

Why Bother with Partnership?

*Positive Examples of Partnership in
European Funds from Central
and Eastern Europe*



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Introductory Note

Two and a half years after publishing “Structural Funds and Partnership”, SFteam made another attempt to examine how much progress had been made in the partnership between civil society and the authorities in CEE countries within the confines of the implementation of EU Regional/Cohesion policy and the use of EU funds. There had been a great deal of development in this period – both in positive and negative terms. However, we must admit that in spite of the growing number of positive cases and signs, there is still time left before we can learn all the lessons on how to work together.

The political development in some countries has verified our anxiety about the attitudes of governments and politicians towards the broader involvement of civil society in decision-making. Some optimism, however, may spring from the fact that there are positive cases of cooperation even under these hard conditions. Such cases are still in progress and we are planning to continue to follow them.

SFteam’s mission is to promote and support processes leading to the utilization of structural funds with the aim of maintaining sustainable development. We are convinced that the involvement of non-profit civil organizations in decision-making and partnership is the essential requirement for such processes. Since we are at the beginning of the programming of the next financial period for EU funds (2014 – 2020), we believe that our publication will help all our colleagues in CEE countries as well as our partners at the institutions and other stakeholders to set up meaningful and fruitful processes in their countries.

SFteam is a network of non-profit organizations from Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Latvia, the Netherlands, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia. I would hereby like to express my gratitude to our partners, and also thank for the data, with the help of which I could compile this publication.

Sofia, 29th April 2011
Petko Kovachev

The Approach

The partner organizations of SFteam in Central and Eastern Europe (in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Latvia, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia) participated in the research.

At the first stage, the team discussed the basic issues – goal, themes, organisation of work, and created the work plan.

The partners searched for cases not only from the experience of their own organisations, but also looked at examples of partnership practice in a broader range of environmental and other NGO communities in their countries and provided a description of the cases they were aware of. Although there have not been many such cases so far, we expect that good practices will grow in number with the progress of operational programmes.

Each partner prepared case studies, based on which the editor then compiled short introductory texts on each theme. Apart from these cases, further information was collected and used about other activities related to participation of NGOs in EU funds - from the editor's own experience, SFteam partners and desk research.

List of Abbreviations

CAP	Common Agricultural Policy
CBA	cost-benefit analysis
CEE	Central and Eastern Europe
CF	Cohesion Fund
CRESC	Regional Steering Committee (RO)
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
CSUEUF	Coalition for Sustainable Use of EU funds (BG)
EAB	Environmental Advisory Board (LT)
EC	European Commission
EE	energy efficiency
EIA	environmental impact assessment
EP	European Parliament
ERDF	European Regional Development Fund
ESF	European Social Fund
EU	European Union
IA	impact assessment
JROP	Joint Regional Operational Programme
LAG	Local Action Group (LEADER approach)
MA	Managing Authority
MC	Monitoring Committee
MOEW	Ministry of Environment and Waters
NDP	National Development Plan
NGOs	Non Governmental Organizations
NSC	National Society of Conservationists
NSRF	National Strategic Reference Framework
NTNP	National Thematic Network for Partnership (PL)
OP	Operational Programme
RES	Renewable Energy Source
ROP	Regional Operational Programme
SCF	Structural and Cohesion Funds
SEA	strategic environmental assessment
SF	Structural Funds
SFteam	Structural Funds Team for Sustainable Future
SNER	systems for nomination and election of representatives
UMIS	Unified Management Information System
WFD	Water Framework Directive
WG	working group

6 *Executive Summary*

The third report of the SFteam on implementation of the partnership principle with regard to the use of EU funds in CEE countries comes in the middle of the financial period 2007 – 2013, thus provides relevant information on the implementation of this important tool for EU policies. It may also serve as a guide for groups which monitor EU financial assistance on local, national or international levels.

In the first two reports (2004¹, 2009²), our experiences regarding the application of the partnership principle are summarised and used to shed light on practices that were found controversial or problematic. With the present report in general, we decided to take a positive approach and show examples of good practice and its benefits. Still it is to be admitted that there are hardly any cases that could be considered a hundred percent positive; one could always identify points or factors worth improving. Nonetheless, we hope that this collection of cases will give some incentive for the adaptation of good practice examples to national conditions and for the implementation of partnership in a broader sense.

As described in our previous report,

“the demand for the implementation of a partnership principle in programmes originates from several sources. One of them is the reformation of the European administration, which has, for 8 years, been a priority of the European Commission . The European Commission³ laid the EU under an obligation to cooperate more closely with regional and local authorities, and (besides these formal constructs) also with the wider civil society. This cooperation is not intended to be one way and communication among concerned parties should not be established merely for the implementation of European policies, which have been already agreed.”

Two years after publishing this report, we could conclude that the partnership principle was playing a more important role in programming, implementation and monitoring of EU funds. No doubt, there is still a lot to be done in making partnership a steady practice at all levels of governance and self-governance in our countries. But we found some promising results of joint stakeholders activities in Poland, Bulgaria, Hungary, Latvia, the Czech Republic, Romania and Slovakia. And even further ones could not be included in the current report for various reasons. There are cases in progress that may result in even better schemes of public involvement, thus securing a higher impact of the use of public money.

¹ Partnerships for Sustainable Development?, National Society of Conservationists, Budapest, 2004

² Structural Funds and Partnership, Center for Community Organizing, Prague, 2009

³ See the White Book of the EC on European Control of Public Issues, 2001.

Examples of good practice that can already be highlighted in the middle of the financial period include the initiative of the Marshal's Office of the Lodz region (Lodzkie voivodship) to introduce a model for participation of NGOs in regional annual action plans, which was subsequently recommended by the Polish government to be implemented in all regions as a good practice (see theme 3). Another case, also from Poland, is the establishment of the National Thematic Network for Partnership (NTNP) in June 2010 by the Coordinating Committee for the National Strategic Framework 2007-2013. The aim of the Network is to provide concrete support for the members of Monitoring Committees (MCs), especially to those which represent socio-economic partners. The aim of the support is to make their activities more effective and eliminate problems related to the implementation of structural funds in Poland. (see theme 2)

Authorities in the Czech Republic and Hungary also devoted some resources to support the involvement of NGOs in issues related to EU funds.

After 12 years of campaigning, there has been some positive progress in the well-known case of Kresna gorge in Bulgaria. Following the initiative of Bulgarian authorities, the long-tunnel option for the NATURA 2000 zone of the gorge has been accepted and a special monitoring committee for the project (Struma motorway, part of TEN-T corridor No 4) is going to be established.

Of course, we see the existing weaknesses and problems hindering broader and deeper partnership in CEE, too. While civil society is under pressure by the crisis on the one hand, on the other hand, government initiatives for a "strong state" have gained momentum, including the more centralised management of the shrinking financial resources. But hard times are also the best ones to motivate civil groups for leadership and be active in proposing positive solutions for the problems. It is not surprising that most of the partnership schemes described in the cases were initiated and promoted by civil society. We are aiming to acknowledge our colleagues' efforts in all countries of the region to introduce innovative practices for meaningful partnership for better and sustainable use of EU funds. Such practices would also easily serve the general transition towards post-crisis states and the EU in general.

Even with this promising background, we still have to voice our concerns regarding attempts of authorities which would ruin existing good practices. One such example is that of the Ministry of Environment and Waters in Bulgaria which, by disregarding the established internal election system of environmental NGOs, would open the door for the participation of "NGOs" representing corporate or political interests.

