent the umbrella for the shorter term and more focussed Lisbon strategy. Following the European Commission's proposal, the European Council stresses the importance for decoupling from two angles: the need to decouple economic growth from resource use and to bring about a significant decoupling of transport growth and GDP growth (European Council, 2001). After the strategy's first revision in 2006, sustainable consumption and production was additionally mentioned as an approach for addressing decoupling economic growth from environmental degradation. The revised 2006 EU SDS, however, does no longer explicitly mention the word "decoupling" in the context of managing natural resources (European Council, 2006).

For more information see http://ec.europa.eu/sustainable/welcome/index_en.htm

The Cardiff process

This is the name of the process launched at the European Council in Cardiff in 1998. It requires nine different Council formations to integrate environmental considerations into their activities, among them key sectors from the decoupling perspective, such as energy, transport and industry (Giljum et al, 2005; EC, 2004). The horizontal approach of integrating the environment into all EU policies not only triggered the elaboration of a comprehensive strategy for the EU, viz. the EU SDS, but also sectoral strategies such as the Transport White Paper (see below). The Commission points out that the mid-term review of the EU SDS and of the Lisbon strategy offer opportunities to examine how environmental integration and economic growth can be mutually supportive (EC, 2004). Giljum et al (2005: 36) however argue that no generally accepted definition of environmental integration has been developed so far which leads to sectoral strategies that vary considerable and that miss clear and quantifiable targets and timetables.

6th Environment Action Programme (EAP)

Handled by: DG Environment

Timeframe: 2002-2012

The 6th EAP forms the environmental dimension of the EU SDS. It was proposed by the European Commission and adopted by the Council and the Parliament under the co-decision procedure. The EAP is meant to guide EU environmental policy-making up to 2012, focussing on four key environmental priorities: climate change; nature and biodiversity; environment and health and quality of life; natural resources and wastes. An overall target of the EAP is to achieve a decoupling between environmental pressures and economic growth (European Parliament and Council, 2002). In order to implement and concretize the outlined objectives, the EAP calls for

the development of seven Thematic Strategies, among them two that are especially relevant for decoupling: the Thematic Strategy on the Sustainable Use of Natural Resources and the Thematic Strategy on the Recycling and Prevention of Waste (see below). European institutions earned harsh criticism for the 6th EAP, due to the lack of ambition, the absence of concrete targets and timetables, and significant delays in implementing the objectives (EEB, 2006). A report from the Institute for European Environmental Policy for the EEB concludes that most objectives of the EAP will not be met and that environmental policy has been “downgraded” under the influence of the Lisbon agenda (Pallemaerts et al, 2006).

For more information see <http://ec.europa.eu/environment/newprg/index.htm>

Summing up it can be said that decoupling economic growth from its negative environmental impacts is only vaguely mentioned in these documents, mostly as overarching goal neither specifying measures nor concrete targets. They build the overall framework and represent broad guidelines for the coming years. The strategies and processes explained above provide the umbrella and reference for the following, more focussed initiatives:

Thematic strategy for the sustainable use of natural resources (Resource strategy)

Handled by: DG Environment

Timeframe: 2005-2030

Together with the Transport White Paper, the Resource strategy is the most mentioned initiative as regards the decoupling debate in the European Commission. The strategy’s overall objective is to reduce environmental impacts associated with resource use in a growing economy: “Considering that the driver of resource use in Europe is economic growth, while at the same time economic growth is a major EU policy objective, the only way to achieve a reduction of environmental impacts is to de-link or decouple resource use and associated environmental impacts from its driver: economic growth” (EC, 2005c: 16). In order to achieve decoupling, a life-cycle approach is adopted, this means that environmental impacts should be examined at each stage in the life cycle of a resource. The Resource strategy puts particular emphasis on

- improving the knowledge base of European resource use, its negative environmental impact and significance in the EU and globally through the creation of a **Data Center**. Run by the Commission and coordinated by the Statistical Office of the European Communities (Eurostat), the Data Centre gathers data on natural resource use during each stage of a product's life-cycle. It will serve as a decision-making tool to support the overall strategy. Eurostat officials explained that the Data Centre will be in place in two years time.
- developing **indicators**. By the end of 2008 the EC plans to develop 1) indicators to measure progress in efficiency and productivity in the use of natural resources, including energy; 2) resource-specific indicators to evaluate how negative environmental impacts have been decoupled from resource use,

and 3) an overall indicator to measure progress in reducing the ecological stress of resource use by the EU (eco-efficiency indicator).

