

REReP 2.3: “Promoting Networking and Cooperation of Environmental NGOs: Establishment of Electronic Computer Networks on a National and Regional Level”

Main implementing agency:

The Regional Environmental Center for Central and Eastern Europe

Project Manager:

Gabor Heves

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Project End Date: 31 December 2003

I. KEY INDICATORS OF ACHIEVEMENT

Original purpose of project:

- Support the establishment of networks in all countries.
- Increase international information exchange and cooperation.
- 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
- There is a large-scale international cooperation through on-line information exchange, personal meetings and new joint projects.
- Electronic networks enjoy great support from the NGOs, indicated by their active participation in information exchange and network development.

II. FUNDAMENTAL IMPACT OF PROJECT

The fundamental positive impact of the project on cooperation and information exchange among South Eastern European environmental NGOs was reviewed systematically and its results are published in the attached ‘**Networks at Work – three years later**’ booklet. It draws the attention to the project’s tangible impact as well as highlights some of the areas that still need attention as part of a possible follow-up project.

III. KEY CONCLUSION

The project has contributed to a level of progress in the environmental NGO electronic networking field in South Eastern Europe that is unprecedented worldwide in terms of pace of progress, geographical coverage and depth of transition. However, to maintain the current dynamism and secure long-term existence further international support continues to be of utmost importance. (Currently there is no international funding pledged for 2005 and beyond.)

IV. 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 environmental NGO electronic communication networks. The ultimate objective of NGO networking was to strengthen the environmental civil societies of SEE countries and improve trans-boundary cooperation and information exchange.

Activities were implemented through four sub-tasks: selecting / supporting an NGO Steering Group to run each network, improving the communication skills of environmental NGOs through training programmes, setting up an SEE regional environmental NGO information hub, and providing technical assistance to participating NGOs.

In countries where there was an already functioning and internationally acknowledged environmental NGO network (Romania and Bulgaria), most project activities were performed by the networks from the very beginning. In those countries without a functioning electronic network yet, the REC Country/Field Offices started project implementation. Once networks and their NGO Steering Groups were up and running, responsibilities (and the implementation of the project) were gradually shifted over.

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 Web Site, available at the <http://www.rec.org/REC/Programs/SEE_Networking/> Internet address.

V. CHRONOLOGICAL ACTIVITY REVIEW

In the period of 1 January 2001 – 30 November 2001 most project activities were implemented through the project start-up phase, funded by the Royal Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Norway. The purpose of project start-up activities was to lay down solid foundations for the implementation of this project. These activities allowed us to conduct a survey to provide a scientifically justified basis for further activities, to design the project in detail, to involve NGOs in activity planning already from the beginning, and to work towards such kind of a project design and implementation that delivers lasting results even after it is over.

The project was designed in a way so that each sub-task complemented and mutually reinforced the others. Especially at the initial stage of the project activities built on each other in a strict timely sequence. While we paid large attention to the variance of the local working conditions, the main activities were essentially the same in all of the beneficiary countries and followed each other in this order:

- Conduction of a **needs assessment**. An extensive literature review was performed, questionnaires were sent out to all South Eastern European environmental NGOs and personal/telephone interviewes were conducted to examine the current situation in each country and to collect recommendations. The results of this survey were published in the book titled “Networks at Work”. It was structured into an international summary and country reviews, each of them containing the following sections: the general situation of the environmental NGO sector, the general situation of electronic networking and cooperation, the needs and problems of network use, the perceived benefits from the project, the planned network use and the recommendations for the project. Please find one copy of the book in the attachment. (On request the hardcopy is available for free or it can be downloaded from the project website.)
- A call for **expression of interest** was circulated in every country. Before any further steps could have been done it was essential that every South Eastern European environmental NGO was informed about the upcoming electronic networking activities and they were invited to join them. (Please find a copy of the call for expression for interest in the

appendix.) Those NGOs that expressed an interest were kept informed about the project and were invited to the project start-up meetings.