To make the examples of good practice more useful, we combined them in seven thematic groups:

- Access to information;
- Bottom-up and coordinated planning;
- Participation in programming;
- Financing for sustainability;
- Delegation in committees;
- Participation of NGOs in project evaluation;
- Cooperation among NGOs.

Each theme starts with an introduction that summarises the findings from the experience of the SFteam members.

The following messages may be gathered from the case studies:

- The partnership between NGOs and institutions is still mainly a result of civil initiatives, but there are examples of good cases on activities initiated by various authorities, too.
- Effective, formally organised schemes for partnership often result from single issue projects or programmes, not from long theoretical debates.
- Partnership principle is not yet effectively implemented in the development phase of regional policy. This is a crucial problem, as EU funds should be planned on the basis of or alongside regional plans and strategies. This is to be a great opportunity to spread partnership on local and regional levels, to promote real decentralisation in the planning of needs and funds that would support solutions for them.
- Within the partnership initiatives, NGOs, (or CSOs in a broader sense) may provide very good expertise in a number of areas related to EU funding:
 - independent monitoring and control;
 - qualified experts in regional planning, programming of OPs, project and programme evaluation;
 - various services under outsourcing schemes (e.g. social issues);
 - managing projects in specific areas, e.g., nature protection;
 - moderating dialogue and communication with communities concerned, etc.
- For a fruitful partnership, it is crucial that all partners be treated equally – providing information in time and in full scale, equal opportunities for comments and other input, taking these alternative proposals as seriously as the ones that come from institutions, etc.

It is worth discussing further whether a more balanced structure of working groups, monitoring committees or other bodies with more representatives of stakeholders (e.g. 50:50 percent) would improve the work on EU funds in our countries.

The rest of the findings, conclusions and recommendations of the SFteam can be found in the presented themes and case studies.

Let me again refer back to the previous SFteam report:

“Partnership principle became one of the key principles of EU cohesion policy. Based on this principle, the partners take part in programming, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of cohesion policy on more levels (regional, national and multinational) and by involving more participants (local/regional authorities, private organizations and organizations of civil society). Partnership principle again gained importance when the financial and operational framework for regional policy for the 2007–2013 period was established. It also includes organizations and civil societies, ecological partners, non-governmental partners, and authorities responsible for equality between women and men.”⁴

The cases SFteam partners observed in 2010 – 2011 fully reaffirm this conclusion.

Nowadays CEE countries face the next challenge: to organise and conduct the programming of EU funding for their second full financial cycle (2014 – 2020) on the basis of lessons learnt in the last 7 years. Having in mind the vast number of recent problems, partly resulting from the global crisis and further economic challenges, like the energy crisis between the EU and Russia, the nuclear disaster in Japan and revision of the EU Common Agriculture Policy among others, partners of SFteam are confident that effective and meaningful partnership would bring strong impetus for the development of the regions towards an effective use of resources, thus paving the path for sustainability.

⁴ See also paragraph 11 of General Regulation (EC) No 1083/2006.

Theme 1: Access to Information

Access to information is one of the most crucial tools for civil society to understand whether authorities and businesses are making good or bad investments and their potential impact on citizens and their lives. Timely access to information is a precondition of meaningful public participation. Not surprisingly, EU is a member of Aarhus Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters. The EU's own legislation on Access to information⁵ existed even before the Convention itself was signed, ratified and put in force.

In the domain of EU funds, access to information is essential. The EU Regional policy and related structural and Cohesion funds support projects with diverse, but definitely significant impact on the local, regional or national public. Therefore, using the procedures for access to information, citizens and NGOs could analyse independently potential benefits and losses, and to propose better alternatives at an early stage.

Although SFteam found only one clear example of good access to information (Slovakia), virtually all cases in this brochure include this topic in one way or another. Moreover, the practice of NGOs that monitor EU funds countrywide show that there is a growing number of good initiatives and practices, initiated by different stakeholders. The problematic point is to turn those into a long-term steady practice elsewhere.

The Slovak case seems to be an average one for CEE countries. Although authorities are obliged by law to publish most of the documents regarding implementation and control of EU funds, there are many obstacles preventing access to information about EU funded projects and the processes of monitoring and implementation. Current development in the country shows the progress towards more transparency through a greater level of active publishing of information. However, barriers still exist that prevent access to information by citizens.

The situation is more or less the same in Bulgaria, where the Law on access to public information and the respective chapters of the Law on environmental protection (dealing with the Aarhus convention) provides very good opportunities for citizens.

⁵ COUNCIL DIRECTIVE 90/313/EEC of 7 June 1990 on the freedom of access to information on the environment

However, under the disguise of the Law on classified information, institutions are trying to keep information they feel would be used against them away from the greater public.

In mid-2010, the Unified Management Information System (UMIS) was launched in Bulgaria and subsequently its public window was also activated. It is a good step towards the transparency of EU-funded projects.

SCFs in Hungary are also managed by a UMIS system (called EMIR). Several of its functions are publicly accessible through the website of the National Development Agency, the central coordinating government institution of EU funds. E.g., JELEK system, based on GIS, UMIS and official social and economic statistical data, makes it possible to create reports about the use of EU funds since 2004 on a territorial and funding scheme basis. The data analysed and presented there include the number of project proposals submitted and awarded, as well as the amount of funding applied for and granted. The system also gives access to the description of each funded project. Another function provides a search opportunity in the database of financed projects. Here, along with basic information about the projects (beneficiary, name of project, amount, timeline), a short description of contracted activities and, in some cases, even the names of the members of the project evaluation committee are published.

Whether you have regional cooperation between civil society and institutions in Poland or Hungary, participation in programming (Bulgaria), or campaigns against bad infrastructure projects, funded with EU money, NGOs deserve information to make their impact valuable. It is not easy to summarise various types of cooperation or lack of it between civil groups and institutions, it would take pages to do so. The variety of relations regarding EU funds and access to information, however, helps to set up a short list of achievements, problems and recommendations.

On the basis of our long-term work and experience, we may summarise the following achievements, problems and recommendations for improving the working of EU funds with the public.

Achievements:

- legislation on access to information exists in all new MC's;
 - Aarhus Convention is in force;
 - there are experienced civil groups and individuals; which are, in all countries, supported by lawyers with good qualifications in the access to information;
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- NGOs are able to cooperate with EU institutions when governments/ regional authorities deny information;
- the media are in constant search for cases that are lost and justice is prevented due to non-access to information;
- the costs of meeting requests for public information are typically low.⁶ In some countries, NGOs even enjoy some allowance in this regard. The costs of court cases against information denial are also generally low in most countries.

Problems:

- governments often do not provide „passive“ information (obligatory publications, registers, etc.);
- too broad definitions of terms like „national security“, „business and/ or trade confidentiality“ attempt to hide sensitive information on environmental, social and financial problems;
- often the rule of overriding public interest is not used;
- institutions do their best to delay information in order to cover some occurring problems.

Recommendations:

- institutions should make an effort to fulfil their obligations to provide as much passive information as possible;
- clear and straightforward definitions should be provided for national security, business and trade confidentiality;
- the rule of overriding public interest should be obligatory in all court cases against the denial of information;
- no confidentiality should exist for public utilities and national/regional monopolies, funded by public money;
- there should be a rule not to use EU money for programmes/projects that deny access to information.