The Resource strategy does not set quantitative targets for resource efficiency and the diminished use of resources as prescribed by the 6th EAP because the Commission thinks it is impossible to do so with the current stage of knowledge and indicators (EC, 2005c: 6). Furthermore, the Commission does not seek to restrict the use of materials or energy as such. The resource strategy only seeks to “challenge business to further develop its leadership in the eco-efficient use of natural resources” (EC, 2005c).

For more information see <http://ec.europa.eu/environment/natres>

Thematic strategy on Prevention and recycling of waste (Waste strategy)

Handled by: DG Environment

Timeframe: 2005-2015

The Resource strategy described in the paragraph above provides the conceptual framework and scientific foundation for the so-called Waste strategy. The overall aim of this strategy is to transform the EU in a recycling society. The European Commission points out that “preventing waste generation and promoting recycling and recovery of waste will increase the resource efficiency of the European economy and reduce the negative environmental impact of use of natural resources. This will contribute to maintaining the resource base, essential for sustained economic growth” (EC, 2005d: 6). Actions of the Waste strategy include the modernisation of the existing legal framework, i.e. by introducing life-cycle analysis in policymaking and to clarify, simplify and streamline EU waste law, i.e. by revising the EU Waste Framework Directive from 1975 (EC, 2005d).

A report from the Institute for European Environmental Policy concludes that both the Resource strategy and the Waste strategy have watered down the objectives of the 6th EAP: “the measures proposed to promote more sustainable use of natural resources are clearly insufficient to achieve the initial objective of breaking the link between economic growth and resource consumption. New measures are proposed in the field of waste prevention and management, but priority is given to recycling and recovery rather than reduction of waste production” (Pallemaerts et al, 2006).

For more information see: <http://ec.europa.eu/environment/waste/strategy.htm>

Integrated Product Policy (IPP)

Handled by: DG Environment

Timeframe: 2003-ongoing

IPP builds part of the Commission’s effort to deliver the 6th EAP. It is a strategy to encourage the greening of products at all stages of their life-cycle, from the extraction of natural resources, through their design, manufacture, assembly, marketing, distribution, sale and use to their eventual disposal as waste. The overall aim of the IPP is to reduce the environmental impact caused by products. As the entire life-cycle

of many different products is concerned, not a single instrument but a mix of policies is suggested. The 'IPP-Toolbox' includes state aid, voluntary agreements, standardisation, environmental management system (EMAS), eco-design, labelling and product declarations, greening public procurement, green technology (e.g. ETAP) and legislation in areas including waste and chemicals. IPP seeks to improve co-ordination between the different tools and to apply them in a mutually reinforcing way. The Commission makes clear that IPP is not an attempt to reduce consumption but rather to decrease the environmental impacts of increased consumption (EC, 2008).

For more information see: <http://ec.europa.eu/environment/ipp>

Transport policy: Transport White Paper

Handled by: DG Energy and Transport

Timeframe: 2001-2010

In 2001, the Commission presented a White Paper in order to address major challenges of the EU's Transport policy, such as environmental pressures and the continued rise of freight and passenger transport. Some 60 measures presented in the White Paper should form the basis for a sustainable transport policy that will ideally be in place in 30 years' time. A main objective in 2001 was to gradually break the link between economic growth and transport growth. The issue of decoupling was, however, reformulated in the 2006 mid-term review. In contrast to the 2001 communication, no reference is made to curbing transport demand, instead, the review stresses the need to disconnect mobility from its negative consequences. Although the mid-term review contains the term 'sustainable' in its title, environmental issues are obviously no top priority (EC, 2001b; EurActiv, 2008).

