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Environment Scotland: Prospects for Sustainability

Edited by
Eleanor McDowell
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ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND: PROSPECTS FOR SUSTAINABILITY

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Eleanor McDowell
James McCormick

1 Environment Scotland: An Overview

ELEANOR McDOWELL and JAMES McCORMICK

The idea for *Environment Scotland: Prospects for Sustainability* came from a discussion about the need for more detailed thinking on environment policy in Scotland. A group of policy experts met in Glasgow on the eve of the devolution referendum for a two-day seminar to explore: how environment policy might change; how it ought to change; what historical experience and international comparisons have to teach us; and the limits to achieving sustainability in a small country. The focus is deliberately on only the environmental dimension of sustainable development. Our focus could just as appropriately have been on how the labour market, public health or education contribute to (or detract from) the same goals.

This collection of essays presents the findings of the seminar and subsequent thinking. It brings together academics with business practitioners and voluntary sector experts, to explore a series of short and long-term challenges facing Scotland. The book benefits from the in-depth discussion shared by the authors and others who contributed to the Glasgow seminar. But it is not written in the style of a report by a commission. It does not offer a definitive set of recommendations supported by each author, although there is considerable agreement among them on what needs to change. Reflecting the diverse backgrounds of the authors, we expect this book will appeal to a wide audience spanning environmental studies, Scottish affairs, social policy and local government studies.

Introduction

From the late 1960s to the mid-1970s, environmental issues were synonymous with apocalyptic warnings of population explosion, pollution and depletion of the earth's natural resources at an unsustainable rate. They defined what one contributor to this book describes as the 'Armageddon Now' tendency. Demands for urgent action to avoid the worst-case scenarios were published through various blueprints, conference events and the formation of environmental groups and organisations. By the late 1980s, the environment had become popularised, politicised and commodified.

'Sustainable development' has become the green narrative for the 1990s. It offers a higher quality of life while respecting the principle of justice between the generations. It was the driving force behind the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro - popularly known as the Earth Summit. Attention focused on climate change, biodiversity and forest management. Perhaps the most influential outcome was Agenda 21, promoting local involvement in planning and implementing measures towards sustainable development. 'Think local - Act global ' became the popular term for expressing the inter-connectedness of individual and community action with wider environmental objectives.

Earth Summit 2 took place five years later in New York. It reviewed the commitments made in Rio and established a series of priorities for the future. Both Earth Summit events raised public awareness and expectations. Nevertheless, commentators have called for greater political commitment on the part of national governments and voiced concern over the deepening inequalities in well-being and environmental standards between industrialised and non-industrialised countries. A five-year review of the 1995 Copenhagen World Summit for Social Development is planned for 2000. In preparation for the Third Earth Summit in 2002, poverty and the links between human and environmental degradation will be the leading concerns for governments and the unofficial groups who meet on the fringes of such events. Sustainable development has provided a focus to unite disparate interests in dialogue if not action. The challenges are more daunting than ever: that much is uncontroversial. The extent of the problems to be solved threaten to defeat even the most committed environmentalist, and obscure some of the first principles of sustainable development. Most of the problems can only be addressed by international action and are beyond the focus of a book on what can be achieved in Scotland. Some have been created by decision-makers who are elected and can expect to be held to account for their actions; others may wield more economic power without accountability being clearly located.

While there is growing interest in the implications of sustainable development in Scotland, the distinctive Scottish features of sustainability have received insufficient attention from academics, practitioners and policy-makers. This collection of essays seeks to improve on that position. Ahead of the establishment of a devolved Scottish Parliament, this book asks:

- What will be the key policy options and constraints around sustainability?
- What practical difference will devolution make?
- How will policy-making across the different tiers of government adjust to the demands of sustainability?
- What changes beyond government will be required to move beyond the rhetoric of sustainable development?