⁶ It is only in some isolated cases that data owners abuse their position by imposing extreme costs.

Case Study (Slovakia):

Access to Information on the Implementation of EU Funds in Slovakia

Background

Effective public control depends on detailed information about the activities and decisions carried out by public authorities and projects financed by funds. Although authorities are obliged by law to publish most of the documents regarding implementation and control of EU funds, there are many obstacles to gain access to information about EU funded projects and the process of monitoring and implementation of EU funds. Current development in Slovakia shows the progress towards more transparency through a greater level of active publishing of information. Even with these steps, barriers exist preventing access to information for citizens, which are summarized in this case study.

Publishing of Information

Low accessibility of information is one of the key issues that hinder the monitoring of the implementation of EU funds. Civic control of funds is often hampered by the lack of information about the projects, the activities and decisions of ministries, monitoring and evaluation committees. Slovak citizens have two ways of obtaining information that is not published on the web of the OPs:

- A. Through requests for information.
- B. Through the central registry of contracts.

A. Information requests:

In accordance with the Law on free access to information, passed in 2000, state bodies, self-governing bodies and other public institutions are obliged to provide any information at their disposal when requested, with the exception of classified information (state or trade secret or copyrights). Information can be requested by any citizen without stating their purpose.

Thanks to this mechanism, citizens and NGOs are able to obtain detailed information about approved projects, which would otherwise be inaccessible to them. In practice, there are, however, various problems in obtaining information. Official bodies in some cases refuse to provide information referring to trade secrets and copyrights, or stating that they don't have the information in the form and structure required.

B. Publishing of State Contracts:

In 2010, as an effort to increase transparency of the utilisation of public finance, an obligation for all public bodies and institutions to publish all their contracts related to public procurement was put into practice by a series of act amendments. This dramatically improved accessibility of information on EU funds.

A central registry of contracts was launched in January 2011. Citizens may find prompt information on what amount and under what conditions is being spent, for example, on technical assistance. The validity of all contracts is dependent on being published in the register. This also refers to contracts with financial contribution from EU funds. The contract between the provider and the beneficiary has a standard form and doesn't include any detailed information about the project. However, one of the appendices, the so-called "subject of support" contains information on the goals and targets of the project, the activities, the impact and output indicators, as well as the budget overview.

Conclusions

Compared to the level of information provision before 2010 (the majority of MAs published only the project title, the applicant and the amount applied for), the reform presents a great progress. There is still need for some information necessary to evaluate the quality and efficiency of projects thoroughly. The information needed includes: the project summary which is a part of the project application, and contains the justification of the project, the description of activities, outputs and results, as well as a detailed budget.

Theme 2: Bottom-up and coordinated planning

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This chapter consists of two closely related sub themes: “Coordination between local/regional and national priorities, cooperation between these levels” and “Bottom-up planning of programmes/participation in programming”. The cases for both themes came from Poland, which is another reason to treat them in one chapter.

Coordination between Local / Regional and National Priorities, Cooperation between these Levels

Coordination between local and regional priorities on the one hand and national ones on the other hand is not well developed in the new Member states. Having a long-lasting tradition of centralization in political life and the economy, some time would be needed to accomplish the total decentralisation of decision-making and realize meaningful coordination between local/regional and national priorities.

Well managed cooperation between the two (or three) levels of territorial administration (and therefore, appropriate definition and implementation of their priorities) is a key to a good regional policy. Regional policy is the one, in which local and regional priorities are defined, strategised, prioritised and implemented. Financial planning and sources are also done on this level.

A recent study in Bulgaria shows that there hasn't been any coherent approach between regional policy planning and programming of EU funds. This situation led to a lot of confusion, preventing bottom-up approach and resulting in many problems between Managing Authorities, Monitoring Committees and local/regional authorities all having their own plans, expectations and political games.

Our team hasn't been able to find many examples of good cooperation between these two (or three) levels. The case chosen from Poland shows, however, that it is possible to organise positive and feasible partnership initiatives/schemes across programmes, in particular, EU-funded ones.

The National Thematic Network for Partnership (NTNP) was established in June 2010 by the *Coordinating Committee for the National Strategic Framework 2007-2013*. The Network will be in force till the end of the current programming period. The aim of the Network is to provide concrete support for the members of Monitoring Committees (MCs), especially those, which represent socio-economic partners. The aim of the support is to make their activities more effective and eliminate problems connected with the implementation of structural funds in Poland. The term “socio-economic partners” includes employers’ and employees’ unions, non-governmental organizations and representatives of academic institutions. They make up about 30% of the members of the Polish MCs.

The NTNP focuses on all stakeholders in the Monitoring Committees and is aimed to promote partnership among the members of the MCs, working out tools for partnership, opening room for a wider discussion on structural funds, increasing effectiveness of all stakeholders, monitoring the legislation on regional development, etc.

Started as an answer to the problem of the low sense of influence on real decision-making among the civic and social representatives of MCs, the NTNP got the support of the Coordinating Committee of the NSRF and the *Polish Ministry for Regional Development*. The costs of the Network are covered from the *Technical Assistance Operational Program 2007-2013*.

A very important side effect of the Network is that it is likely to strengthen the entire civil society in Poland indirectly, where (as in all ex-communist countries) the lack of trust in relations between different groups and institutions can still be recognised.

One of the advantages of the Network is that it provides six practicable instruments:

- a national annual conference;
- regional meetings – held every 2/3 months in one of the 16 Polish regions;
- analysis and expertise (thematic studies);
- competition for the monitoring committee with best partnership practices
- horizontal exchange of information using the Knowledge Base, administered by the Ministry for Regional Development;
- various educational activities, depending on needs.

NGOs and other stakeholders are awaiting the results of this experiment. 150 out of about 800 people are already involved in the Network and the ambitious plan is to involve all members of the MCs and their alternates, as well.

Recommendations

Ultimately, SFteam calls on all governments to synchronise the processes of developing regional policies in their countries with the programming of EU funds both on framework and operational levels. The principles of the recommended synchronisation are:

- strong regional policy oriented towards sustainable development of regions and communities;
- decentralisation of responsibilities, rights and obligations in developing regional policies;
- bottom-up planning of both regional development and funding (incl. EU funding) as much as appropriate;
- continuous coordination.

Case Study (Poland):

National Thematic Network for Partnership – Bottom-up Initiative to Enhance Partnership across EU-funded Programmes

The National Thematic Network for Partnership was established in June 2010 by the Coordinating Committee for the National Strategic Framework 2007-2013. The Network is to be in force till the end of the current programming period. The aim of the Network is to provide concrete support for the members of Monitoring Committees (MCs), especially those which represent socio-economic partners. The aim of the support is to make their activities more effective and eliminate problems connected to the implementation of structural funds in Poland. The term 'socio-economic partners' includes employers' and employees' unions, non-governmental organizations and representatives of academic institutions. They make up about 30% of the members of the Polish MCs.

The operational objectives of the Network are as follows:

- popularisation of the idea of partnership among members of Monitoring Committees,
- working out a system of instruments for implementing the partnership principle,
- providing opportunity for a wider discussion of important and urgent issues related to structural funds,
- increasing the effectiveness of the participation of socio-economic partners, the government, regional and local authorities in MCs,
- strengthening the relations between social and civil partners in order to avoid neglecting important civil and social needs,
- raising public acceptance of the decisions of the MCs and the activities of the institutions in the context of cohesion policy,
- monitoring legislation on regional development, especially the elements concerning partnership,
- working out recommendations.

