

Increased involvement of the organised public in decision making

The case

The Black Sea NGO Network (BSNN) and the Burgas Association of Ecological and Rural Tourism (BAEST) recently finalised work on a project entitled 'Public Support for the Sustainable Management of the Natura 2000 Sites along the Black Sea Coast', funded by the EEA Financial Mechanism. After careful analysis of the situation in the country the experts of the organisations identified a significant general issue to be addressed by the project, namely the insufficient public support for the protection of biological diversity and the introduction of the Natura 2000 sites along the Bulgarian Black Sea coast in combination with inadequate capacity of civil society to influence the public sector toward proper use of the principles of sustainable development in the process of biodiversity protection.

Those problems were particularly obvious against the background of a mighty lobbyist campaign against Natura 2000, which shaped negative attitudes towards it in the whole society. Even the environmental NGO community and concerned representatives of the media and the authorities were not sufficiently acquainted with the network concept, its aims and the strategy of its enforcement; the availability of reference materials was limited and there



was almost no significant hands-on expertise in intersectoral exchange and dialogue on issues of the environment and Natura 2000 in particular.

The change process

The perceived problems and needs helped identify the project target group including representatives of NGOs, media, independent experts, as well as civil servants from local authorities and government agencies with functions related to Natura 2000, such as environment tourism, energy production, agriculture, forestry etc., as well as representatives of the local communities and businesses.

The project goal was to provide public support to the protection of biodiversity in Natura 2000 sites along the Bulgarian Black Sea coast through strengthening the capacity of civil society to influence the work of the public sector to implement sustainable solutions for environmental management, partly using the experience of a Norwegian expert Mr Lars Soeftestad of CBNRM Net.

The specific objectives were: to improve the knowledge about biodiversity and the access to reference materials about Natura 2000 and the process of its enforcement; to develop the skills and practical experience of civil society organizations and media to influence society and the public sector in connection with the introduction of Natura 2000 legislation; and to improve the efficiency of cooperation and help establish effective partnerships and dialogue on sustainable solutions about Natura 2000 places between regional actors from the civil society sector and the authorities and businesses with involvement of the Norwegian expert.

The project has achieved its objectives by implementing informational, educational, campaigning and planning activities, associated with protection of biodiversity and the enforcement of Natura 2000 along the Black Sea coast. They are described at the dedicated website natura.bsnn.org



For the purposes of this review the project expert team singled out two of them: the holding of a campaign against fragmentation of the coastal Natura 2000 sites and the preparation of concerned stakeholders in the region of the Bosna Site of Community Importance within the Natura 2000 network, for planning the site management and the production of a draft management plan.

The BSNN was involved in working with journalists and experts on collecting information and providing input for the production of articles on Natura 2000 and activities in the coastal areas and wetlands. Most essential were the efforts to reveal to the public how development and construction destroyed habitats and made impossible the proper establishment of the network of sites designated for conservation purposes. To obtain material for the publications the organization used the instruments of access to information. Journalists from the local media were most closely involved in the dissemination of information.

The process of establishment of the Natura 2000 network on national level was monitored closely. The environment ministry issued some draft orders for the establishment of sites of community importance. The project team took the opportunity under Art. 12, item 5 of the Law on Biodiversity, to address the minister and suggest improvement in the draft order. The suggestions concerned activities and measures on the territory of the designated sites. Their purpose was to suggest a stricter regime and prevent fragmentation by giving away land for construction and industrial project (mostly wind generators). A lot of problems related to the Natura 2000 sites were associated with the preparation of the general land use plan of Varna and the adjoining areas. The spatial planning process was far from transparent. Public participation was either given a short shrift or neglected. Lots of complaints were filed as the very procedure for informing and consulting the public was not performed according to the requirements of the law. The organization put a lot of efforts in campaigning for

better public involvement and voicing the concerns of experts over problems in the spatial plan.

The partner NGO from Burgas, BAEST conducted awareness activities about Natura 2000 and the future planning process for the designated sites. The experts focused their attention on the Bosna site of community importance, a wooded area on the southern coast designated under the EU Habitats' Directive. First the project team made a plan for educating the independent NGO experts and the local administrations about Natura 2000 and the future planning process related to the management of the sites. The next step was to review in a realistic way the main stakeholders in the area and further from the site and to designate those likely to be most actively involved in the planning process. The NGO activists visited all villages with lands in the Bosna site. Apart from those the team involved other important stakeholders in the communication: local authorities, the state forestry, environmental agencies and water companies, owners of the two reservoirs in the vicinity of the site, some businesses, local community leaders, teachers etc.

Informing the public about the future planning process and its purpose was done in good time. An analysis of stakeholders on all levels was performed. The stakeholders were interviewed about their wishes, expectations and attitudes towards the future management plan for the Bosna site. A good number of them were positive that they would like to be involved in its preparation. A draft was



produced by the project experts and along with their analysis of stakeholders it can be utilized by the experts of the environment ministry in the future. It is important that the local communities and various stakeholders were informed of the plan, its purpose and future implementation in an open and transparent way, with maximum involvement of people who actually lived on the territory of the Bosna site or near it. The bottom-up planning approach, the integration of the wishes and concerns of the public in it, the recognition of local interests and the attempt to find solutions satisfying a maximum number of stakeholders were essential project achievements. The local people set up an association named after the Natura 2000 site in order to take part in the planning and development process in the future. The association will hopefully serve as an instrument for securing of funding for sustainable development on the territory of the site.

The project team continues the process of monitoring the designation of the Natura 2000 network and informing the public about the process.

The outcome

The gradual process of recognition of the significance of nature protection, conservation and biodiversity protection is taking firm root in the public attitudes. Parallel to it goes the process of strengthening of civil society and consolidation of

its influence on the public sector, especially on decisions related to the environment. The public attitude and media pressure in particular begin to exercise a positive influence on the work of administrations. However the pressure and the monitoring on the work of the public sector have to be ongoing to achieve lasting results.

Lessons learned

The project expert team is of the opinion that active citizenship and increased involvement of the organized public, represented by NGOs and citizen groups, in decision making on local and national level are most essential for fostering democratic changes in society. Naturally both partners have been most closely involved in decision-making and publicity issues in the environmental sphere and the enforcement of environmental legislation and watching the planning process, especially ICZM in the coastal area.

We single out the development of cross-sectoral partnerships with governmental organizations as particularly challenging and difficult to achieve under the current conditions in Bulgaria. The authorities are not sufficiently transparent, especially in big cities and on national level. Independent organizations, representing the public interest, are becoming fewer. Organizations registered as non-profit are often associated with authorities, local and national. Unfortunately working too close with the governments and their agencies is becoming increasingly familiar in the environmental NGO sector and the supporting scientific sector. The distance between NGOs and governments allowing a fair and critical look at the work of the public sector is missing very often. The cross sectoral partnerships can be more beneficial to the public interest if the government sector develops its own capacity and performs the obligations typical for the government and assumes the responsibility for them.