The chapters are organised into four sections. This chapter presents a summary of the key theoretical and practical issues raised in each contribution, indicating where the lines of agreement and disagreement lie. It is followed by a comprehensive review of the theoretical foundations underpinning 'sustainable development'. It is not an easy concept. Like 'partnership', 'social exclusion' and perhaps 'stakeholding,' it is difficult to define and even harder to achieve. In Chapter Two, David Silbergh traces how the concept has been expressed historically through the disciplines of economics, sociology, politics and environmental social sciences. This approach provides a useful theoretical synthesis, but it also highlights the complexity surrounding the concept. Silbergh presents thirty propositions on sustainable development. Although the achievement of sustainability is compared with the pursuit of the Holy Grail, decision-makers at all levels are not excused from making a practical contribution towards it. There may be uncertainty about the destination, but the direction should be clear. A theoretical treatment of sustainable development is not the stuff of popular politics. Once unpacked however, its constituent parts should make a great deal of sense to ordinary people. The challenge for Scottish policy-makers is to make the issues meaningful on a day-to-day basis.

Public and Political Opinion

In the second section, the authors provide a contextual map of public and political opinion. A progressive agenda for change will not reach very far if it conceived without a firm grasp of the appropriate mix of incentive and regulation. Neither green parties, politicians nor consumer movements have yet achieved a step change in how environmental sustainability is approached. Energy and commitment have not been matched by lasting achievements. More effective means of dialogue between policy-makers and the public are essential if the modest advances achieved so far are to be built upon.

Chapter Three explores the pattern of environmental beliefs and behaviour in Scotland. It reviews some of the earlier findings of British and Scottish survey research and draws on the results of a Scottish opinion survey commissioned for the *Environment Scotland* project (and published for the first time in this collection). The authors note the limitations of opinion polling as well as the advantages of clearly 'costed' questions asked on a consistent basis over time. The evidence from previous studies of Scotland's position relative to the rest of Britain is inconclusive. While some have found Scots to be a relatively paler shade of green, others have noted the particular concern about nuclear power and waste, while others still have noted that Scottish consumers are more likely than the average to engage in some forms of green behaviour.

More revealing is the pattern of attitudes and behaviour within Scotland, derived from the 1998 survey. For example, there is strong support for developing alternative energy sources even if it costs more, while opinions are evenly split on the value of extra jobs at the expense of the greenbelt. Across a series of questions, educational attainment is the most powerful variable in distinguishing between both attitudes and behaviour. The higher the level of education, the more common are green beliefs and actions, and the gap is greatest for those options which are generally less popular. Less significant differences, although still notable, emerge between socio-economic groups (skilled non-manual workers are 'more green' than those above and below them on the occupational ladder); regions (the East is ahead of the West); and among 'car rich' households. As important are the associations which do not emerge. Youngest respondents are less likely than the oldest to take part in those environmental activities specified, while there is no gender gap to speak of in terms of green behaviour.

The chapter concludes with a call to Scotland's new policy-makers to 'make the sustainable choices easier choices - in other words, more accessible and affordable'. As part of this approach, the costs of reform must be clearly located and the benefits must be apparent if public support is to be secured.

'If support for the Green Party was used to measure the strength of environmentalism, one would be forced to conclude that green politics in Scotland is essentially irrelevant.' Lynn Bennie argues in Chapter Four that such a conclusion would be mistaken. She traces why Scotland's electoral climate has proved so cool for the Green Party although not for green politics in the broader sense. The Scottish party's lack of success, even compared with the fortunes of the Greens in England, is striking. It has been 'almost completely marginalised in recent political history. This is also

contrasted with the domination of green politics by environmental pressure groups. While the Greens have played their part in local campaigning, political parties also exist to win influence through elections. In trying to be a pressure group and a party, Scottish Greens have found themselves uneasily located between the two: unable to convince voters to overcome their party attachments, but 'reluctant to associate with the more radical activities of the environment movement for fear of discouraging potential voters.' Bennie suggests this is a no-win situation, with the party neither credible enough to elect representatives nor sufficiently 'media-genic' to attract publicity.

Why has there been no breakthrough for the Green Party? The first-past-the-post voting system is without doubt a barrier to small parties whose support is low and spatially dispersed. Ireland's Green Party has won parliamentary seats on less than 3 per cent of the popular vote due to its system of proportional representation (PR). However, the Greens in England have managed to elect councillors under the same majoritarian system as in Scotland (although multi-member wards in much of England offers a modest advantage). A more convincing explanation is to be found in the degree of party competition in Scotland, where the presence of the SNP provides disaffected supporters of the other main parties with an alternative that does not exist south of the border. There is simply less political space available for the Scottish Greens to carve out a distinctive niche. The tentative formation of the independent Highland Alliance will make for even more of a squeeze.