- Organisation of **project start-up meetings**. In every country the REC invited interested NGOs to a meeting where the project was introduced to them, the results of the needs assessment was presented and an opportunity was provided to discuss issues about electronic networking. In those countries where an electronic network had already existed before (Romania and Bulgaria) the role of these networks was reinforced at the meetings, yielding the NGO community's support to implement project activities. The key priorities were agreed upon during these meetings and hence provided a solid grounds for a democratic and transparent functioning.

In the other countries an important element of these workshops was that they were facilitated by representatives of already functioning networks (Bluelink from Bulgaria and StrawberryNet from Romania), instead of experts from the REC. We believe this arrangement has made the information to be perceived more credible, being presented by "colleagues being in the same shoes" and not by a person outside of the NGO community.

While there was no expectation for concrete outcomes (being at an early stage of project development) two of these meetings ended with the decision to establish a network. In other countries such a decision followed within the following year. In Albania and FYR Macedonia the creation and development of the networks was supported in a cooperative effort of Milieukontakt Oost-Europa and the REC.

The following table lists all the start-up meetings:

Country	Date	Location
Bosnia and Herzegovina	10-11 December, 2001	Fojnica
Bulgaria	15 February, 2002	Sofia
Croatia	11-12 April, 2002	Pula
FYR Macedonia	16-18 November, 2001	Strumica
Romania	23-24 October, 2001	Bucharest
Serbia and Montenegro	10-11 November, 2001	Valjevo
Kosovo	18-20 January, 2002	Prishtina

- Preparation of **project guidelines**. At the initial stage of the project there were a lot of open questions for the NGOs. Even though the project was explained at the start-up meetings and the concept of networking was discussed in detail, this area was a so far an unknown terrain for them. A lot of work was to be done in the field of strategic network development as well as in identifying specific user needs and developing the corresponding services. The REC believed that it was crucial that these questions were answered by the NGOs themselves (crucial for reasons of motivation and sense of ownership). While the REC did not wish to interfere into these processes, it did develop and provide NGOs with documents that gave fundamental guidance for them. These documents were drafted based on the experience of established networks and contained practical advice for implementing the project. These documents were slightly modified to fit the specific circumstances of each country. Please find in the attachment an example of these guidelines.
- Network **steering groups**. Once the NGO community had agreed to establish an electronic network they have elected a small group of NGOs that showed interest to govern and oversee the network's development. This group of typically 6-7 NGOs was called a network steering group. It is very important to note that – in spite of the initial idea outlined in the project proposal – there is no "lead NGO" in these networks. The steering committee may elect one NGO to take certain tasks (e.g. financial management, content development or project reporting) but the REC believed that the concept of steering groups is an important element in assuring that there is a community-wide sense of ownership over the networks. Members of the steering groups are re-elected from time to time. Each country-level steering group could delegate one person to take part in the

international steering group, providing recommendations and NGO control over the project.

- **Network workplans.** Once the basic institutional framework was laid down, the network steering groups have created documents that provided detailed information over the activities they would like to perform. These documents were called workplans and – in line with the instructions provided in the distributed project guidelines documents – they contained three sections: a narrative part, timeline and a proposed budget. Proposed activities typically contain training seminars, the creation of on-line content (portals, mailing lists, databases, news services etc.), the distribution of computer hardware and a large number of miscellaneous other activities (study tours, the establishment of an Internet café, promotional materials etc.) Please find these workplans in the attachment of this final report.
- **Financial coverage** of the proposed activities. When drafting the network workplans, the REC purposefully did not tell the networks the amount of available budget. Being a bottom-up focused and needs driven project, the REC has requested the networks to outline all activities they felt was necessary and propose a corresponding budget. In all of the cases the proposed budget was considered realistic by the REC's project team and the project could provide adequate resources to cover the requested amounts. The REC wanted to avoid the impression of this project being a grant-giving project where the drafting of activities was driven by the amount of available funds.

