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Small Grants Programme (SGP) in the GEF/UNDP Danube Regional Project (DRP)



Abstract: Among some 80 activities pursued by the UNDP-GEF Danube Regional Project, its Small Grants Programme (SGP) has had a particularly remarkable impact. The SGP was the DRP's main vehicle for engaging local stakeholders and the public through NGO involvement and capacity building for actions at the local level to support the Danube SAP. In total, 120 National Grants and 10 Regional Grants were distributed to NGOs in 11 countries in the Danube River Basin. Projects were monitored and evaluated by the DRP through regular reporting and site visits. The best practices of NGO projects were highlighted in stories submitted to both national and international media. The SGP support NGO activities to reduce nutrient pollution, along with other projects and tools implemented by the DRP, has contributed to significant and measurable improvements in the water quality of the Danube and the Black Sea. Specific heuristics are presented here to help other projects replicate DRP's interactive SGP approach -- through design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation phases.

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Small Grants Programme (SGP) in the GEF/UNDP Danube Regional Project (DRP)

Experience of the GEF - sponsored

GEF/UNDP: Strengthening the Implementation for Nutrient Reduction and Transboundary Cooperation in the Danube River Basin

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PROJECT DESCRIPTION

On December 1 2001, the US\$17,2 Million *Danube Regional Project (DRP)* was launched as the next 5-year phase of UNDP-GEF's long-term commitment to achieving environmental health in the Danube River Basin. The main DRP goal was to strengthen existing basin management structures and activities, building on lessons learned, and facilitating a regional approach.

The **project's** objectives were:

- ◆ To assist with the establishment of institutional and legal instruments at the national and regional level to assure nutrient reduction and sustainable management of water bodies and ecological resources, and
- ◆ To assist the 13 countries in implementing their agreed strategic action programme, focusing on nutrient pollution reduction. (The Danube Strategic Action Programme (SAP) was adopted in a previous GEF-supported project.)

A key focus was on building the capacity of the International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River (ICPDR) and Danube countries to fulfill their legally binding commitment to implement the Danube Convention. Such efforts include the development of a River Basin Management Plan in line with the EU's Water Framework Directive.

The DRP is an umbrella for some 80 activities to strengthen agricultural policy, provide river basin management tools, protect wetlands and improve water services.

The project is also significant because of its many links to the local level, including activities related to public participation, access to information, communications, local pilot demonstration activities and a large grants

programme for non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

THE EXPERIENCE

(a) *Transboundary Water Management (TWM) Issue:*

The objective of DRP's Small Grants Program (SGP) component was to facilitate stakeholder participation and action at the grassroots level for addressing key Danube River Basin (DRB) environmental problems – such as nutrient pollution -- in the context of river basin management and transboundary cooperation. Individual grants promoted pragmatic approaches to complex basin issues, creating demonstrations replicable in the Danube basin and elsewhere. The intention has been to stimulate awareness and action within the NGO community while building cooperation for solving nutrient pollution problems. The SGP consequently contributed to building the participatory process needed for effectively dealing with nutrient reduction and transboundary cooperation in the DRB. The SGP has shown how much local NGOs can contribute to raising awareness and doing practical work related to these issues. NGOs also increase public involvement in pollution reduction, including practical and replicable community-based projects involving education training and monitoring.

(b) How was the issue addressed

The SGP was the DRP's main vehicle for engaging local stakeholders and the public through NGO involvement and capacity building for actions at the local level to support the Danube SAP. The programme was coordinated and implemented by the DRP together with the Regional Environmental Center (REC). Other NGOs were grant recipients, addressing regional environmental problems and challenges

while enhancing their own capacities in project management and implementation. In this fashion, the SGP helped raise the capacity of many of the more than 170 NGOs participating in the Danube Environmental Forum (DEF).*

* See “Institutional development of NGOs – Danube Environmental Forum (DEF)” (IW Experience Note)

RESULTS AND LEARNING

Grants were distributed to DRB NGOs through two rounds, each lasting approximately one year. Concise and compelling announcements of the grant competitions were publicized in international and national media that were known to effectively reach NGO readers. Many NGOs responded to each call with project concepts which were screened by selection panels. National projects were screened and selected by national selection panels. Regional projects were screened by an international panel that initially invited a short-list of NGOs to prepare more detailed proposals for submission. In this time, potential regional grantees were assisted financially and technically in project development, after which five regional grants were selected in each round. In total, 120 National Grants and 10 Regional Grants were distributed to NGOs in 11 countries in the DRB. Projects were monitored and evaluated by the DRP through regular reporting and site visits. The best practices of NGO projects were highlighted in stories submitted to both national and international media.

NGO projects with a high potential to reduce nutrient and toxic pollution received funding for their activities. Activity examples ranged from the direct reduction of nutrient pollution through wetland vegetation absorption, to raising the awareness of urban consumers about the contributions made by laundry detergents to nutrient pollution. In the end, many activities resulted in direct reductions in nutrients at the local level, for example small scale waste water treatment plants or projects focused on changing agricultural practices and the reduced use of fertilizers.