The Greens look to PR to deliver a handful of seats in the first Parliament, but Bennie argues that electoral reform offers false hope for Scotland's Greens. Aside from the external barriers - including a regional threshold which will probably still be too high for the party to exceed - internal party factors must also be considered. 'The party's internal organisation was, for a period, nothing short of shambolic' and although it has been effective in working with other bodies on constitutional reform, it has yet to prove that it could work successfully with other *parties*. This makes sobering reading for those who wish to see a healthy green presence at Holyrood, but it also suggests that some of the necessary steps in the short-term can be taken by the party itself. Tactical resourcing and raising the profile of a small number of 'identifiable' candidates on a small number of salient issues may go against the grain, but is probably the only way of organising support in order to win any representation.

Policy Debates

The third section explores the substantive policy issues which are likely to occupy Scotland's new politicians and policy-thinkers in the early years of devolution. Is sustainable development more than old whisky in a new bottle? An immediate challenge will be posed by grassroots campaigns which tend to present politicians with difficult tradeoffs. Can the responsibility of the local authority or enterprise company to boost employment be reconciled with the interests of diverse communities? How should today's apparent advantages be judged against longer-term risks? And where local initiative goes beyond environmental protection to new forms of innovation, how can policy-makers provide the appropriate degree of support without exercising too much control?

In Chapter Five, Eleanor McDowell and Douglas Chalmers focus on the local arena to examine the nature of grassroots activity in urban Scotland. Three local initiatives are considered in order to explore the purpose and achievements behind such activity. Sustainable development is, ultimately, a challenge to the traditional model of governance (based on the assumption that policy elites based in central government have the capacity and authority to prescribe standardised solutions across all localities). It demands community participation and inter-agency partnerships in keeping with the overall philosophy of Local Agenda 21. The authors state: 'the greater the community involvement, the greater the erosion of the democratic deficit' in pursuit of development that is 'economically efficient, socially equitable and environmentally sound.' Associated concepts of quality of life and empowerment should guide thinking and action. Intermediate agencies standing at arms length from government and the private sector have a vital role to play in responding to local priorities quickly and in a more flexible manner, but local government has a particularly important contribution to make in fulfilling the objectives of LA21. Scrutiny of local authority commitment to sustainable development is likely to become sharper once the Parliament is elected. Councils will be expected to act upon their stated aim of decentralising environmental decision-making. They must also place a higher value on consensus-building across very different sectors if long-term change is to be secured.

The dilemmas around sustainable development have been played out most controversially on the territory of land-use planning and transport. The first of these will be shaped largely by negotiations between the Scottish Parliament and local government. The second is marked by the new boundary laid down by the Scotland Bill. While some powers over transport

planning will be devolved, other strategic and financial powers will remain reserved to Westminster. Despite the powerful consensus in favour of an integrated transport policy and the generally favourable reaction to the Scottish White Paper of July 1998, the objectives may continue to prove elusive in the early years of devolution.

In separate essays, David Begg (Chapter Six) and Sarah Boyack (Chapter Seven) make the same point: local government reorganisation has reduced the capacity for coordination. According to Begg, the imposition of legislation encouraging a 'go-it-alone' mentality has had 'a devastating effect' on the ability of transport planners to address issues of strategy effectively. The new Parliament will inherit a country with more cars and more miles travelled by road each year. Yet the structure planning process which should allow for greater transport coordination across local authority boundaries is essentially a voluntary mechanism. Reorganisation in urban Scotland has carved out councils which are geographically too small to implement workable transport plans on their own.

In response, Begg notes that a quasi-regional tier of decision-making is necessary and feasible. Writing in the run-up to the Government's Integrated Transport White Paper, he favours five 'Transport Partnership areas' covering the city-regions and rural areas and notes that they should be given powers to pay for their respective transport priorities using different fiscal instruments, ranging from urban road pricing (as subsequently proposed in the Scottish White Paper), non-residential car parking taxes, and a share of revenues from the petrol price escalator. Partnership areas could provide an effective forum for joint planning by local councillors, Members of the Scottish Parliament and the appropriate officers. Begg concludes that such a structure is essential to reverse the fragmentation of recent years.