For more information see: http://ec.europa.eu/transport/white_paper/index_en.htm

Upcoming policies: Action Plans on Sustainable Consumption and Production (SCP) and Sustainable Industrial Policy

Handled by: DG Environment / DG Enterprise

DG Enterprise envisages a new initiative on sustainable industrial policy. In the mid-term review of the industrial policy DG Enterprise calls for actions so that the industrial policy contributes to sustainability and more sustainable consumption and production patterns. The overall aim is to turn challenges into opportunities for EU industry. Complementary, DG Environment works on the development of a comprehensive SCP policy, following the renewed EU SDS which identified SCP as a key priority. This, together with the 2007 Spring Council targets for greenhouse gas reduction, energy efficiency and increased use of renewables, led to the development of an action plan for SCP and for sustainable industrial policy. As there are obvious overlaps between both action plans, the Commission decided to merge the two drafts into one background document. This joint document was open for public consultation from July to September 2007. It identified five key challenges (EC, 2007):

- Leveraging **innovation**: stimulating the development and commercialisation of low carbon, energy and resource efficient technologies, products and services;
- Better **products**: creating a dynamic internal market for better performing products;
- Leaner and Cleaner **Production**: increasing the efficiency of EU production;
- Smarter **Consumption**: changing behaviours;
- Global markets: exploiting first mover advantages and levelling the playing field for industry worldwide.

Policy intends to focus on these challenges. New instruments might be considered, however, the main intention is to build upon existing policies and instruments, such as the Industrial Policy¹, Integrated Product Policy (IPP)², the Eco-design of Energy-Using Products (EuP)³, the Resource strategy⁴, the Waste strategy⁵, the Eco-Management and Audit Scheme (EMAS)⁶, the Environmental Technology Action Plan (ETAP)⁷, the Eco-label Scheme⁸, the Energy Policy⁹, Green Public Procurement (GPP)¹⁰ and other product legislation and labelling schemes. The action plans should describe how these policies link together, thus, providing a framework for ensuring policy coherence, avoiding overlaps, identifying gaps and policy priorities. The Commission states in the background document that “future policy will aim to achieve economic growth, whilst respecting environmental carrying capacity, find ways to minimise environmental damage and make a sustainable use of the earth’s resources” (EC, 2007: 2). This statement clearly implies a decoupling of economic growth and its negative environmental effects. The two action plans are likely to be presented together in May 2008. Furthermore, a European Topic Centre on Sustainable Consumption and Production will be run by the European Environment Agency (EEA) from 1 January 2009.

Background document: <http://ec.europa.eu/enterprise/environment/sip.pdf>

For more information on SCP see: http://ec.europa.eu/environment/eussd/escp_en.htm

For more information on sustainable industrial policy see:

http://ec.europa.eu/enterprise/environment/sip_en.htm

3. Interviewee’s comments on policies

These are the main ‘decoupling policies’ I identified in the course of research activities. Interestingly, for the interviewees (a complete list of interviewed EC officials see below) it was rather difficult to name policies that deal with decoupling economic growth from environmental degradation. They explained that decoupling is

¹ http://ec.europa.eu/enterprise/enterprise_policy/industry/index_en.htm

² <http://ec.europa.eu/environment/ipp/>

³ http://ec.europa.eu/enterprise/eco_design/index_en.htm

⁴ <http://ec.europa.eu/environment/natres/>

⁵ <http://ec.europa.eu/environment/waste/strategy.htm>

⁶ http://ec.europa.eu/environment/emas/index_en.htm

⁷ http://ec.europa.eu/environment/etap/index_en.htm

⁸ http://ec.europa.eu/environment/ecolabel/index_en.htm

⁹ http://ec.europa.eu/energy/energy_policy/documents_en.htm

¹⁰ http://ec.europa.eu/environment/gpp/index_en.htm

not identified as an explicit policy objective in many areas in the sense that having decoupling as the No1 objective. There are several policies that touch on the issue but individual policies tend to target on something more specific. An interviewee from DG Environment said that, in essence, all environmental policies deal with decoupling as they try to reduce environmental impacts associated with economic activity. “You can tackle it from different sides – from the resource side, from the waste side, from specific sectoral policies, from specific impacts, like climate change – in the hope that all these little bits will work together in reaching your overall goal of decreasing environmental impacts.” Except environmental legislation, industrial greening was mentioned as the main policy area that focuses on decoupling. An interviewee from DG Secretariat-General said that they particularly hear about decoupling from DG Transport. There, decoupling has been an issue in the transport policy but in its latest revision it has been dropped (see Transport White Paper above).