In Bulgaria and Romania the networks started their activities by direct financial support from the project (A subcontract was signed based on the submitted workplan/budget.) In those countries where networks were at an early stage of development the REC local offices had a very important role in assisting with the implementation of the proposed activities. As the new networks became institutionally more established the REC gradually shifted over the responsibilities and the necessary financial resources. This was in line with one of the project's top priorities, which aimed for the creation of such networks that by the end of the end of the project would be able to continue functioning on their own.

VII. ACTIVITIES IMPLEMENTED DURING PROJECT, COMPARED WITH ORIGINAL OBJECTIVES

Regional information hub

Activities described under “Sub-Task c” of the original project proposal aim to assure a smooth information flow across the South Eastern European region and beyond.

A key element to assure transparency of project implementation as well as information flow is the project's website, accessible at http://www.rec.org/REC/Programs/SEE_Networking/. It is continuously updated, and currently hosts 31 web pages, 110 downloadable PDF files (mainly reports and summaries) and 220 photos and illustrations. During the year 2003 we registered 16,900 page hits and 18,000 file downloads (!). The exceptionally high rate of the latter figure suggests the very high ratio of those targeted visitors who do take the time to download and read key documents. We also attribute this fact to the continued efforts to advertise the site among the project's target audience. Besides people from South Eastern European countries, the project web site was visited from 78 other countries of the world.

Following the first regional electronic networking seminar in Sofia in 2002, a regional mailing list was set up (regnet@bluelink.net). Currently it has 91 subscribers and serves as the main forum to disseminate and discuss issues on a regional level.

As part of the help desk services of the international information hub a large number of information requests were answered. These ranged from technical questions to promoting synergies with other REReP projects.

Exchange programs, conference visits

As one of the key objectives of the project is to foster international cooperation, in the reporting period we have witnessed an intensification of cross-border interactions. At most national training and strategic meetings there were invited speakers from other countries, primarily from those that already have an established network (Romania and Bulgaria). Such personal visits have greatly contributed to help new networks avoiding the pitfalls of the early stages of development. As a result, such positive experiences have led to maintained international cooperation as well as joint work in other projects.

In line with the original project proposal, the project also supports visits to relevant regional and international conferences. The most important of these were a contribution to the Romanian network's attendance at the annual meeting of the Association for Progressive Communications (the international umbrella organisation of NGO electronic networks) as well as the representation of the project at the World Summit on Sustainable Development.

Annual regional workshops

The first regional networking meeting within the framework of this project took place in Sofia on March 28-29, 2002. It was organised and held as a joint effort of BlueLink (Bulgaria), StrawberryNet (Romania) and the REC Country Office Bulgaria. More than thirty participants took part in the meeting, representing donors, national governments, NGO communications networks and international development organisations.

There were two main parts. The aim of the first day's morning session was to review past activities and to promote the existing national networks to government officials, donors and the media. The fourth anniversary of the establishment of the Bulgarian network, BlueLink, was then celebrated.

The second part of the meeting was a less formal workshop to share information about accomplished activities in greater detail and to review the country work plans developed under this project. There was also a brainstorming session for identifying the next steps in international cooperation. A joint statement was drafted and accepted.

The meeting proved useful for building a sense of community and enthusiasm for South Eastern European regional networking initiatives. All in all, the feedback about the meeting was very positive, both from the participants' side as well as from the invited high-level officials' side. This meeting was considered by many as an important milestone in regional environmental networking and cooperation. The meeting also attracted significant media attention.

For more information on the Sofia regional meeting please visit the project Web site at http://www.rec.org/REC/Programs/SEE_Networking/SofiaRegionalMeeting.html This page holds all background materials, including the list of participants, the list of invited guests, the statement of participants, press responses as well as a photo gallery.

