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Joint ANEC/ECOS position paper on CEN EHD – New strategy

Summary

Recent discussions within CEN regarding a further reform of the Environmental Helpdesk (EHD) show that some wrong lessons appear to have been learnt from the criticisms expressed in the past by various stakeholders on the quality of its performance. Instead of focusing on an improved quantitative and qualitative output, the intention now seems to be to, more or less, drop the screening of draft standards and the elaboration of proposals for the incorporation of environmental aspects in standards. The intention seems to be to convert the EHD into a toolbox provider to "enable the technical bodies to identify and address environmental aspects themselves". This may be seen as a kind of subordination of the activities of the EHD vis-à-vis business interests, and as giving up on pushing for a high level of environmental protection (by providing independent external expertise going beyond business approaches). A "greening" of standards is unfortunately unlikely to occur if the currently suggested approach is followed. ANEC and ECOS therefore call for the new EHD concept to be developed taking into account the views of all stakeholders and the advice by SABE. In our view, the main elements of a reasonable EHD concept should include:

- Provision of substantive output by making use of external expertise.
- Broadening the scope of EHD statements from individual enquiry drafts to existing standards, families of standards and horizontal issues relevant for a range of products.
- Involving all stakeholders and national initiatives in the planning and execution of the EHD work, e.g. priority setting, selection of standards or environmental subjects.
- Bringing together NGOs and environmental experts from the non-business field, with the experts from Technical Committees (TCs).

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- Strengthening the standardisation rules by making the consideration of environmental expertise provided more obligatory.

In our view, a discussion on a concept for a future EHD should begin without further delay by creating a special group for this, or by allocating this task to an existing one such as the ENIS Quality Team, as proposed by SABE. Otherwise full support by key stakeholders, such as ANEC and ECOS, can no longer be guaranteed.

Background

The Environmental Helpdesk of the European standardisation institution CEN was established in September 1999. Its major purpose was to review draft standards with respect to their environmental implications and to submit proposals to the relevant Technical Committees and Working Groups (WGs). In addition, it was intended that the EHD would, upon request, assist standardisation groups in addressing environmental concerns. This was subject to criticism from the NGO side (e.g. ANEC/EEB position paper on CEN Environmental Helpdesk, 2002; ANEC research project “Review of the output from the CEN Environmental Helpdesk”, 2004) because of a perceived lack of effectiveness. Despite efforts to improve the working methods, things did not seem to improve and, partly even worsened as a result of e.g. many staff changes. In the view of ANEC and ECOS, the key problems were not sufficiently tackled and, therefore, were not solved. Meanwhile, the European Commission has also concluded that changes are needed.

Alternative approach for the EHD

At the November 2005 meeting of SABE the insufficient functioning of the EHD was discussed and a need for change was perceived by several parties, including the Commission. As a result the following resolution was taken:

“SABE adopts the opinion expressed by ENIS that a review of the operational procedures of the EHD is required. It is noted that this view is shared by the Commission. CMC is asked to provide the ENIS Team TF Quality Control within 2 weeks and before the end of January 2006 by ENIS a document containing an analysis of current problems and suggestions for improvement of the functioning of the EHD, including the incorporation of EHD comments by TCs. Subsequently, ENIS is asked to discuss this document, with close involvement from the EHD, and to provide a proposal to the next SABE meeting”.



Following this, and without prior consultation of the ENIS Team, the CEN MC proceeded to present a paper to the BT members, which they approved (BT N 7516 CEN Environmental Helpdesk – Proposal for a new strategy). The outlined approach contained some interesting ideas which could be further developed. However, the paper was neither sufficiently clear, nor did it seem to be sufficient, in itself, to solve the problems previously encountered. It is understood that the focus is intended to be shifted from reviews of individual draft standards to the provision of a sort of a toolbox involving an LCA-based issue identification step, prioritisation and, finally, selection of individual standards to be reviewed. It was also proposed to hold a “Discovery workshop” for (selected) TCs to identify the main environmental issues, followed by several procedural steps resulting in tools (database, guides, etc.) to enable, finally, the development of product-specific requirements. Additional documents have been provided later regarding the selection of TCs for the workshop and a draft version of a framework document.

Analysis of the alternative approach

The procedure, as advised by SABE (concept development in the ENIS Quality TF followed by subsequent discussion in the whole ENIS Team and approval by SABE), has been disregarded by the CEN BT. It appears that the implementation phase has started directly without the intended discussion of the approach in the fora mentioned above. ANEC and ECOS strongly regret this change in procedure as it was our understanding that the document presented at the BT meeting was just a starting point in the discussion. As such, it was even welcomed by ANEC and ECOS, while at the same time we recalled the SABE resolution.

The approach aims at institutionalising a procedure which – in principle – the TCs were expected to apply using the existing guides and tools contained in the BOSS system (although unfortunately this has rarely happened in practice). However, after closer inspection, the new EHD system appears merely as a more sophisticated version of the old recommended procedure, intended to complement the EHD activities using more elaborated tools.

From our point of view the suggested approach is not convincing and it appears that some mistaken conclusions may have been drawn from previous comments. In order to clarify the ANEC/ECOS position, our main recommendations are reiterated below:

1. Discontinuing the provision of comments should not be seen as the answer to the lack of quality of the past EHD comments and would, rather, constitute a step backwards. The poor quality comments which the EHD delivered in the past were a result of a lack

of expertise at the disposal of the EHD. This should be changed by making use of external expertise, rather than by ceasing to make the comments altogether.

2. Whether and how TCs responded to the EHD comments has been entirely voluntary in the past. This should be addressed by calling for changed rules and stricter obligations for TCs, rather than (better) toolboxes.
3. The focus on (many, and often irrelevant) individual enquiry drafts was indeed insufficient, but the conclusion from this would be to broaden the scope of the EHD comments to include documents from earlier stages of the standards' development and final standards, as well as issues not yet on any work programme (initiation of new work). In addition, the EHD could deal with issues of horizontal nature (standards families of similar products, or horizontal issues such as chemicals in consumer products).
4. Typically, the EHD provided only written comments and was usually not present at, or in permanent contact with, TCs. Thus, meeting attendance and providing assistance on a more continuous basis would be crucial in the future.
5. The EHD worked in relative isolation, without sufficient contacts with stakeholder organisations or national contact points dealing with similar issues. ANEC and ECOS therefore call for continuous involvement of stakeholders in the daily work of the EHD, e.g. by way of a multi-stakeholder panel assisting the EHD. The purpose would be to assist in priority setting, to identify important issues and the potential solutions.
6. The non-coverage or inadequate coverage of environmental issues by TCs has mainly to do with the industry domination of most product TCs. Consequently, one of the main strategies of a meaningful EHD should be to facilitate a fruitful dialogue between NGOs / non-business environmental experts and TCs.

Conclusion

In our view, the alternative concept, which still remains somewhat unclear, constitutes in many ways a step backwards. It certainly has its merits as an awareness-raising and outreach activity for TCs. As such, the work carried out by the EHD Programme Manager has been very useful. However, to reduce the EHD to a TC instrument would not lead to a significant greening of standards, and this is especially the case if one expects the incorporation of some substantive normative requirements into standards. In the worst case-scenario, the EHD might be (mis)used as



an alibi for poor approaches, suggesting that the adopted measures are “EHD-approved”. In order to ensure that the EHD takes a step forward, ANEC and ECOS believe that the EHD concept should be developed including all stakeholders, not just TCs, and that this approach should be adopted from the beginning.

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