The National Thematic Network for Partnership was established as an answer to the problem of low sense of influence on real decision-making among civic and social representatives of MCs. The *Working Group for Civil Society* within the *Coordinating Committee of National Strategic Reference Framework* decided to address this issue. The *Polish Ministry for Regional Development* gave its strong support for the establishment of the Network. It is to be mentioned that the costs of maintaining the Network are covered by the Ministry by the Technical Assistance Operational Program 2007-2013.

The Network also strives to strengthen the entire civil society in Poland indirectly. In a country with a communist heritage, the lack of trust in relations between different groups can still be felt.

The first step for the solution of this problem came in the form of a training course organized by the Working group and the Ministry for Regional Development in 2009. About 10% of the civil and social partners – members of the MCs – participated in this event. The conference set a precedent. It was the first meeting of the representatives of NGOs, employers' and employees' unions as well as representatives of the academic circles from all over Poland, where they had an opportunity to talk and share experiences. The meeting focused on important issues for the entire Operational Program 2007-2013. At the end of the conference, the opinions of the participants were summed up as recommendations in the following fields:

- civil society,
- selection criteria of projects,
- evaluation,
- equal treatment/gender policy.

However, the most important recommendation was the idea of establishing the *National Thematic Network for Partnership*.

Authors of the recommendations declared their willingness to cooperate more deeply in supporting partnership in the implementation of public policies. Their previous experience showed that partnership between public administration and civil institutions was effective only by means of wide consultation, respect for partners, autonomy, as well as inclusion in the system of decision making. That is why the objective behind the creation of the Network was the provision of an instrument of permanent exchange of information and experiences, as well as promotion of good practices that strengthen the role of socio-economic partners in programming, implementation and evaluation of public policies, especially structural funds on every level of implementation.

In order to carry these out, the Network has six instruments:

- a national annual conference on various aspects of partnership (the first took place in October 2010, the second is planned for the first half of 2011),
- regional meetings – held every 2/3 months in one of the 16 Polish regions, meetings are dedicated to actual difficulties in the work of members of MCs, training, workshops and exchange of experiences (the first was held in November 2010 in Lodz, 4 more are scheduled for 2011),
- analysis and expertise – possibility to order thematic studies,
- competition for monitoring committees to identify the best application of the partnership principle,
- horizontal exchange of information - using the Knowledge Base administrated by the Ministry for Regional Development,
- other educational activities, depending on needs.

The Network is still in its start-up phase. So far about 150 people attended the Network meetings. They gradually tap into the information system. There are an estimated 800 members of the MCs and their alternates which represent socio-economic partners. At the same time, some people are members of several committees.

It seems that the greatest potential lies in the regional meetings that the Network organises. Each of these is attended by up to 80 people. Meetings are devoted to current problems with the implementation of European funds in a particular region, partnership principle, issues of gender mainstreaming and equal opportunities, sustainable development and civil dialogue.

Each regional meeting is open to all socio-economic partners from all committees in Poland, but also to representatives of public administration, especially from the particular region. The meetings concentrate on raising awareness as well as on information exchange between participants. The idea of the meetings is to develop solutions and recommendations for problematic issues, both on a general level and for a particular program.

The National Thematic Network for the Partnership is an example of real-life implementation of partnership and good governance principles. This type of mechanism should be used more widely, because it builds trust between the partners in dialogue and is an investment in social capital. Regarding threats to the successful functioning of the network: one could be the insufficient use by the socio-economic partners of the opportunities created, while another one could be the tendency of authorities to limit its role. The practical results of the Network's operation can be evaluated during the year 2011.

Bottom-up Planning of Programmes and Participation in Programming

The bottom-up planning of programmes seems to be a desired, but not yet implemented tool for programming of operational programmes in new Member countries. In spite the fact that some attempts were made in this direction (e.g. partially in Bulgaria), the main approach still in use by governments is top-down. It is the central governments that organise processes, and very often they are preparing the legislative framework for programming without any consultation.

The stakeholders (local and regional authorities, NGOs, business associations, etc.) are often involved at the stage of working groups that are to prepare the drafts of the OPs. The case of Bulgaria between 2005-07 shows that all stakeholders other than the central authorities were placed in front of a fait accompli with the preliminary work of the ministries that they were not able to influence significantly.

However, there is a good case of participation in programming of the European Social Fund in the Lodzkie Region in Poland.

The detailed plan of spending, the financial breakdown between fields of intervention, their forms and amounts are decided in advance for every year. Goals and indicators of the *Operational Program Human Capital* give the overall framework. This program manages the entire ESF allocation in Poland. Each of the sixteen Polish regions has its own Monitoring Subcommittee, which is in charge of the regional component of the annual *Action Plan* of the OP Human Capital. A Monitoring Subcommittee consists of representatives of both regional and government authorities as well as representatives of socio-economic partners. This category includes NGOs, trade unions, employers' organizations and academic institutions. The actual participation of these different groups varies across regions and primarily depends on the attitude of the Marshal's Office.

After a few years of neglecting the impact of socio-economic partners in the region, in 2009 about 30 NGOs participated in a consultative meeting on the draft Action plan. They were listened to by the representatives of Marshal's Office, the Regional Employment Office and the Managing Authority. The proposals of the NGOs were accepted almost fully, thus, opening a meaningful future cooperation for 2010 and beyond.

Probably the best outcome of the case is that the Managing Authority of the OP Human Capital reviewed the process in Lodzkie positively and recommended this working method for Action Plans across all regions. But the cooperation among national and regional NGOs and the approach of administration when civil partners are taken seriously, are also to be sought after as good examples.

Recommendations

- Cooperation among national and regional NGOs is useful in order to channel information about planning processes among each other. Their cooperation also has a potential to take joint and coordinated action for common priorities at various levels.
- Planning and programming should be carried out in a bottom-up approach, where national plans rely on sub-regional and regional planning which follow EU and national level guidelines and principles. Adherence to national sustainable development strategies is a must.

Case Study (Poland):

Programming the European Social Fund in the Lodzkie Region (Poland) - an Example of Participatory Process

The European Social Fund in Poland is implemented both on central and regional levels. The detailed plan of spending, the financial breakdown between fields of intervention, its forms and amounts are decided in advance for every year. Goals and indicators of the Operational Program Human Capital provide the overall framework. This program governs the entire ESF allocation in Poland. Planning on the regional level must take into account the regional socio-economic circumstances, e.g., unemployment rates or access to education on all levels. There are special instruments for this annual programming called Action Plans. They are prepared by the Monitoring Committee. In case of the regional component, each of the sixteen Polish regions established its own Monitoring Subcommittee.

This body is responsible for the Action Plans for the particular region. The decisions of the subcommittees need to be accepted by the central Monitoring Committee. Final decisions regarding the Action Plans are adopted in late autumn each year. The work on their development takes months.

The Intermediate Authority responsible for the implementation of the regional component of the OP Human Capital in each (self-governed) region is the Marshal's Office (provincial government). Thus, the Marshal (provincial governor) is the Chairman of the Monitoring Subcommittee. The Monitoring Subcommittee consists of representatives of both the regional and government authorities as well as representatives of socio-economic partners. This category includes NGOs, trade unions, employers' organizations and academic institutions. The actual participation of these different groups varies across regions and primarily depends on the attitude of the Marshal's Office.

