

Environmental NGO Electronic Networking in South Eastern Europe

Implementing agency in South Eastern Europe:

The Regional Environmental Center for Central and Eastern Europe

Project Manager:

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Implementing agency in Italy:

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I. KEY INDICATORS OF ACHIEVEMENT

The original purpose of the project was to:

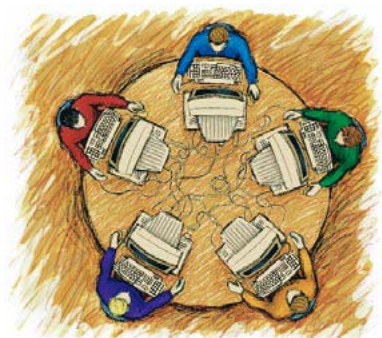
- support the establishment of networks in all countries;
- increase information exchange and cooperation between networks; and
- develop a sense of NGO ownership in order to achieve lasting results.

How did the project fulfil these basic expectations?

- In every single country there is an active and dynamically improving electronic network.
- Networks cooperate extensively through online information exchange, personal meetings and new joint projects.
- Electronic networks enjoy great support from the member NGOs, indicated by their active participation in information exchange and network development.

II. GENERAL DESCRIPTION

This project provided assistance to South Eastern European (SEE) environmental NGOs to increase their networking and cooperation. It pursued this goal by creating and supporting eight environmental NGO electronic communication networks. The ultimate objective of NGO networking was to strengthen the environmental civil societies of SEE countries and to improve transboundary cooperation and information exchange.



This project built on the results of the networking project that had been implemented under the Regional Environmental Reconstruction Programme for South Eastern Europe (REReP) by the Regional Environmental Center for Central and Eastern Europe (REC), and funded by the government of the Netherlands.

Activities were implemented in close cooperation with an Italian environmental association called L'Umana Dimora, whose main field of activities was organising activities to raise the environmental awareness of the general population. It added value to the project by organising international study and training courses in its home city of Rome.

The project was implemented along basic principles, such as transparency and democratic functioning, the principle of subsidiarity (decentralisation of activities), and the extensive involvement of the environmental NGO community in all planning, implementing, and supervising activities.

As the project progressed all information was continuously made public through the project website <www.rec.org/REC/Programs/SEE_Networking/>.

The project was structured into four sub-tasks:

- institutional strengthening (supporting network working groups and coalitions);
- improving the electronic communication skills of environmental NGOs (capacity building);
- creating and running regional environmental NGO information centres (online portals and services) and;
- providing technical assistance to participating NGOs (computer equipment).

Specific project activities were designed on the basis of the research findings and recommendations of a needs assessment conducted at the end of the preceding Dutch-funded project. The 27-page document *Networks at Work: Three Years Later* and is available on the Internet at <www.rec.org/REC/Programs/SEE_Networking/PDF/ProjectReview2003.pdf>.

Beneficiary Networks of the Project

Network name	Country or territory	Year established	Number of NGOs served
Bluelink Information Network	Bulgaria	1999	170
EkoMrezaBiH	Bosnia and Herzegovina	2003	130
EkoNet	former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia	2003	70
Grincajg and Ekologija.hr	Croatia	2004 (Ekologija.hr) 2005 (Grincajg)	150 (together)
Sharri.Net	Kosovo – Territory under UN interim administration	2002	18
StrawberryNet	Romania	1994	90
QKE	Albania	2003	60
Volvox	Serbia and Montenegro	2003	160

III. FUTURE PRIORITIES

Building on the successful implementation of the current project, beneficiary networks will continue to offer their services to their users in the future. Although the project has significantly increased the quality and extent of their work, the key future priority remains to increase the networks' financial sustainability. The table below illustrates their current sources of income, and also compares the financing portfolio of SEE networks with their Slovak and Canadian counterparts. These figures demonstrate that, in spite of significant efforts to diversify funding sources, SEE electronic networks continue to depend on foreign donor support. Considering the difficult financial situation in SEE countries, such types of support will remain a top priority in the future as well.

Current network financing sources

	QKE – Albania	EkoMrezaBiH – Bosnia and Herzegovina	Bluelink – Bulgaria	ZaMirNet – Croatia	Eko.Net – former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia	StrawberryNet – Romania	Volvox – Serbia and Montenegro	Sharri.Net – Kosovo (UNMIK)	ChangeNet – Slovakia	Web Networks – Canada
Donor funding	100%	100%	60%	80%	100%	98%	100%	100%	5%	
Indirect donor support			31%	5%		1%				
Membership fees				5%		1%			20%	100%
Fees for services			9%	10%					72%	
Advertising									2%	
Tax donation									1%	

IV. INTERNATIONAL ACTIVITIES

1. STUDY TOURS

In 2003 four study tours were organised to Rome for members of South Eastern European environmental NGO electronic networks. In every group there was one participant from each network (that is groups of eight people). In addition to the learning experience, this set-up also contributed to strengthening ties between networks from different countries. Participants were selected and delegated by the networks themselves, following a review of the input they provide to



the community. During the study tours, Italian experts presented aspects of:

- environmental NGO management;
- Internet content development;
- research on media and communications;
- fundraising; and
- communication skills (media relations, online newspapers).