One specific concern, also alluded to by Dunion in the book's concluding chapter, relates to the Parliament's tax-variation powers. With discretion limited to the basic rate of income tax, the Government appears to treat taxation as simply a revenue-raising tool rather than one means of changing incentives and behaviour. He makes a convincing case for the Parliament to have the ability to vary taxes to reflect the different social and economic geography north of the border (such as raising petrol prices more slowly in rural Scotland). While there have been recent moves to permit local authorities to levy new transport charges, the author judges the Devolution White Paper to be 'behind the times in thinking on economic and environmental issues'.

Begg is, however, optimistic about the opportunities provided by devolution to make fundamental changes to the pattern of transport funding. To make a reality of an integrated transport strategy, the model of budgeting must change. An *integrated transport fund* is proposed, pooling existing sources of public and private funding, and the revenues accruing from new transport charges shared between road users, employers and consumers. Begg proposes a significant break with political tradition by making a strong case in favour of *hypothecation* of new funds to ensure the money is invested in the manner originally intended used for the purpose intended, and by recognising the need to phase in some of the benefits of a sustainable transport policy in advance of higher costs being levied.

The post-war planning system has for decades offered a window onto the policy priorities and ideology of governments. Sarah Boyack highlights the resilience of planning, having survived the harsh climate of the Thatcher years, only to be applied in the later Conservative years in defence of homeowners' interests and, to some extent, to promote environmental protection. Experience of the planning system is usually associated with disputes over proposed development of land or changes in its use. Such conflicts attract media attention precisely because they are untypical: fewer than 2 per cent of planning applications result in appeals. In most cases, for most of the time, planning is uncontroversial. The agenda for reform is concerned instead with the speed and effectiveness of the system in dealing with applications. The lag time between drawing up plans and their adoption typically exceeds five years. By the time they are implemented, they have too often fallen out of synch with the overarching structure plan. There is also growing interest in developing a series of planning services which anticipate change rather than getting stuck in fire-fighting.

The Scottish Parliament will add legislative competence to a planning system which has enjoyed substantial administrative devolution without actually exercising much of the discretion that has been available. Devolution will result in time for more effective scrutiny and for more legislation. But like Begg, Boyack notes that the capacity of the planning system is uneven and has been fragmented: 'Transparent, accountable and long-term decision-making is likely to become progressively more difficult to achieve as the impact of local government reorganisation works its way through the system.' While a *de facto* regional tier of land-use planning has emerged or survived in parts of Scotland, there are overall fewer staff to prepare, implement and monitor planning, at the same time as an increased need for liaison between the same sectors in different localities. Boyack

identifies the need for a tier of decision-making between Holyrood and local government as one of the early issues for the Parliament to take a view on.

A more rigorous approach to monitoring trends might improve the system's ability to anticipate change rather than respond after the event. The author proposes an index composed of *State of the Environment* Indicators. While this would provide a national focus on sustainable development, it should also be able to accommodate the different planning priorities *within* rural Scotland as well as between remote, suburban and central city locations.

Boyack identifies two drivers for change in planning, in addition to the regional question. One is the development of fiscal instruments to shape where we live and how we travel to work, including levies on greenfield development and financial incentives for brownfield development (for affordable housing and to locate new sources of employment closer to where people do or could live). The second is the involvement of ordinary members of the public. Boyack expects devolution to give rise to a higher profile politics of planning, where urban/rural disputes may become more common. More effective conflict resolution processes should be developed in planning inquiries to encourage a problem-solving approach 'rather than stand-offs between opposing interests'.

One striking feature of the 1997 devolution referendum was the much higher levels of voting in favour in rural authorities than twenty years earlier. The Parliament is expected to take early action to strengthen the position of Scotland's rural communities. Andrew Raven explores the significance of agriculture and forestry in Chapter Eight, offering an explanation of the key influences shaping rural land-use patterns now and in the future. The chapter presents an *Audit* of the current situation, a *Vision* of what might change in the future, and a plan of *Action* to get there.