The system of programming the regional component of Human Capital evolved in an interesting way in the Lodzkie region. In the first few years of the Program's implementation, regional authorities restrained the socio-economic partners' impact on the final shape of the annual Action Plan. In fact, consultation was limited to a few hours of discussion during the Subcommittee meeting. In addition, the MS had

to work under time pressure because the Marshal's Office had little time to negotiate the proposal with the Managing Authority.

In October 2009, representatives of the Regional NGO Council in Lodzkie, who participate in the Subcommittee held a consultation meeting on the draft of the Action Plan for 2010. The Council received organizational and financial support from the Polish Federation of NGOs. About 30 NGOs from the region attended the meeting. The draft Action Plan was presented by representatives of two offices responsible for the implementation of the regional component of the OP Human Capital (Marshal's Office and the Regional Employment Office). Representatives of the Managing Authority and the Federation of NGOs were invited to the meeting as advisors and observers. The purpose of the meeting was to conduct a real public consultation, based on discussion and dialogue. Representatives of the non-governmental sector actively discussed and presented a number of proposals. Most of them concerned the importance of the points for meeting strategic criteria used in competitions for grants. Three days after the Monitoring Subcommittee meeting, all the recommendations were formally accepted by non-governmental members and included into the final version of the document that was sent to the Managing Authority.

This meeting set a precedent. It allowed both parties to see and understand the conditions under which both of them operate. The following year, the Marshal's Office began working on the Action Plan already in spring. In April, the consultative conference was organized. It was attended by around 100 people. Among others, the Deputy Marshal, the Deputy Director of the Managing Authority, the Chairman of the Regional NGOs Council in Lodzkie and a representative of the Federation participated. As previously, a lively discussion took place. In 2010, a working group was established by the Subcommittee to work on an Action Plan. Consultation of different kinds (in writing, through a website, in meetings) went on from spring to late autumn and satisfied every partner in the process.

The example of Lodzkie showed how much could be achieved through the combined forces of national and regional NGO federations. The other important factor is the high activity and initiative of NGO representatives in committees. And last but not least, administration must devote time and attention to treat civic partners seriously. Consultation carried out this way doesn't result in decision paralysis. This argument is often used as a reason for the limited use of such methods. The added value of the process is the building of social capital, leading even towards trust in state institutions.

The Managing Authority of OP Human Capital positively reviewed the process in Lodzkie and recommended this working method on Action Plans across all regions.

The experience gained in the region has also been used by the National Thematic Network for Partnership. The Network is currently (January 2011) working on the standardization of the schedule for the development of the annual regional Action Plan for ESF. The model was prepared on the basis of the process in Lodzkie.

The approach applied in Lodzkie to the development of the Action Plan, especially the process of opening it to different groups and their representatives, is an example of good practice. Making the discussion on the Action Plan broader and the inclusion of many stakeholders interested in the region's development, not only members of the Subcommittee, result in better procedures and requirements that fit potential beneficiaries. The disadvantage of the method could be a possible threat of some institutions or people having more influence on the final shape of the Action Plan than others, as well as the dependence of the success on the activity and interest of the members of the Monitoring Subcommittee.

Theme 3: Participation in Programming

Environmental NGOs from new member countries had been prepared for the programming for 2007 – 2013 well in advance. The leading among them were mainly national groups of the CEE Bankwatch Network and FOE-Europe, as well as some powerful local groups of the environmental and social movement (eg. in Romania). Often these groups formed coalitions (Bulgaria, Latvia, Hungary) and join their capacity and expertise for better participation in the programming. In Latvia there was also strong cooperation between NGOs working on environmental, education, gender and social issues. They informed each other about key positions and challenges in each sector and attempted to coordinate their demands. This approach of coordinating demands prevented NGOs from different sectors to come up with contradicting proposals, but instead reinforced each others' demands.

Meaningful and democratic public participation hasn't had long-lasting traditions in CEE countries. The countries also vary in their legislative basis regarding participation and in some countries (e.g., Romania) the procedures for civil participation are not well established. Even in countries with advanced legislation, there was general fear within the authorities to open the programming of EU funds for a broad participation of the representatives of civil society.

Nevertheless, in spite of the general problems with programming in most of the countries, it seems that participation in the process concluded with a number of positive examples and lessons learned.

The most important one is that NGOs – being only generally prepared for participation in an otherwise unfamiliar process driven by different and sometimes contradictory interests – achieved everything mainly on account of their self-organisation and their own initiatives. Whether it was pressure on officials to accept civil representatives (Bulgaria), protests (Romania), advocacy work (Hungary), participation in formal consultation meetings (Poland) or a mixture of all these and even further approaches – civil groups managed to fulfill achievements due to their own active and continuous hard work. In general, even many institutional players recognised these achievements as of common benefit.

Some of these achievements are:

- improvement of the governmental internet tool for public consultation (Hungary);
- model case for participation of NGOs in regional annual action plans, later on recommended by the authorities to be implemented by all regions as good practice (Poland);

- NGOs and Ministry of Environment supported each others' ideas (Latvia);
- special information website with time-line of the programming process and important deadlines, draft documents, meetings comments from line ministries, NGOs and the European Commission (Latvia);
- miscellaneous achievements in the development of OPs (Bulgaria, Romania), etc.

One definite success was that more and broader information than ever was disclosed to and discussed with CSOs and other stakeholders. We hope that institutions learnt their lesson: timely disclosure of information during the debates on strategic documents, plans and programmes helps to find better solutions and make things work.

Not all of these achievements are perfect or stable throughout the years; at the end of the day the new programming process for post-2014 EU funding will prove their stability or otherwise. However, it is clear that good organisation and good arguments by civil society could bring about better and more open procedures and could improve the contents of the programmes.

It is very important to point out that in some countries (Bulgaria, Hungary) NGOs organised their own system for the internal and independent election of the representatives of civil society in the working groups and/or committees. Though some of the responsible institutions in different countries did not make use of the system in selecting representatives of NGOs, it is proven that this is one of the best practical achievements of civil society elsewhere.

The fact that consultation in some countries or between some institutions and CSOs went beyond formalities also presents the way the work could be done easier, faster and without trouble or hesitation by most of the parties.

The main difficulty for non-governmental stakeholders in participation seems to be the unclear approach of the programming. There were cases of processes and procedures organised top-down and bottom-up (and in various mixtures) that confused communities and NGOs. In fact, it is very natural that some of the activities are done one way, while others the other way. One cannot plan the national transport system bottom-up. By the same token, the top-down planning of local and regional goals would be almost disastrous. Therefore, a preliminary schedule for the organisation of the different processes within the frame of the programming, made available to all participants in due time would improve the meaningful input of all parties.

A problem still exists with the inclusion of representatives of civil society (except for trade unions and employees' associations) within the "social and economic partners" category. Poland is a single positive example, while other CEE governments are reluctant to take this step in favour of civil society.

A long-lasting problem is rooted in the internal and external limitations of the NGO sector. This theme would require a study on its own. However, it is to be mentioned here that any participatory process (and the programming of EU funds is not an exception) brings a major risk when pushing NGOs towards being providers of services and consultants, thus diminishing and marginalising their role as watchdogs and keepers of public interest, even though both processes and functions are essential. This risk is recognised by some authorities (e.g., in Bulgaria). The solution must be found before this risk turns into reality.