2. TRAINING COURSES

Following the successful implementation of the study tours in 2003, and with the approval of the Italian Trust Fund, the REC and L'Umana Dimora agreed to organise a series of thematic training courses in 2004. The topics of the training courses were identified based on evaluating the needs of the beneficiary networks. The first workshop was attended by two people from each country (altogether 16 network representatives), the other three by one from each network (groups of eight people). Each course was led by two people: either two trainers or a trainer and a resource person.

Financial sustainability being of the most important basic areas of attention for the beneficiary networks, the **first workshop** (February 2004) covered the topic of mission-driven network business planning. The purpose was to give network representatives practical advice on how they can develop fee-based services and products to cover their costs of operation while pursuing their original environmental missions. As part of this workshop a business plan was developed for each network. Workshop participants included the networks' executive directors or strategic coordinators.



As SEE electronic networks regularly organise local training workshops, the **second workshop** (June 2004) focused on learning facilitation skills. The focus of this training was not *what* to teach but *how*. (In general, networks deliver trainings on a wide range of topics, such as online writing skills, how to use their services, computer training seminars, etc.). Participants in this training learned practical tips on how to efficiently train others. Participants included the networks' own trainers that deliver training courses to their users.

The **third event, a training course** in October 2004, covered skills related to publishing content on the Internet and managing media relations. As over the past few years the focus of SEE networks has shifted from providing technical services to offering content (e.g. environmental news), the need for offering quality information has become greater and greater. This workshop therefore covered news writing skills, media relations and promotion/public relations. Participants in this training course included those network coordinators that are actively involved with publishing news, editing online content or are assigned with managing media relations. Like the other events, this workshop also had both theoretical and practical components.

The **fourth training course** – held in November 2004 – brought together systems managers of SEE electronic networks and focused on learning new computer technical skills. The training course covered information architecture, website planning, online campaigning/activism tools and other relevant Internet software. Significant time was devoted

to learning about ActionApplications, software used to publish news and databases on the websites of the SEE networks.

3. INTERNATIONAL OUTREACH

The project partners attended the following international events, in which they promoted the results of the project and used it for further fundraising and partner selection. Their participation in almost all of these events was co-financed by the hosts, therefore this project typically covered only the travel costs.

- Conference on European Non-profit Organisations (Brussels, L'Umana Dimora, 17 October, 2003)
- Information Society and Environment Conference (Cottbus, Germany, REC, September 14-15)
- Web of Change conference (Canada, REC and StrawberryNet, September 23-26, 2004)
- Participation at the Stockholm Challenge Final Event (Bluelink, May 8-14, 2004, Stockholm)
- APC ActionApplications camp (StrawberryNet, October 4, 2004, Cape Town, South Africa)
- Participation in Rimini Meeting 2004 (Bluelink, EkoNet, EkoMrezaBiH, QKE and StrawberryNet, August 24-27, 2004, Rimini)

4. REC HEAD OFFICE SUPPORT

Considering the international nature of the project, REC Head Office staff implemented activities relating to overall coordination and facilitation of information exchange. These tasks varied from more general (e.g. overseeing activities, providing advice, researching new funding opportunities, extending international outreach, etc.) to more specific tasks, which are listed below.



- Strategic coordination

Local activities were continuously monitored by the international secretariat. In order to catch negative trends at an early phase and guide progress, from time to time it made recommendations both to colleagues in REC country offices as well as directly to network coordinators. Typically, such interventions were made in those countries where the electronic network had a short history or it did not exist before.

- Website

The project website was updated continuously with new information as activities progressed. In 2004 altogether 35,000 page hits were registered on the site. The most active pages were: the home page (5,000 hits), activities (1,800 hits) and Italian support to the project (1,300 hits). The site has grown significantly during the implementation of the project: it includes 135 web pages and provides links to 180 PDF documents. In line with the project's principle of transparency, all relevant documents were turned into PDF documents and then mounted on the website.

- Regional mailing list

After the second regional strategic meeting in Kosovo (April 2003), which is currently under UN interim administration, a mailing list was started, connecting all individuals involved in the project (network representatives, donors, REC personnel etc.). This mailing list was

technically administered by Bluelink Information Network, Bulgaria. The REC used this list to post project updates, calls for proposals, etc.