4. Examples for absolute decoupling

Air and water quality were repeatedly mentioned as the two prime examples where pollution could be decoupled from economic growth in absolute terms. For most of the main pollutants the trends are dammed (e.g. air pollution caused by SO_x and NO_x). According to the interviewees, this success is mainly due to two reasons: 1) legislation in those areas has a long history and is therefore quite advanced (e.g. there is a bigger set of measures in place) and because 2) technical solutions were available relatively easily. Air legislation is at the table at the moment because of a revision to the National Emission Ceiling directive that will be proposed shortly.

5. Measuring decoupling: Eurostat’s approach

Eurostat’s role in decoupling comes firstly when politicians decide to make a target and secondly when measuring towards that target. In other words, Eurostat try to advise policy-makers so that they choose the right indicators and in a second step they provide data to find out whether targets have been met. In order to allocate comparable, efficient and timely data, people at Eurostat work on the development of a system of **integrated economic and environmental accounting**, which will build the basis for a strong set of indicators that allows insights in economic and financial decisions on the environment. But this will take time.

The problem today is the poor availability of environmental data. GDP, inflation and unemployment are key indicators based on a system of national accounts which were priorities in statistics in the last 20-25 years. Therefore, they are available very quickly, often quarterly or even monthly. Environmental data are usually available with a couple of years delay. Eurostat officials believe that they can set up a system for environmental accounting similar to the one of national accounts. They say it just takes several years to make data more timely and available and in a quality that people trust. In order to set up an integrated system, Eurostat is cooperating in a “Group of four”, together with DG Environment, DG Research and the European Environment Agency (EEA).

The interviewees mentioned one big project funded by the European Commission called Exiopol (<http://www.feem-project.net/exiopol>). In this enormous project scientists from all over the world aim to make a whole set of integrated environmental and economic account system for all of Europe for one year. They are going to use all this data to make all sorts of indicators, including decoupling indicators. The project duration is March 2007-March 2010.

Regarding the question which decoupling indicators exist at the moment, I got the general answer that it is “in the making”. By the end of 2008 there will be an environmental impact indicator ready for the SCP policies. In two years time there will be a data centre on resources, data on Integrated Product Policy (IPP), on life-cycle analysis etc. What is available now is presented on the webpage <http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu>. Some of the structural indicators (Lisbon indicator set) and the SD indicators (EU SDS indicators) measure decoupling, e.g. energy intensity, energy consumption of transport, and resource productivity. For details see:

- Short list of structural indicators:
http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page?_pageid=1133,47800773,1133_47802588&_dad=portal&_schema=PORTAL
- Sustainable Development indicators:
http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page?_pageid=1998,66119021,1998_66391726&_dad=portal&_schema=PORTAL

Another interesting issue the interviewees raised is that it takes several years to convince Member States on harmonised statistics. One of the core functions of Eurostat is to make harmonised data that is Eurostat officials spend about 50 % of their time on standardisation and harmonisation. As far as I understood this means that they cannot orient themselves towards the most advanced EU countries but have to find a balance between all Member States. An interviewee touched on the issue of country differences as follows: “If all Member States were as advanced as Germany, for instance, we could deliver lots of pressures indicators – the impact indicators are much more difficult but we are working on that [...] Germany is extremely advanced, the UK is lagging a bit behind and very unwilling to engage in new areas.”

6. Key players within the Commission

Key players from the decoupling perspective are DG Environment, DG Enterprise and DG Transport and Energy. DG Enterprise has for some time been engaged in elaborating a strategy called “Greening Industry”. The driving force for DG Enterprise’s engagement in decoupling and other environmental issues was, according to the interviewees, the increasing prominence of climate change and the increasing prices for commodities and energy prices. Thus, the economic case for decoupling is based on more efficiency in the use of resources. One interviewee mentioned that interest comes at the latest then, when there is hard law (as in the case of climate change). One example for greening the industry was the establishment of a High-Level Group (HLG) to specifically examine the relationship between competitiveness, energy and the environment. Set-up in February 2006 to address a specific political need, the HLG was a place for exchanging ideas and innovations, progressing debate on issues such as climate change and the role of business, linking people and

publishing shared position papers. The group was, as every HLG, dissolved after two years. Stakeholder consultation continues anyway though.