The experience on cross-sectoral communication and coordination between NGOs gained in Latvia is used nowadays in Bulgaria, where a wide network of various NGOs and civil coalitions joined forces to participate in the programming for 2014 – 2020 financial period.

Case Study (Romania):

Successful Intervention of the Representatives of NGOs in the Regional Operational Program ax 1.1 in the Region of Central Transylvania, Romania

In the framework of the Regional Operational Program (ROP) ax 1.1, approximately 14 million Euros were allocated to the town of Târgu Mureş to support the implementation of the Integrated Urban Development Plan (IUDP), which was to be elaborated in cooperation with local stakeholders. As a result of the intervention of the representatives of NGOs in the Regional Steering Committee (CRESC), public participation in the elaboration of the IUDP was significantly improved.

The budget of the ROP ax 1.1. was established to give financial support for the specific needs of towns for their development. The condition for the allocation of the money was the realization of an integrated development plan, which also represented the long term vision of the development of the town. For the establishment of a long term vision, the participation of the public at large is absolutely necessary, because the development plan has to be acknowledged by the population, not only by the actual administration of the town.

Romania has no long tradition of public participation and the procedures are not well established. Therefore, in this case the town administration (the town hall) considered the opportunity of submitting a project just as a usual possibility and decided to allocate the available sum to the construction of a road through the town forest, a project which had been opposed by environmental organizations for years. This proposal was communicated to the Regional Development Agency, and the representatives of the NGOs from Mures County were informed about it at the meeting of the Regional Steering Committee (CRESC).

The representatives of the NGOs in CRESC informed the NGOs about the proposal of the town hall and the NGOs protested against the project. The representatives of the NGOs in CRESC informed all parties involved about the controversial nature of the project and that it was not a suitable proposal for this type of financing line, which was supposed to be based on the principle of wide consensus. Subsequently, the town hall withdrew this proposal and submitted a different one.

The participation of the representatives of NGOs in the Steering Committee (CRESC) can be very useful. It is our recommendation for Romanian NGOs in the future to fight to become members in the CRESC in all regions, because this way they can represent the interests of environmental NGOs, and may have an influence on the development of their region.

Case Study (Bulgaria):

Participation in Programming: from First Attempts (2005) towards Meaningful Impact (2011)

In late 2004 some 10-15 environmental NGOs in Bulgaria got together to form a coalition for participation in the programming of EU Structural funds for the 2007 – 2013 financial period. They started a campaign for the inclusion of civil society and managed to take part in three out of the eight working groups, two WGs on OPs and the WG on NSRF, as well as in the WG on the National Plan for Rural Development. The participation in the programming led to a number of small successes and a lot more lessons were learned. Recently, a new study made by NGOs shows how the lessons learnt could be used during the programming of Structural funds for the 2014 – 2020 period.

The first meaningful attempt by the Bulgarian government to include various stakeholders in the programming process opened new possibilities for environmental groups in Bulgaria. Though environmental NGOs are not officially recognised as “social partners” (are neither trade-unions or associations of employers), some of the most active ones managed to organise themselves in a coalition and took part in the programming process that happened in 2005 – 2007. NGOs were active in:

- the working group for NSRF;
- the working groups for OP Environment, OP Transport and the National Plan for Rural Areas;
- public meetings, the so-called Forums, which are a set of meetings of all the WGs aimed at making the whole programming a coherent process. The Forum-approach was financially supported by the Swiss government.)

The process itself was well structured from the beginning, with different stages, and discussions after every stage among WGs, and cross-institutional communication was urged unlike in most other cases... The implementation, however, was very poor due to:

- the lack of knowledge and experience about the process;
- the lack of knowledge and experience about the essence and requirements of the EU Cohesion Policy;
- national elections and change of government in the middle of 2005;
- problems among the institutions and within institutions;
- incorrect political implications, etc.

In a working environment that may barely be called normal, participating NGOs tried to focus on several issues, both on participation and on the aspect of problematic contents.

There seemed to be quite many options for participation, not all of them democratic enough. For example, some ministries invited NGOs to participate on their own, bypassing the election procedure of environmental NGOs. There were even cases when a single person was supposed to decide whom to invite. Nevertheless, there were also positive examples (the WG on NSRF, the WG on OP Environment), where the respective institutions not only formally ensured a slot for environmental NGOs, but also actively made use of their expertise in formal and informal ways.

In the case of the WG of OP Environment, the representatives of NGOs supported actively the proposals of the Ministry of Environment and Waters (MOEW) to focus funding on infrastructure (such as waste water treatment and waste management projects) under the “heavy directives” (WFD, Waste Directive) in order to be able to meet the requirements of Chapter 22 of Bulgaria’s Accession Treaty.

At the same time, NGOs were the strongest proponents of the prioritisation of biodiversity (protected areas and NATURA 2000), that wasn’t in the focus of others. But as a result of the work of NGOs throughout the negotiations, biodiversity was finally accepted as one of the three main priority areas (“axes”) of the OP Environment.

NGOs opposed several other proposals, which were finally removed from the OP Environment with semi-public support of the MOEW. These were the prioritisation of mining waste, advocated very heavily by the mining industry (market distortions) and the inclusion of support for renewable energy sources (RES) and energy efficiency (EE) in the OP, which was finally included in the OP Competitiveness by the Ministry of Economy and Energy).

Unfortunately, due to the deficiencies of the process and the pressure of time (the end of 2006-beginning of 2007), NGOs were neglected at the last stage of the programming. This led to some problems, like the inclusion of non-agreed projects in the list of major projects by the OP Environment, and problems with the SEA of the OPs).

Since the end of 2009, a group of NGOs, including CSUEUFB, OSI Bulgaria, Civil Activity Forum and other social and childcare NGOs got together with the idea to prepare themselves for participation in the upcoming programming of EU funds for the 2014 – 2020 financial period. As part of the preparatory work, a study analysing the programming process for the 2007 – 2013 period was envisaged.

The study⁷ made by a team of experts at NGOs and freelancers, led by OSI Bulgaria, concludes that the process was a big failure. First of all, there was no coherency between regional policy planning (municipal, regional and NUTS 2 strategies) and programming. This led to a number of discrepancies and contradictions between the strategic documents and the OPs. Some of the recommendations also focus on meaningful public participation, which would allow them not only to “participate”, but to bring positive impact on the results.

The study also proposes an algorithm for better programming as such. Based on this, the Coalition and the broader network of NGOs work on implementing the ideas on civil participation in programming.

⁷ Konstantinov, Dragomir. (ed.) Challenges to the new programming of EU funds in Bulgaria after 2013 based on the analysis of the experience in 2007 – 2013, Sofia, March, 2011. available at: http://www.osf.bg/downloads/File/Fonds_after%202013_FINAL.pdf in Bulgarian

Case Study (Hungary):*Participation in Programming –
Consultation on Project Proposals*

Since 2007, the National Development Agency in Hungary used to publish each call for proposals for EU funds for public comments on the web, on one single website (www.nfu.hu), prior to the opening of the call. This practice is the result of long-term NGO advocacy and, despite its deficiencies, one also has to acknowledge its novelty and progressive features.

In 2007, the National Development Agency (government institution managing EU funds) restructured its website and introduced a registration system for those interested in EU funds issues. Registration was simple and accessible to anyone with an internet access; the minimum information required was a name and an email address. Giving the title, position, name, type and contact details of the organization or the private person were optional. Those registered got regular notices about documents newly opened for public consultation. Registration, however, was a tool of convenience for the user only because anyone could find and access the documents published for consultation.