- Thesis on network financing

In the spring of 2003 the REC hosted Austrian university student Romana Glaser. As sustainable financing is one of the most important issues for the strategic development of SEE electronic networks, she wrote her university thesis on *Outlooks for NGO Network Self-financing: Identification and Evaluation of Self-financing Methods for Non-profit Environmental NGO Electronic Networks in South Eastern Europe*. This work provided practical advice to SEE networks for improving their financial sustainability and researched the state-of-the-art in this field. This publication can be regarded as a pioneering work, as no similar research has been implemented before and has received very positive feedback both from the academic field as well as from the beneficiary electronic networks. On the project website this document was downloaded more than 1,000 times. The full, 69-page document can be obtained at www.rec.org/REC/Programs/SEE_Networking/ThesisRomanaGlaser.html. Some key pages were also printed out and included in the annexes to this report.

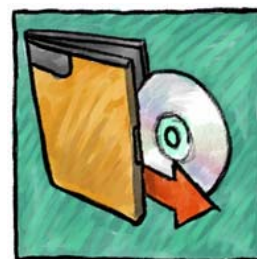
- Establishing relationships beyond the SEE region

Because this project was an innovative initiative even on a global level, the secretariat devoted ongoing efforts to transferring experiences to other regions, both in Europe and worldwide. As the REC has opened a new country office in Turkey, the feasibility of extending project activities to this country was examined. While during the project period no concrete activities started, it is planned that in the second half of 2005 a networking seminar will be organised there, with participating trainers from SEE electronic networks.

The project's experiences were disseminated to other countries by direct information provision (e.g. through the regional mailing list), an invitation to key events (e.g. network business planning seminar) and participation in international events (see section 3. International outreach).

- Organising follow-up events

Although the Italian Trust Fund support component of this project has been concluded, the REC continues to provide assistance to electronic networks. Beyond maintaining basic secretarial services, this also includes organising various follow-up events. One such initiative was the Connecting Networks project financed by the Netherlands environment ministry, which ran in the first half of 2005. In June one seminar was organised in Belgrade, bringing together electronic network representatives, journalists and ministerial experts to discuss progress and priorities for environmental information management, exchange and public access in South Eastern Europe. The outcome of the discussions were documented in the "Belgrade Statement," which outlines in detail the current trends and priorities. This document is available from the Connecting Networks website at www.rec.org/REC/Programs/REREP/ConnectingNetworks/.



- Media relations

Throughout the project, significant efforts were devoted to maintaining good media relations. Journalists were informed about all important events, and as a result of intense information exchange as well as pioneering ("newsworthy") work, the project's activities were featured in newspapers, TV and radio. Some of the printed and online articles are available on the project website.

5. COOPERATION WITH L'UMANA DIMORA

Activities that took place in Italy were implemented in cooperation with L'Umana Dimora Lazio, an environmental NGO based in Rome, Italy. At the beginning of the project, terms of reference were prepared that outlined the tasks and responsibilities of L'Umana Dimora and the REC in the project. They agreed that L'Umana Dimora would take a leading role in organising activities that take place in Italy, while the REC would focus on activities being implemented in South Eastern Europe.



In May 2003 a start-up meeting was held in Rome in the presence of managers from both organisations. Here the terms of reference were officially endorsed by the president of L'Umana Dimora. As this document specified the conditions for the financial transfers, the contract was also signed.

V. NETWORK ACTIVITIES

In line with the original project proposal's aim to help networks stand on their own feet, local activities were fully designed and implemented by the beneficiary networks themselves. These activities were documented in project workplans/business plans. These documents typically covered activities over the course of two to five years, and included elements that were to be implemented as part of the current project, as well as by other projects in the future. These were submitted to the REC for approval; in some cases the REC requested minor modifications and then provided direct financing to assist their implementation. Funding and supervision was done both by the international secretariat (in the case of Bluelink, StrawberryNet) as well as the REC's country offices (for all other networks). This section gives a rough outline of the types of local activities implemented.

For detailed and country-specific information please read the network workplans and project final reports, accessible from the project website. Some examples were printed and included in the annex to this report as well.

- Institutional strengthening

Most of the South Eastern European networks have a relatively short history of existence; therefore the project devoted significant attention to strengthening their institutional capacity. These activities included both financial sustainability as well as demand-driven service development.