Another question I was particularly intrigued by was whether DG Enterprise and DG Environment have the same political influence within the Commission. In Member States Environment Ministries are rather weak in comparison to Finance Ministries or Ministries of the Economy. Surprisingly, this does not seem to be the case at the European level (at least not to the same extent as in Member States). Most interviewees currently see both DGs as coequal. The climate and energy package is together with the Lisbon package the two main packages of this Commission. This means the political climate helps to give DG Environment a strong position within the Commission at the moment. In general, the relationship between DG Enterprise and DG Environment is subject to strong fluctuations, said the interviewees, depending on current issues, Commissioners, the political atmosphere, etc. The very large amount of environmental legislation that comes from the EU also indicates a strong position of DG Environment. However, one interviewee mentioned that DG Environment is in fact weaker, but lately relatively less because of climate change.

7. Governance aspects

EU environmental policy is increasingly focused on voluntary and market-based instruments and policy packages (e.g. IPP, SCP). This means, the use of soft law (strategies, action plans, programmes) is cumulatively chosen over hard law (directives and regulations). One interviewee mentioned the following reasons for this development:

- **Enlargement:** Firstly, the EU are now a Union of 27 Member States that have very different views on where to go. New Member States are more eager to develop in the traditional way and they are not as eager to accept environmental ideas, thus, it is more difficult to get legislation through the Council.
- **Weakening of the Commission:** Secondly, there is a certain weakening of the Commission. It has been stronger under the law and there is not the same vision and forward driving as there has been for some time.
- **Better regulation:** Thirdly, there has been a huge drive towards better regulation, which means not to propose too much legislation.

Another interviewee said that there is a lot of hard law in DG Environment but that it takes time to develop it. He explained that the initial process is to set out broad objectives and to come out later with more detailed measures of how to implement them. In other words, once an issue is at the political agenda, it will become more and more concrete over time. The broad Thematic Strategies of the 6th EAP, for instance, have quite a lot of legislation associated with them, in the case of the air strategy, the soil strategy etc.

The situation of climate change legislation is different. In this case hard law was enacted to guarantee the achievement of the climate change targets. Against the background of strict resource requirements, the suggestion was not to enact more hard law at lower levels but to apply soft law instruments instead. A person from DG

Enterprise said that the big challenge today is to translate the challenge of climate change targets into an advantage for businesses. “This is what sustainable industrial policy tries to do”, he said.

In the case of the Resource strategy it was rather difficult to identify the sort of legislative measures that needs to be taken, said an interviewee. One question in this context was: do you aim at reducing resources or the impact of resources and then which impacts and which resources? The EEB suggested to reduce the use of materials, but the person in charge of the Resource strategy meant that it is impossible to put this in law. He likes the idea of resource taxes¹¹, which is changing taxation from labour towards resources, but said that such an idea will never go through the Council at the moment.

Which kind of legislation is chosen also depends on how well defined and how complex an issue is. A concept like decoupling or SCP cannot be put in law, explained the interviewees. The terms are quite general and can cover almost everything which means they are not tangible enough for legislation. The interviewees agree that there will not be a future directive on SCP but directives that cover various aspects of consumption and production. Currently, the Directive on the eco-design of energy using Products (EuP)¹² is such a SCP directive.

8. Personal views: is decoupling possible?

Policies repeatedly mention that they don't attempt to reduce the level of consumption but rather to decrease the environmental impacts of increased consumption. In essence, all policies are steered towards facilitating and stimulating high economic growth. This means (to my opinion) that the underlying assumption is that decoupling is possible. I asked EC officials whether they personally think that we can decouple economic growth and environmental degradation.