In 2007, the first year of the new EU budgetary period, dozens of calls for proposals were expected to be opened. After four years of varying transparency and public consultation practices on programming documents, in 2007, the government decided to publish the calls for proposals for EU funds on the National Development Agency's website for public consultation, prior to opening the call. The information about a call usually included: the draft call itself, application guide, draft budget form, project assessment and evaluation criteria. The Agency published Excel questionnaires with sections dedicated to certain parts of the call (guide, form, aims, beneficiaries, financial or selection criteria, budget etc.) to be filled in with comments. The Agency also allocated an email address to each call to receive and easily manage the comments from the public. Public consultation on a call was usually open for about one or two weeks (not much but still something). After concluding the debate, the Agency published a file with the comments received and the responses of drafting experts. With the high number of calls published, it would require a lengthy research to assess the level and scale of comments incorporated or neglected.

In 2008, the National Development Agency gave a new function and meaning to online registration; the documents open for public consultation could be commented on through an online forum which required prior registration. This had the advantage that those commenting could also reflect on each others' comments, while the necessary registration probably made them "moderate" themselves as well. (One could still anticipate that there was some internal moderation, too.) Unfortunately, along with the introduction of this online forum-based consultation system, the possibility of submitting comments through email was abolished (or not evident at least). The same system continued operating ever since, with a single opportunity to submit comments to calls for proposals through the online forum.

Another important feature of the online consultation was that one could and had to chose from a pop-up menu on which document or chapter (just like in the questionnaire above) of the call they wanted to comment on. This probably made it easier for the drafting team to handle the comments on the one hand, but on the other hand, it also limited the possibilities of commenting (e.g., no space for comments on the general content or aim of the call).

One could think that the opening of calls for public consultation would result in unmanageable amounts of comments. However, this was usually not the case. It was probably due both to the high number of calls and the limited capacities of civil society and the general public that they mostly commented on the few calls only that were of major interest to them. Still, it was crucial to have the opportunity there.

Even if the internet is spreading more and more, there are still quite many (smaller organisations especially) who don't have access to it. There are even more, who are hesitant to use the newest technologies such as commenting on online forums. Therefore, decision-makers should consider offering the possibility of email commenting along with the online forum for a further couple of years. Also, partnership would be more intense if the conditions and proposals for major projects were also subject to public consultation.

Case Study (Latvia):*NGO Participation in the Programming Process of EU Funds for 2007-2013, Latvia*

Environmental NGOs in Latvia were actively and systematically involved in the programming process of EU funds for the 2007-2013 period. National NGOs cooperated in order to elaborate key demands and positions, coordinated their position with NGOs from other sectors and then discussed proposals with the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Environment. NGOs used participation opportunities that were provided but also acted proactively and organized advocacy meetings, roundtables and seminars. Most of this activity took place in 2005 and 2006 with the aim to influence the National Strategic Reference Framework, three operational programmes and their complements.

NGO Cooperation Platforms and Networking

Environmental NGOs started to get prepared for the EU funds programming process in early 2005. NGOs started with learning about the EU funds programming process in general, reflected on lessons learned from the 2004-2006 national programming period and then organized several meetings to build capacity. Inspired by the experience of functioning NGO coalitions in other CEE countries and the international NGO coalition on the sustainable use of EU funds, the Latvian environmental NGOs established the national NGO coalition focused on environmental issues in May 2005. There were about 8-10 environmental NGOs involved in the work of the coalition actively and a few more NGOs were subscribed to receive regular updates from the mailing list. Environmental NGOs met regularly and elaborated their demands and positions on various issues.

During the programming process, there was also close cooperation between NGOs across various sectors. NGOs working on environmental, education, gender and social issues informed each other about key positions and challenges in each sector and attempted to coordinate their demands. Several times these NGOs organized joint advocacy meetings with the Ministry of Finance. This approach of coordinating demands prevented NGOs from different sectors to come up with contradicting proposals but instead, reinforced each others' demands.

In addition to national networks, international networking also played a crucial role. The environmental NGO coalition used position papers prepared by the international coalition on the sustainable use of EU funds. Several position papers were translated into Latvian and international NGO demands were adapted to the Latvian situation. Three members of the Latvian NGO coalition, namely, Green Liberty, Latvian Green Movement and WWF Latvia were directly involved in international networking. Having better understanding of programming related processes within the European Commission, equipped with the arguments of the international NGO coalition and knowing the situation on home grounds were preconditions that allowed successful involvement in national programming.

NGO Focus and Key Demands

Key NGO demands were formulated around financing for nature protection measures, sustainable tourism, renewable energy and energy efficiency measures, support for implementation of requirements of EU Water framework directive requirements and supporting waste hierarchy as well as putting forward demands for horizontal integration of sustainable development. NGOs also advocated for the inclusion of various soft measures such as trainings, capacity buildings, monitoring and similar support activities to foster the implementation of EU requirements in the field of environment. On the other hand, environmental NGOs also observed whether environmentally harmful infrastructure projects were programmed and voiced their concerns about some of them. Thus, NGOs focused their efforts on commenting the NSRF as well as the OP "Infrastructure and services".

Representatives of the national NGO coalition organised meetings with officials of the Ministry of Finance, distributed information and prepared comments on the draft documents. On several occasions, the Ministry of Finance even took the initiative to invite officials from Ministry of Environment also to these meetings with the NGOs in order to be able to discuss various issues on the spot. At times, the NGOs proposed new activities and sought support from the Ministry of Environment, while on several occasions the Ministry of Environment sought the support of environmental NGOs to reinforce measures that the ministry proposed. This process, however, makes it difficult to make statistics on how many NGO comments were taken into account, because participation had a nature of constant interaction between NGO representatives and ministries. Direct meetings and exchange of opinions took place throughout 2005 and 2006 until the end of the active programming process.

There is however also criticism about the lack of advocacy on allowing NGOs to be beneficiaries in many programmed activities. Indeed, during the programming

process environmental NGOs did not have particular focus on ensuring that NGOs could be beneficiaries. This appeared to be a problem during the implementation phase, when NGOs were not eligible as applicants in many activities. This should be taken as a lesson learned for upcoming programming.

Structures for Involvement and Procedures

The success of NGO involvement was partly due to the opportunities provided by the structures of participation such as proper information tools, participation procedures such as the public consultation process on draft documents and the strategic environmental impact assessment. However, the openness and willingness to cooperate on the part of the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Environment was perhaps more important.

The Ministry of Finance, which was responsible for the programming process, provided structural support for the involvement of NGOs. At the start of the programming process, a special website was created (www.esfondi.lv), where all information related to the programming of EU funds was published – the time-line of the programming process and important deadlines, draft documents, meeting comments from line ministries, NGOs and the European Commission. The publication of the programming time-line was of particular importance – clarifying it for NGOs and allowing time for the preparation of planning and allocating the necessary capacities. This website still continues to function and has been extended to include documents for monitoring and implementation and other EU funds related information and links can be found.

As for meetings between NGOs and ministries, those were demand-oriented, i.e., NGOs proposed to have consultation meetings and the Ministry of Finance was responsive towards NGO requirements for information and advocacy meetings. Also the fact that the official consultation process (on NSRS, OPs and strategic environmental assessment) went beyond formalities, i.e., all received comments were listed in one document (including comments from NGOs) and then later separate consultation meetings were organised with those who submitted comments to discuss the comments one by one. This highlights the commitment of the ministry towards meaningful participation.