Locally, every network's workplan/business plan includes elements of organising strategic planning meetings, visiting and consulting key users, and increasing collaboration and visibility. As sustainable financing is a major problem, networks see the way out as increasing their target group in order to reach a critical mass of users. A larger target group (primarily consisting of non-environmental organisation) is expected to make the introduction of fee-based services easier. From a technical point of view, most existing services can be customised relatively easily to serve other types of NGOs. The basic environmental mission of the networks would not change.

Internationally, the REC and L'Umana Dimora provided financial assistance to the network governing working groups. It organised international trainings (mission-driven business planning workshops in Italy) and performed research ("Outlooks for NGO Network Self-financing" thesis).

- Local capacity building

Training network users is a key objective of SEE electronic networks. The topic of trainings ranged from more technical (how to use the Internet and computers), through network oriented (how to use the online services provided by the



networks) to more strategic (journalism, strategic use of ICTs). Most trainings were implemented for a group of users located in specific regions of a particular country. This is valid both for larger countries (e.g. Romania) as well as to smaller ones (e.g. Albania). Participants of these trainings often received further materials, such as educational booklets or computer software.

To increase the quality of training delivered by network trainers, the REC and L'Umana Dimora organised a training of trainers seminar in Italy. This seminar focused more to the methodology of training and less on specific training topics.

- Online content services

Probably the most important network activities included the development of new online content services, such as news portals, databases, events calendars, announcements, discussion forums, and mailing lists. These services cover the core network activities. During the implementation of the project there was a very significant improvement in the quality and quantity of online information provided.

Every network launched many new services in the past two years. Already existing services (primarily news) were accompanied by databases on legislation, contact directories of environmental NGOs, new thematic websites, easy-to-use web space services, interactive campaigning and voting sites. These new services are described in detail in the network workplans/business plans (available from the project website) and are accessible on their network websites (they are also linked from the project website.)



Besides launching new services and increasing the quality of the existing ones, there was a significant quantitative improvement in the number of users and amount of online information. Half of the networks have a dedicated journalist who regularly posts news to the network news portals. (All networks provide access to environmental NGOs to post news, using easy-to-use online forms.) The largest increase in the amount of information provided was registered in the number of news items posted, the number of database entries (NGO contact information, legislation) and the number of subscribers and messages sent on mailing lists.

- Technical assistance

One of the most important obstacles against the efficient use of online services in South Eastern Europe is that many of the users (NGOs) do not have suitable computers or cannot afford connecting to the Internet. In addition, the lack of technical equipment also limited the further development of online services. As a response to these needs, local activities included almost everywhere the distribution of computers, installation of servers and purchase of ADSL subscriptions. Computers were purchased in three ways: directly by the networks themselves, by the REC country offices and by the international secretariat. Altogether 17 computers were purchased and 24 Internet subscriptions were made. Thirteen various accessories (memory, pen drive, mouse, monitor, UPS, backup tape drive, etc.) were purchased.

- Promotional activities

As networks become more established, increased attention was devoted to promoting their activities, both towards the primary target groups (environmental NGOs) as well as the secondary target groups (e.g. readers of online portals, journalists). These activities attempted

to increase the sustainability of networks by creating a critical mass of users and increase their general visibility in society. Networks developed a very wide range of promotional products, including brochures, leaflets, bookmarks, t-shirts, stickers, posters, calendars, demo CDs, CD covers, and mouse pads. Five of the networks gave multimedia presentations at the 2004 Rimini Fair.

Strengthening ties with related initiatives

Increased network stability has many indicators, such as the number of users, amount of online content and overall network budget. Most notably, a positive sign is that more and more capacity networks started implementing their own independently financed projects. Local activities therefore also included those that allowed the commencement of new activities.

One example is the Environmental Content Sharing in South Eastern Europe portal, available at <www.see-environment.info>. This initiative has received significant international attention, including a nomination as a finalist at the Stockholm Challenge Award. The implementation of this project as well as others was made possible by support given under the current project and is a positive sign of diversifying network activities.

VI. FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT

The project was financially managed in line with the original project proposal. There is no significant deviation from the original budget.

During the course of the project considerable savings were made in implementing the Rome study tours. Considering this possibility and the existing need from the project's beneficiaries, the REC and L'Umana Dimora have therefore requested permission from the Italian Trust Fund to reallocate funds and organise an additional training. This request was accepted, allowing the organisation of the "Mission-Driven Business Planning Workshop" in February 2005. The modified budget was documented in updated terms of reference between the REC and L'Umana Dimora.

After organising each study tour or training course, L'Umana Dimora has prepared financial reports for the REC. (The next installments were transferred by the REC upon receipt of the previous financial reports.)



During the final financial accounting between REC and L'Umana Dimora EUR 6,000 of unspent funds were accumulated after organising all events in Italy. This amount is being transferred back to the bank account of the Italian Trust Fund.