

The Swiss Development Cooperation (SDC) and Regional Environmental Center Project *"Transboundary Cooperation through the Management of Shared Natural Resources" 2000 - 2008*

Short project summary and future perspectives

In 2000 SDC has launched three transboundary projects involving 6 countries, aimed at establishing and restoring the dialogue across political borders in the Balkan Peninsula. The projects focused on the joint cross-border management of a common territory and shared natural resources, which proved to be a very fertile ground for dialogue promotion and a very good entry point for this peace-building process in a difficult post-war situation.

REC was chosen as the executive and implementing agency, since at that time and still today, it represents an international organization with a well-established and operational network throughout the Balkans with a highly professional background and know-how on environmental issues.

Three representative transboundary sites with important ecological qualities, different management regimes, threats and protection status were identified: Shkodra Lake / Skadar Lake between Albania and Montenegro, the Neretva Delta corresponding to the lower part of the Neretva River between Bosnia Herzegovina and Croatia and the mountain ridge of West Stara Planina between Bulgaria and Serbia. For each site and on each side of the borders a REC site-coordination-office was established.

After 8 years this important project has now been closed in February 2009. The most important results is the foundation of independent, legally registered organizations in form of NGOs, which are the continuation of the already well established Transboundary Collaboration Forums on each side of the border for all three sites. Those Forums first started as informal platforms, initiating regular contacts, meetings, working groups and first small cross-border projects. Gradually - with the continuous effort of the site-coordinators, who played a crucial role in this process and who are to a large extent responsible for the success of the project - the Forums gained the position and recognition of permanent structures. Converting them into independent organizations appears therefore as a logical final outcome of this process. In fact the entire project has to be considered more as a process, than a classical project.

Besides the Forums a large spectrum of other results have been achieved such as the publication of numerous bibliographies and books on the values of the natural resources, the production of promotion material like calendars and brochures, or the performance of baseline studies, capacity building workshops, technical assistance to communities or nature park authorities and small grant programmes maps just to name some examples. A comprehensive summary report including a review of the lessons learned has been established by REC in May 2007¹. A shorter report including a leaflet on the benefits and lessons learned has been issued by SDC at the end of 2008².

One of the conclusions is, that natural resource management is a door opener for reestablishing the so important cross-border collaboration of the various stakeholders. However, it is by itself not a sufficient contribution for the local and regional development. As a consequence the newly established Forum organizations have extended their scope and range of activities. According their statutes and objectives they now combine natural resource management much more with important economic and social issues for communal and regional development such as the promotion of eco-tourism, waste and water management, agriculture, land management or good governance and civil society representation.

¹ Trans-Boundary Cooperation Through the Management of Shared Natural Resources - Experiences and lessons from six years of work in three pilot areas: Neretva Delta, Skadar/Shkogra Lake and West Stara Planina, REC, May 2007, ISBN 978-963-9638-16-7

² Benefits from Cross-border Management of Natural Resources - Experiences and lessons learned from the SDC Balkan Transboundary Projects 2000-2008, SDC Report, November 2008

Although the new Forum organizations origin from a long-lasting dialogues process, they are today in a difficult and delicate start-up phase. With the end of the project, they have to establish an independent and sustainable functioning in terms of financial, institutional and human resource. There is a considerable risk that those capacities cannot be built up and maintained rapidly enough, because each of the founded NGO is by itself still small and dependent on local projects and public capacities.

Therefore action and active support is needed to strengthen and further establish the Forum organizations. This would allow local and national stakeholders to profit best from the results and capitalize on the project achievements.

A solution would be to deal with natural resource management in a broader context. Economic development, good governance, income generation in particular employment and jobs for young people, education, mobility, infrastructure development, or the private sector development in general are in fact among the most vital development topics throughout the entire of Balkan region. However, for many of those regions, in particular for the often-remote transboundary zones, those key development topics cannot be separated completely from natural resource management, because the latter offer the only basis for income generation and employment.

Therefore one outstanding feature of a network of Transboundary Forum Organizations would be to take up those economic highly relevant development topics and to combine them with natural resource management. The objective would be to help creating business and employment opportunities in those transboundary areas, where natural resource management represents one, if not the only important added value, which can be utilized to the benefit of the local society and only with cross-border collaboration.

Overall this situation offers important opportunities in particular also for REC: With joining and connecting the Forums to a regional network of cross-border organizations, REC could expand their focus on the socio-economic development of transboundary areas in combination with natural resource management in transboundary areas - a highly relevant combination and a key development for many Balkan regions.

The present situation offers also to all national authorities (like e.g. the ministries and governmental services present at the REReP Regional Meeting "Towards Natura 2000 in South Eastern Europe" on 29th May 2009 in Sarajevo) very good opportunities to use of the Transboundary Forum Organizations intensively to address the numerous priorities and challenges listed in the conclusions under the title of "Potential country specific cross-border future priorities". For all those future or starting projects the Forum Organizations could provide concrete added values by supporting the cross-border coordination and collaboration process.

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