

Summary Report on Workshop

Sustainable Development in Lake Areas: Empowering Local Initiatives and Civil Society



22 – 26 September 2010

Keramoti, Greece



Summary report

After workshops in Estonia, Poland and Slovenia, Forum Synergies and Global Nature Fund held their 4th workshop about “Sustainable Development in Lake Areas: Empowering Local Initiatives and Civil Society” in Greece from 22 to 26 Sept 2010. The workshop was financially supported by Fondation de France.

With 48 participants from 15 countries this workshop was the largest so far. We met in the small fishermen and tourism village of Keramoti in Nestos delta, a large river delta in north eastern Greece and part of the country's only national park. Until 100 years ago one third of the delta had been covered by riparian forests which had been reduced to a tiny rest of 150 hectares until the 1970ties. There would probably be no national park without German biologist Hans Jerrentrup who during his studies at Heidelberg university 30 years ago wrote his masters thesis about the delta, for the first time collecting maps and ecological evidence for its ecological values. He stayed there and helped to set up the NGO "Society for Protection and Eco-Development" (EPO), our host organisation, which despite very difficult circumstances finally succeeded in partial measures for nature conservation.

The Workshop

On the first day participants were welcomed by the management and board of the Nestos – Vistonis - Ismarida National Park, by the local Mayor and the presidents of the Fishermens' Cooperative and EPO. The local situation was explained in presentations of the National Park Management and two research institutions, and the participants were taken to a first field trip to visit the results of EPO's LIFE Project at the freshwater lakes near Hrysoupolis and the organisation's environmental education centre in Avramilia.

In the evening our local hosts together with Tillman Stottele, GNF advisory board and member of the Rotary Club in his hometown Friedrichshafen, had prepared a panel discussion which was held in the Rotary Club of Kavala. Key decision makers and honoraries had been invited to debate the most important tasks concerning environment and economic development for the region in the actual times of crisis. The subsequent dinner was sponsored by the mayor of Kavala.



The second day started with a ‘panel interview’ game where 3 international participants asked questions to 3 representatives of the local side to reflect the lessons of the first day and further clarify details and dynamics of the local situation. (see minutes for more details) It became clear that ecological thinking in the Greek public vanishes almost completely behind the struggle for daily life, except in cases where municipalities are threatened by heavy fines for not implementing EU directives (eg for recycling). In terms of ecological issues, recycling or energy saving are still closer to the people than biodiversity conservation which is regarded as a quite exotic idea. And any sort of stakeholder participation in Greece was virtually absent until 5 years ago.

After the interview reflection, examples of stakeholder participation and protection strategies were presented from Bulgaria, Poland, Serbia, Estonia and England.

Another highlight was a lunch on invitation of the Keramoti fishermen’s cooperative, serving local fish and Greek salad at the harbour. The local fishermen are good partners to the environmentalists because their low input economical use of the vast lagoon areas makes them natural allies to resist demands for construction development in the coastal zone which would destroy valuable natural habitats.



In the afternoon participants split up in working groups to further elaborate the three project proposals about eco/rural tourism, environmental education and practical conservation exchange that had been started in Slovenia. Next steps and commitments were agreed and presented to the plenary.

A political declaration

A special emphasis on this 4th workshop was to derive a "political message" from the workshops and participants’ case studies so far. This part of the workshop concept had remained somewhat in the shadow during the past events. So the third day was dedicated to politics: How can national and EU policies support local actors to take up the challenge of sustainable development?

In the beginning the president of the union of farmers’ cooperatives presented the actual state of the regional LEADER programme and commented about the agricultural situation, being sceptical towards eco-farming. Titus Bahner then presented the current EU policy context and the actual reform debate about the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). Forum Synergies co-organizes the “Agricultural and Rural Convention” (ARC, www.arc2020.eu) to formulate a coherent message from civil society towards the CAP reform discussion.

In this context we tried to review the relations between local administration and civil society groups in the participants' projects in more detail. Reflecting our experiences in the light of a systematic structure proposed by the moderator led to the result that NGOs and civil society groups in almost all cases play a significant role from the very beginning of protective measures until the development of accompanying initiatives of integrated sustainable development, but that they are rarely put in a responsible position by local administrations to do so.

On this basis we elaborated a "Declaration of Keramoti" as a summarizing political message from the findings of the "Sustainable Development in Lake Areas" workshops. The message was that

- ☞ NGOs play a crucial role in implementing EU conservation directives by their initiative, expertise and communication skills.
- ☞ But this work often relies on unstable structures, mainly due to temporary funding. Usually most of it, including highly qualified expertise, is voluntary and unpaid work.
- ☞ The potential of NGO contributions in the implementation of EU conservation directives and national policies is far greater than actually practiced.
- ☞ To realize this potential we need a better recognition of the role of NGOs in policy implementation; capacity building both for NGOs and local administrations; increased legal opportunities in national regulations to allow delegation of specific responsibilities to NGOs; and also financial support to maintain permanent structures. This support should be accessible by simplified procedures.

The declaration was signed by the participants and later put on the ARC website (in the context of a "nature 2000" thematic group). It influenced the final ARC declaration which was presented on 17 november 2010 to the EU commission.

The workshop was concluded with a common field trip to the protected remnants of the Nestos riparian forests and to the lagoons of Nestos Delta.

Evaluation

In summary the Keramoti workshop was a great success and valuable supportive event for the local host NGO in its very difficult struggle for an integrated and balanced ecological development of the Nestos delta. It was by far the largest workshop so far in terms of participants and it yielded a political message to European decision makers and which can be seen as a valuable contribution of the "lake project" in the context of the ongoing reform discussions of EU policies.