The second regional networking workshop was held in Brezovica, Kosovo, on 4-5 April 2003. The event was organised in a similar cooperative manner like the first one, in partnership of the newly established Kosovar network, Sharri.Net and the local REC office. The selection of the meeting's hosts was a symbolic step: the first regional meeting was held by an experienced network while this year's by a newly born one. In its short life of existence

Sharri.Net has demonstrated a very remarkable progress, in spite of its difficult working conditions.

This meeting also had two main parts, like the first one. The first morning's event was held in Prishtina, with the purpose to review past activities and promote the networks to government, media and donors. This event was held in Prishtina and has attracted significant media coverage, including news reporting in three local TV channels as well as a number of daily newspapers.

The morning session was followed by a 1.5 day informal workshop in the town of Brezovica. During this part the challenges and obstacles against electronic networking were identified as well as proposals to overcome these. There was also a brainstorming session for the next steps in international cooperation. A joint statement was drafted and accepted.

The meeting was organised in close partnership between the REC and Milieukontakt Oost-Europa. The latter organisation has also brought in network representatives from Moldova and provided valuable contribution to the meeting's facilitation. The meeting was a good opportunity to share experiences and map out future joint work, to plan further cooperation between the REC and Milieukontakt Oost-Europa and to make concrete suggestions for the project's implementation. The meeting proved useful for building a sense of community and enthusiasm for South Eastern European regional networking initiatives.

Provision of technical equipment

Installation and distribution of computer equipment was part of all networks' workplans, since the lack of computer equipment was identified as one of the key obstacles for efficient on-line networking. Equipment was installed at network centres as well as distributed to active network members. In Kosovo, an NGO Internet café was installed at the REC's premises. In Kosovo additional computers were installed and distributed following a corporate in-kind donation of used computers.

Computer equipment was disbursed in two rounds. The first one was primarily at the commencement of project activities. It included the purchase and installation of about 20 computers. The second round of the hardware distribution took place at the end of the project. In this phase as many as 50 computers were disbursed all around the region. The distribution was implemented based on a call for applications, and targeted those organisations that were the most active or promising in sharing information on-line. The specific conditions of the call varied from country to country, including various legal conditions, ownership of equipment, usage conditions etc.

The timing of the second round of the distribution had two main reasons. One was that with the more precise knowledge of the remaining financial resources in the project allowed a more accurate planning of the amount of available hardware. The second, and more important reason was that the REC's project managers paid large attention over the whole project implementation period to find the most appropriate level and gradual phasing of support. The project beneficiaries have welcomed this second round of disbursement as an acknowledgement of their hard work and gave an important boost towards the future.

Support of the Italian Ministry of Environment

In an attempt to diversify funding sources the REC also implemented fundraising activities with the purpose to secure funding beyond the end of this project. These efforts have resulted in a new project contract signed with the Italian Ministry of Environment, in the value of 350,000 EUR. Project activities under this agreement will be essentially an extension of those in the current project. Activities will finish in 2004 – beyond that date there is no funding currently available.

One addition to core project activities is that South Eastern European networks and the REC will cooperate with an Italian organisation called L'Umana Dimora. As part of this cooperation a series of study tours are organised to Italy, with participants from each South Eastern European network. Besides the learning experience, the multi-national composition of these groups is foreseen to encourage further cooperation of these networks after returning home, and hence contribute to the overall goals of the REReP process.

The Italian project co-funding is described on the project web page at http://www.rec.org/REC/Programs/SEE_Networking/ItalianCooperation.html

Media coverage

During the whole project period the project received significant media attention. In general, media relations were considered to be a strategic communications tool of the project. NGO electronic networking was praised by the media as an innovative way to achieve two goals at the same time: tackle the heritage of war and international/ethnic distrust while working together for a better environment. These media reports are covered on a separate page of the international project web page at http://www.rec.org/REC/Programs/SEE_Networking/MediaResponses.html

Cooperation between Milieukontakt Oost Europa and the REC

In Albania and Macedonia Milieukontakt Oost Europa (MKOE) is also active in the field of supporting the electronic networking activities of environmental NGOs. In order to avoid overlap and make the best use of the available resources, in these two countries project activities were closely coordinated between the REC and MKOE. Building on a cooperation agreement signed at the Sofia regional networking, the two organisations have established a smooth daily cooperation. This applied to both the international level (MKOE Amsterdam and REC Head Office) as well as on the local level (MKOE local representatives and REC Country/Field Offices.) As one example, the second regional meeting in Kosovo was prepared and implemented together.