In mapping contemporary trends, Raven highlights the importance of state involvement in the Scottish rural economy. Government is the key player through the Common Agricultural Policy (which provides three pounds out of every four in agricultural subsidies) and forestry grants for example. Scottish farming is a business worth £1.8 billion; it employs almost 70,000 people directly, becoming more capital intensive while continuing to shed labour; Scottish farms are nearly ten times as large as the EU average; and four out of five pounds of financial support goes to just one in five farmers, helping to concentrate ownership of more agricultural land in fewer hands. Farming has also become a more complex and bureaucratic business: 'every field now has a unique map code number, every cow its own passport' due to EU requirements. One counter-trend is crofting which

remains labour intensive and maintains a living and working environment in some of Europe's least productive agricultural lands. Despite rising productivity, not least in forestry where output has more than doubled in the last twenty years, all is not well in rural Scotland. Raven states that 'biodiversity has continued its remorseless decline'. Conservation has relied for too long on weak instruments on a voluntary basis. Incentives for sustainable land management must be more widely available and actively promoted.

An integral part of the sustainable vision is to overcome the sectoralism in rural affairs. Specialisation has been bought at the expense of capacity to see the big picture. The inter-departmental Committee for Rural Affairs creates a starting point for something closer to holistic government in rural Scotland. Its deliberations and to a greater extent those of the Parliament should be guided by a search for the greatest public benefit in the long-term. The plan of action should include a long-term reshaping of public subsidies: support for agriculture should 'mainstream' environmental priorities rather than add them on as an afterthought. Moreover, if the target of improving biodiversity is taken seriously, Raven argues that more public spending will be required. A brief but thorough code of good land use practice is essential. Without it, it will continue to prove difficult to measure improvements in the quality of land management, or draw conclusions on the balance between public and private returns. Raven offers a realistic account of the barriers and interests to be addressed. His conclusion is shared by a number of contributors: the prospects for reform are bright if the Parliament demonstrates its commitment (and ability) to act.

It is followed by a related essay on land reform by Hugh Raven (Chapter Nine). The chapter presents a clear account of the historical tensions surrounding ownership and maps out a series of options for reform. Land reform will be an early priority for the new Parliament. The body of law governing ownership and land-based employment has hardly changed through the centuries, making land reform as significant an issue in Scotland as anywhere in Europe. Raven notes that although the bulk of finance available for public interest land management will not be within the Edinburgh's control, *land tenure* will be a wholly devolved issue and provides the obvious starting point for a programme of land reform.

Hugh Raven underlines a theme running through a number of the contributions in the book: the need for more information, of a better standard, more widely accessible to the public. Two areas are identified as priorities. First, information about the pattern of land ownership is very uneven, depending on a combination of local and historical factors. A

register of all land holdings above a specified size should therefore be published 'as a minimum requirement'. Second, Raven calls for an end to the obsession with secrecy around the distribution of government subsidies for land. Those who receive public money to manage land should be required to justify how it is used. There is no case for withholding such information on the spurious grounds of commercial confidentiality.

As part of a strategic overhaul of land management, a Land Commission could be established with powers to tackle poor management and prevent land falling into mis-management in future. Clearer conditions of eligibility to purchase land would be needed. While 'carrots' for good management can raise standards, 'sticks' must also be available and used when appropriate: 'There is widespread dismay at the reluctance of public authorities to use compulsory purchase powers even where there is clear evidence of abuse'. Compulsory purchase orders, backed up by a range of ownership options, are essential components of Scottish land reform. A power is not a power without the commitment to use it wisely. Greater opportunities for tenants to take crofting estates into community ownership at low cost may prove particularly attractive in remote areas, although community ownership in itself is no guarantee of success. Long-term community interest, organisation and capacity for management must be demonstrated rather than simply assumed. The chapter concludes with a practical eight-point plan for land reform which the Parliament could begin work on immediately.

Energy policies have been closely tied to debates about economic development, fuel poverty and Scotland's position within the United Kingdom itself (at least since the early 1970s campaign declaring 'Its Scotland's Oil'). While disputes over the future ownership and the potential of one energy sector may continue, a sustainable energy policy must range more widely. Tony Gloyne and Alan Hutton trace the shift in government instruments from ownership (nationalised energy corporations) to competition, regulation and pricing policies (Chapter Ten).