The main beneficiaries of the grants projects were local residents, local community, local authorities and DRB NGOs. A large proportion of the grants went to NGO members of the Danube Environmental Forum (DEF), the largest

NGO network in the DRB with over 170 members. Small grants provided to the DEF represented a main component of the DRP's overall support activities for DEF.

The aggregated results from NGO activities geared to reducing nutrient pollution, in combination with other projects and tools implemented by the DRP, has contributed to significant and measurable improvements in the water quality of the Danube and Black Sea (e.g. the depletion of oxygen in the lower levels of the Black Sea has been virtually eliminated). It can therefore be observed that the DRP SGP has been an excellent tool in helping to reach the GEF International Waters global goal of nutrient reduction in the Black Sea.

REPLICATION

In order to develop and implement a small grants programme on this scale, there are some challenges and lessons learned that could be useful for other projects. These span three phases: planning/design, implementation and monitoring/evaluation.

Planning / design

Initial challenges for SGP implementers include scoping the grants/ guidelines and the objectives of the grants programme to overall GEF project objectives. Improving public awareness and communication are primary results of many small grants. As a result, the SGP should reflect this audience with an approach that is not too technical. In addition, guidelines and announcements should use simplified English, as this is not often the first language of members of participating organizations. Materials for applicants should also be specific in describing the types of activities that would be funded, to ensure alignment with the SAP adopted by participating governments.

Another issue, for larger programmes to consider, is sub-contracting implementation if there is not sufficient staff in-house to manage it. SGP implementation and follow-up are quite resource-intensive. For the Danube SGP, the REC served as a sub-contractor to handle the 120 National grants and 10 Regional grants. Each grant had its own inception, progress and final reports and an extensive payment schedule. Thus, projects should allocate an estimated level of effort equivalent to approximately one full-time staff per million US\$

in grants, split as appropriate among project, NGO, regional, national and local personnel.

In design of an SGP should budget 10 percent for overhead costs. It is also useful to set aside approximately 10% of the total budget for unforeseen costs, such as meetings, dissemination of results, as well as for an evaluation either at mid-term and/or at the end of the project.

Implementation

With respect to institutional setup, who should be involved in selection, monitoring and follow-up at the national level? In this case, governmental representatives through the International Secretariat for the Protection of the Danube River Basin (ICPDR) as well as national and regional NGOs (DEF) were directly involved in both grant decisions and follow-up for the selected projects.

It is important to provide NGO grant applicants with training during both project preparation and implementation phases. For the Danube SGP, NGOs developed concept papers from which the best ideas were selected and provided technical and financial support to develop full proposals. In this way, final project proposals are more focused and targeted to the overall SGP objectives. It is also important to provide on-going technical assistance to the projects in the preparation/implementation phase.

Other lessons learned relate to the time-line for project implementation: For a large and complex SGP such as in the Danube, an interactive process across two (or more) calls for grants is recommended. This allows the second iteration to draw upon valuable lessons learned and experiences from the first call.

Monitoring and Evaluation

Small grants are excellent communication tools for any project. It is necessary therefore to use this potential and disseminate results and success-stories. Such outreach increases popular understanding of environmental problems and challenges and also builds a public mandate for the project itself.

And last but not least, it is important to develop proper and meaningful indicators at the local project level to measure the local impact of the grants. Base-line surveys or other initial

measurement must be built into the design of the small grants proposals to ensure that grants address the priority concerns identified by governments in their agreed SAP.

SIGNIFICANCE

This experience is significant because:

- ◆ It is one of the main vehicles for public participation in GEF IW projects and has raised awareness and involvement at local, national and regional levels;
- ◆ It has supported the overall goals and objectives of the project for nutrient reduction and trans-boundary water cooperation;
- ◆ It is replicable and valuable for GEF international waters projects to engage local communities and facilitate the start of local action to address priority transboundary concerns; and
- ◆ The lessons learned and experience from this and other GEF projects need to be incorporated into the design and support of new grants programmes for other waters.

REFERENCES

All documents related to the Danube SGP are available at the project web-page as well as at the REC web-page. See links:

- ◆ www.undp-drp.org (until mid-2007), www.icpdr.org (thereafter) – for SGP information
- ◆ www.de-forum.org – Danube Environmental Forum (DEF)
- ◆ www.iwlearn.org – GEF IW:LEARN project
- ◆ www.rec.org – Regional Environmental Center (REC) for Central and Eastern Europe

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KEYWORDS

- ◆ Danube River Basin
- ◆ NGO Participation
- ◆ Nutrient Reduction
- ◆ International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River (ICPDR)
- ◆ Outreach
- ◆ Small Grants Program (SGP)

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