Surprisingly, the range of answers differed considerably. One person said that in terms of environmental aspects we have achieved decoupling in most areas (!). Another interviewee also believes that decoupling is possible and that it has happened in many sectors but that there is still more to do because of the problem of rebound-effects. Moreover, this person thinks that the central problem is not about consuming less but the way how people consume. A typical environmental point of view would be to say: each economic activity has environmental impacts, so if there is no economic activity there are no environmental impacts. If the EU will dematerialise though, prices will fall and demand will grow in the rest of the world. All European efforts might thus be in vain. This is why EU policies focus on reducing environmental impacts rather than on decreasing consumption, said the interviewee.

Another EC official thinks that decoupling is quite a radical view compared to the traditional approach. To this persons opinion it would mean a true behaviour change: consumption patterns would have to change and there would be economic growth without any environmental impacts. According to the interviewee, certain DGs would

¹¹ Green Paper on Market based instruments:

http://ec.europa.eu/environment/enveco/green_paper.htm

¹² http://ec.europa.eu/enterprise/eco_design/index_en.htm

be fighting for it (esp. DG Environment) but other DGs, such as DG Enterprise or DG Trade, pursue policies that are not align with decoupling, in fact, they don't even believe that decoupling is desirable as such. This interviewee does not see decoupling yet in the policies, especially not if it comes to seriously doing something about it.

The next EC official thinks that decoupling is a relatively tangible concept in science that it very relevant but also very abstract, probably too abstract for EU policies. He feels that political statements have to be ambitious but also stresses the difficulty to tackle them at working levels.

One interviewed official gave an interesting input from the early beginnings of the decoupling debate. He said that decoupling has always been the ecological concept that was the closest to the economy. In fact, it is "only" a ratio that does not have a look at the actual condition of the environment. This means, even if absolute decoupling will be achieved it does not mean that they condition of the environment will improve. For example, one can stabilise emissions or even decrease them but the condition of the environment can still get worse. Decoupling does not address this issue. Ecological approaches, on the other hand, look at the condition of the environment, e.g. they try to decrease emissions until they don't cause any more damage. The positive aspect of the decoupling is, to his opinion, that it is maybe the more realistic approach, because it is oriented towards the economy and therefore a lot easier to implement. He confirmed that the positive assumption of EC policies is that decoupling is possible and that, in theory, decoupling can be achieved. The question is which kinds of goods contribute to increasing GDP growth. If, for example, people would pay a lot of money to look at an oak tree, GDP would rise. This means that moral concepts of consumers could theoretically lead to absolute decoupling. In practice however, we are far away from such a society, so his opinion.

9. Conclusions

- There is no such 'decoupling policy' but many policies that try to tackle the issue from different sides. Only the Resource strategy mentions decoupling as an explicit overall goal.
- Economic growth is omnipresent in all the documents investigated, viz. all EU policies are geared towards high GDP growth. The Commission repeatedly explains that growth is compatible with the environment, thus, eco-innovation is seen as a perfect opportunity to boost growth and competitiveness. DG Enterprise and DG Environment believe in environmental technologies as a key to achieve absolute decoupling.
- The pace of change is very slow. Except few examples where decoupling could be achieved (certain air and water emissions), there is no evidence that EU policies substantially contributed to a decoupling of economic growth and environmental degradation.
- However, the amount of environmental legislation that comes from the EU is impressive. Environment is something where everybody agrees that the EU can add value. Certain environmental issues are tackled in Member States not until they are on the European agenda. In this sense the EU can provide guidance and give inspiration for Member States.

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List of interviewees:

Thorsten Brunzema: Policy officer industrial emissions and air quality; Unit B1 – Sustainable Industrial Policy; DG Enterprise. Personal interview, 27 March 2008.

Mark Hayden: DG Economic and Financial Affairs. Personal interview, 28 March 2008.

Werner Bosmans: Policy officer Natural Resource Strategy; Unit G4 – Sustainable Production & Consumption; DG Environment. Personal interview, 28 March 2008.

Oliver Zwirner: Unit G1 – Sustainable Development and Economic Analysis; DG Environment. Personal interview, 31 March 2008.

Christine Dalby: Sustainable Development Strategy; Unit D2 – Strategic Objective Solidarity; DG General Secretary. Personal interview, 31 March 2008.

Pascal Wolff: Eurostat. Personal interview, 1 April 2008.

Peter Eveaers, Elisabeth Mollgaard and Julie L. Hass: Eurostat. Personal interview, 1 April 2008.