After more than two decades of taking about the potential for alternative energy in Scotland, the authors argue that the time is right for cross-sectoral planning to be given a higher priority. Scotland is an energy-rich country. Like other developed economies, it relies on large inputs of non-renewable energy sources (fossil and fissile fuels). Only around 10 per cent of electricity is generated from renewables. Such a pattern of energy production is 'inherently unsustainable'. Rising levels of carbon dioxide are predicted. An alternative measure of Scotland's economic welfare suggests that more wealth, created in the ways it currently is, will not buy a higher

average quality of life. The authors argue that the transition to an energy base with a very different composition needs to be made in a relatively short time period. There will be two clear strands to a more sustainable energy policy: a larger stock of renewable energy; and greater efforts to develop the 'fifth fuel' of energy conservation.

There is no doubt that Scotland's renewable energy potential is high, both on-shore and off-shore. But the economic potential of renewable energy is less clear. Wind power could supply about half of Scotland's current electricity supply, but at uncertain cost. The authors favour the establishment of a Renewable Energy Development Agency to help stimulate growth in the relatively new environmental technologies sector. In common with other authors in this book, Gloyne and Hutton believe that a 'fundamental shift in the base of taxation away from income and towards energy and resource use is desirable,' although they are sceptical about the ability of the Scottish Parliament to make tax changes which are not shared by the rest of Britain. Understandable caution in the early years of devolution need not prevent revenue-neutral changes in the composition of the tax base being introduced, starting perhaps with a non-domestic energy tax partly replacing the fixed property tax facing businesses. Gloyne and Hutton do not make this suggestion in their chapter, although we believe it follows from their analysis.

Greater energy conservation will offer Scotland significant returns. Improvements in the energy efficiency of the housing stock should be a high priority. The Parliament could set a target for Scottish housing to be cheaper to heat and warmer (approaching standards achieved in Sweden despite its harsher winter climate) by the end of its first term.

The focus of regulation in the energy utilities has been on reducing end-user energy prices as the main measure of benefit. As market liberalisation proceeds, the case for better regulation becomes more compelling not less so. The authors argue that consumer energy costs should be reduced by energy efficiency (and thus less need to burn fuel) than through the artificial reduction of unit prices. Gloyne and Hutton argue that: 'This represents an impediment to the development of a sustainable energy strategy for Scotland. There appears to be nothing in principle that should prevent the devolution of regulatory responsibilities....We take the view that the presumptions of current regulatory practice are inadequate or inappropriate'. Even if powers to regulate energy strategy are to remain at Westminster, energy-related policies will be within the remit of the Scottish Parliament. As with transport policy, the boundary between devolved and reserved

powers around energy may in any event turn out to be moveable rather than carved in stone.

Sustainability is too complex to be secured by pulling the right policy levers at Holyrood, even if the level of coordination in government is markedly improved under devolution. New models of governance must share responsibility for sustainable development with the second and third sectors of business and voluntary/community organisations. This section of the book therefore concludes with two perspectives on the contribution of businesses to sustainable development.

Alistair Dalziel presents a concise and convincing argument in Chapter Eleven based on his business experience of environmental audit. While compliance with legislation is an integral part of practising greener business, a system of beliefs and values is also required. Green thinking and behaviour in the company cannot be tagged on as an afterthought. Practical reasons for companies pursuing a greener image include reputation and customer loyalty. Examples of good practice range from the minimisation of waste to energy conservation and environmental auditing. The inability to address such initiatives may result in financial penalties being imposed by legislation or competitive pressures being imposed by more successful and enlightened companies (whose customers may 'select against' those which fail to comply). Dalziel concludes that adopting greener business methods can enhance a company's effectiveness: 'good environmental management means good business.'

Continuing the theme of business environment strategies in Chapter Twelve, Peter Strachan takes the view that 'command and control' legislation has traditionally been considered one of the most effective ways to improve environment performance standards in companies. This approach has been succeeded by a more managerial model. Environmental Management Systems (EMS) are gaining increasing interest in government and industry-led bodies. The author suggests that participants in EMS have to 'fundamentally rethink their core business activities in order to make them more consistent with the macro goals of sustainable development.' A qualitative analysis based on a survey of all British organisations participating in EMS identifies some implementation problems (or 'hotspots'). Strachan concludes with a series of practical recommendations for the Scottish Parliament to consider, with a view to raising awareness and promoting wider implementation of EMS.