Training workshops

Training courses were an essential elements of each network's workplan. In the reporting period there were numerous training workshops in all of the project's beneficiary countries/territories. The topic of these trainings ranged from technical skills through on-line content management to strategic activity planning. In every country or region the networks and the REC offices organised a series of training sessions, covering the whole territory of the given country. Many of these trainings also consisted of more parts, where each part built on the knowledge gained at the previous workshop.

Please see the project website for more details, such as agendas, conclusions, photos and evaluation forms. (http://www.rec.org/REC/Programs/SEE_Networking/Activities.html - this

page is also printed in the attachment.) An example report from one of the training seminars in Albania is included in the attachment.

New on-line services

Over the project's implementation a large number of new or updated on-line content was prepared. This ranges from the creation or update of network websites to setting up thematic websites. The following is a list of all network websites:

- Bluelink, Bulgaria, <http://bluelink.net/en/>
- EkoMrezaBiH, Bosnia and Herzegovina, <http://www.ekomrezabih.net/>
- Eko.Net, FYR Macedonia, <http://www.eko.net.mk/>
- Sharri.Net, Kosovo, <http://www.sharri.net/>
- StrawberryNet, Romania, <http://www.ngo.ro/>
- QKE, Albania, <http://www.qke-al.org/>
- Volvox, Serbia and Montenegro, <http://www.erc.org.yu/volvox/>

Most of these websites contain a news-publishing functionality. The software typically allows any interested NGO or person post news article, which are then reviewed and released by the networks' news editors. In most of the cases the installed software was ActionApplications, an open-source news publishing software specifically developed for non-profit electronic networks by the Association for Progressive Communications, (APC, the international umbrella organisation of national electronic networks). This software also allows the exchange of news articles among different websites, hence truly contributing to an international information flow.

Many of these websites also include databases, holding information such as legislation, list of NGOs or events.

Besides the World Wide Web another key communication channel of these networks are their mailing lists. As a general trend it can be noted that the mailing lists' traffic (number of messages posted) is proportional with the establishment of the electronic network in the given country. The number of subscribers is usually in the range of a couple of hundred people.

III. PROBLEMS/POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS ENCOUNTERED DURING THE PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION

During project implementation we have witnessed a very different level of interest towards the project from country to country. In most of the cases this meant great enthusiasm and in one country (Croatia) a rather low level of interest.. To address this issue in Croatia we implemented activities through different project partners: first a well-established NGO, then – after this had not yielded the expected results – through the REC country office. The primary reason of the low interest towards electronic networking can be explained primarily by the existence of general coordinational difficulties of the Croatian environmental sector. In addition to its original focus the project has triggered discussions that have lead to a general improvement in the overall level of NGO information exchange and cooperation. As a result of these activities we have witnessed a growing NGO interest towards electronic networking – though this development still needs to be nurtured in a possible follow-up project.

A difficulty the project organisers faced at the initial stages of the project was that some NGOs expected instructions from the top instead of taking their own initiative. However, as the key working principles of the project were clarified to the beneficiary organisations this

issue was relatively soon overcome: indicated by the existence of dynamic, motivated and grassroots focused networks.

IX. ANNEXES

- Network workplans
- Network final reports
- ‘Networks at Work – three years later’ final project review
- Networks at Work book
(Prepared during project start-up phase, financed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Norway.)
- Example screen shots from the project Web site
- Examples of various project outputs
- Project guidelines for networks
- Call for expression of interest
- PowerPoint overview of project