



INTERNATIONAL WATERS RESULTS NOTES

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Building Environmental Citizenship to Support Transboundary Pollution Reduction in the Danube: A Pilot Project in Hungary and Slovenia

GEF ID#: 806, PIMS ID#: 1268

Project Status: Completed



Key results:

1. High quality needs assessments were conducted on how to improve public access to environmental information in Hungary and Slovenia.
2. Capacities were increased for improving access to information in both countries via workshops, study tours and printed and electronic information.
3. A new quality of cooperation was achieved between NGOs and government officials.

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PROJECT OBJECTIVE

The project's objective was to enable Hungary and Slovenia to institutionalize public access to environmental information and operationalize public participation, in support of reducing transboundary pollution from the discharge of nutrients and toxics into the Danube River. At the “global” environmental level, the project demonstrates how these measures can help Central and Eastern European countries achieve the important global environmental goals of the Danube Strategic Action Programme, the Aarhus Convention, and the Danube River Protection Convention. The activities conducted in Hungary and Slovenia serve as a pilot for future efforts in all countries of the Danube River Basin to increase public involvement in pollution reduction.

RESULTS: PROCESS

INDICATOR #1: Legal, institutional and practical barriers to public access to environmental information in Hungary and Slovenia identified and analyzed. [*Target: One Needs Assessment completed for each country.*]

Barriers to the public access of environmental information were identified, described and analyzed in two Needs Assessments, one each for Hungary and Slovenia. The Needs Assessments were used as a basis to identify priorities for the project activities, and were made broadly available on a project website. Barriers were illustrated through case studies that were later used as concrete implementation examples in capacity building workshops. The final project recommendations dealt with options for removing these barriers. This project phase may prove highly valuable for other countries beyond the two pilot ones.

INDICATOR #2: Capacity built in the governments of Hungary and Slovenia to establish the legal, institutional, social and practical infrastructure that is a prerequisite to increasing public participation in efforts to protect the Danube from nutrient and toxic discharges. [*Target: Three capacity building workshops and one study tour completed for Hungarian and Slovenian government officials and NGO representatives.*]

- Four capacity building workshops were organized, two in each country. A final capacity building event was organized in the form of a joint regional workshop where the results and lessons learned were discussed and evaluated in the presence of government and NGO experts from other Danube countries. While the Hungarian participants decided to focus on institutional and practical improvements, Slovenian participants concentrated on legislative improvements.
- A study tour was organized for three government officials and one NGO representative from each country to visit the Netherlands and the US. Participants got a substantial overview of legislative background as well as particular information about implementation mechanisms and daily practices of the host country governments on how to provide and access information regimes. Sessions were held on how to apply in practice the experiences gained in the Netherlands and US in Hungary and Slovenia. The tour participants prepared a report for their countries assessing the lessons learned, and made recommendations on experiences and practices that could be used in their countries. The project and its materials were presented in several different Aarhus Convention-related events in both countries and in an NGO national meeting in Hungary.
- At the request of the Hungarian and Slovenian project participants, a 3-day “mini study tour” was organized to provide opportunities for learning and exchange. Slovenian participants had meetings with key officials of Hungarian environmental and water related Ministries and were provided information on mechanisms to promote public participation.
- Hungary ratified the Aarhus Convention on July 3, 2001, a goal that was supported by the project.

INDICATOR #3: Reinforcement of the role of non-governmental actors in efforts to reduce discharges into the Danube. [*Target: Improved legislative and institutional framework and better government practices to provide more opportunities for NGOs to access information and to participate in environmental decision-making.*]

In both model countries, representatives of the governmental and NGO sectors appreciated the opportunities provided to discuss controversial issues, to gain better understanding, to eliminate prejudice and to build mutual confidence. One example of this is the cooperation between the Clean Air Action group and the Central Danube Valley Water Authority in Hungary. Shortly after a joint workshop, their cooperation led to an exceptionally prompt solution of illegal timber logging in the Danube River valley.

INDICATOR #4: Materials developed and disseminated concerning replicable elements of the pilot program. [*Target: Printed materials and website developed and disseminated.*]

The results of the project were disseminated through: the project list-serve; a major e-mailing to approximately 600 people worldwide who follow public access to environmental and water related information issues; communications through IW Learn; and the web sites of the Regional Environmental Center for Central and Eastern Europe and project partners. Printed outputs included a Citizen Guide and a Practices Manual. A Hungarian handbook for public authorities was mailed to all project partners and participants, relevant national government officials and the environmental officials of 1500 municipalities.

KEY LESSONS LEARNED

- 1) While there were many common obstacles to the provision of information in Hungary and Slovenia, there do exist a number of barriers and issues unique to each country. Thus, combining country-driven approaches with regional ones was an efficient strategy supported by the country project partners.
- 2) Flexibility to incorporate bottom up initiatives by project partners increased interest and country ownership and led to better cooperation with government and NGO stakeholders.
- 3) Broad input by NGO, governmental and other stakeholders, along with transparency, helped to mobilize experience and expertise and gain support for the project. This helped make the project more acceptable to government officials and contributed to its overall success. However, it also became clear that it is imperative to develop the genuine support of high-level officials in order to make sure that project results are implemented.
- 5) The Needs Assessment reports prepared in the first phase of the project presented an excellent and thorough basis for defining project activities, priorities, and more specific outputs. It would be even more helpful to prepare such needs assessments as part of the designing phase of projects. However, this would need a different approach in the GEF project cycle, including provision of a certain amount of early funding, to enable applying organizations to be involved.

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