Conclusions

- NGO networking and coordination of opinions, inputs and capacity building measures were of crucial importance. Systematic communication among environmental NGOs, as well as informational support from the international NGO community and national NGO networking across sectors allowed for better quality and coordinated input into programming.
- Openness of ministries and their support of NGO participation. Apart from the official process, many consultation meetings were organised where NGO comments and demands were discussed in detail. It was also of high importance to have all draft documents available and to have a clear time-line.

Theme 4: Financing for Sustainability

The questions about funding for civil society and for nature have always been related to the sustainability of a society and/or a certain territory. Therefore, we agreed to put the cases and conclusions we extract from them into a joint chapter with two subchapters: “Nature protection” and “Financing of NGOs”. We do believe that the best way to protect nature on local and regional levels is to provide support for a variety of local actors (NGOs, associations of businesses, SMEs, etc.) that are directly involved in activities with the sustainable forms of business and development and awareness-raising. We also believe that the capacity-building of NGOs and the support for partnership practices are essential to enable the representation of socio-environmental interests and values in decision-making at all levels of governance and administration.

Nature Protection

The protection of nature is one of the important EU policies. It has received growing attention as a horizontal issue within the Cohesion and Common Agriculture policies. Officially more money – directly or indirectly – is devoted to nature protection throughout the EU funds and other EU financial programmes.

Ironically, most of the problems with EU funding are related to the clash between investment projects, funded with EU money and the protection of valuable and unique nature areas, including ones from the NATURA 2000 network, Ramsar wetlands, Kresna gorge (Bulgaria), Rospuda valley (Poland), Saaremaa bridge (Estonia) and many others from CEE countries are already household names, well known in the whole of Europe for the monumental clashes between EU-funded projects and the protection of nature of European importance.

While governments always declare their deep empathy for the protection of nature, the reality is different. The incorporation of the protection of biodiversity as a priority in the OP Environment in countries like Bulgaria happened mainly due to the EU policy and heavy pressure from NGOs. Otherwise, environmental infrastructure (“more concrete on the ground”) and past pollution (“state pays”) are always on the front line of investments.

One good example came from Romania where NGOs helped the local community to incorporate values of the nature protection into the rural development plan of Niraj

valley micro-region. NGOs also mediated development of relations between the micro-regional association from the Niraj valley and a very experienced LEADER group from the neighbouring Hungary. They organized mutual visits that helped the representatives of the Niraj micro-regional association to understand the importance of the protection of nature.

Unfortunately, the use of LEADER for making the protection of nature and local economy more coherent is very limited. This is one of the easiest ways to promote sustainability on community level with cheaper soft measures.

Still we could find some good examples of using LEADER in Hungary and Slovenia. In Hungary, NATURAMA Alliance comprises LEADER groups with nature protection areas and aim to preserve natural, cultural and human values. The Alliance was established in 2009, and it promotes environmentally conscious rural lifestyle. It also attempts to combine tradition and innovation in economic development in a harmonious, sound way. Members of NATURAMA⁸ cooperate closely, including international exchange. They have organized two photo competitions (on waste and on natural and cultural values), meet regularly and are developing joint projects (eg. a complex soft tourism project involving local farmers and entrepreneurs etc. as suppliers).

Another opportunity for NGOs to work for nature protection is participation in projects, under specific “nature protection” axes within different OPs. Such opportunities exist in all countries.

In Bulgaria, a consortium of NGOs and consulting companies won a tender recently for mapping the NATURA 2000 network. The alternative consortium also included an NGO among the partners.

In Hungary, The Environment and Energy OP contains several priorities promoting nature protection:

a) Priority 3 is aimed at the “Sound management of natural assets” and includes measures like

- alleviation of harmful impacts of linear infrastructure to nature (preservation or regeneration of habitats);
- Preservation or regeneration of botanical gardens and protected historical gardens;
- Infrastructure development of habitat-preserving agriculture and forestry;

⁸ The members of NATURAMA are: Az Élhető Balaton-felvidékért Egyesület, A Felső-Homokhátság Vidékfejlesztési Egyesület, a Borsod-Torna-Gömör Egyesület, „A BAKONYÉRT” Vidékfejlesztési Akciócsoport Egyesület, a Szigetköz-Mosoni-sík LEADER Egyesület, az Alpokalja-Ikvamente Leader Egyesület és a DIPO Duna-Ipoly Határmenti Együttműködés Helyi Közössége Közhasznú Egyesület.

b) Priority 6 (“Sustainable lifestyle and consumption”) contains a measure on developing environmental information technology in public administration (e-environment protection).

A still unexploited tool for nature protection with participatory approach within the broad frame of EU funds use is regional planning. Recently, a growing number of NGOs in Bulgaria (environmental, social, healthcare, rural development, etc.) are in dialogue with the office of the Minister for EU funds on how to exploit this option in the upcoming programming period.

Case Study (Romania):

Rural Development Plan with Special Consideration for Nature Protection Criteria in the Niraj Valley Micro-region – Romania

Short description of the case: In the Niraj valley micro-region, as in many micro-regions in Romania, the local community receives several inputs during the planning process and during the elaboration of development strategy, in many cases the main objective being economic growth, without paying attention to the environmental aspects. In Niraj valley the local community, the LEADER LAG group, by working together with the environmental organization Focus Eco Center, paid special attention to the conservation nature, with the key element of their strategy being sustainable agriculture and eco-agro tourism.

Detailed Explanation of the Partnership

The micro-regional association and the LEADER LAG group started to elaborate the development strategy for the Niraj micro-region. The elaboration of the strategy was a requirement for obtaining funds from LEADER program and as well from other EU programs. At the beginning, the central idea was economic development, and the existing NATURA2000 sites were considered somehow a problem due to their restricted nature.

The representatives of Focus Eco Center participated in several workshops and explained to the local stakeholders the added value which was represented by the existing natural values and the great chance what could be offered by these protected areas. At the same time, the representatives of Focus Eco Center mediated a relation between the micro-regional association from the Niraj valley and the very experienced LEADER group, Pannonia Kincse from Hungary. Mutual visits were organized and the representatives of the Niraj micro-regional association grabbed the importance of the protection of nature.

In the final version of the strategy, the protection of nature became an important issue, and the proposed economic development was based on sustainable

principles. The development strategy was based on extensive and small scale agriculture, which would preserve the valuable landscape with its natural values and eco-agro tourism, which offers jobs for many small pension owners and an extra income for a large number of farmers. The recommendations of the environmental organization were highly appreciated and the representative of the Focus Eco Center was elected in the board of the Local Action Group.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Local communities in rural areas do not have enough information about the principles of sustainable development and about the importance of the preservation of natural values, and they understand development as economic growth, which puts natural values in danger. If local communities are supported, they are able to understand the importance of the preservation of natural values, and the above is a good example of how a rural local community can work together with an environmental organization in order to preserve natural values.

The work of the SFteam shows how hard it is to find any single financing scheme relying on Structural Funds that would be designed for NGOs and their programmes specifically. With “direct” we mean core funding for their everyday work and the coverage of running costs and salaries.

We mean here funds that would focus on support of NGOs in the following areas:

- campaigns “pro-contra” some projects and programmes, co-funded by EU funds;
- participation in activities, events, committees, working groups with regard to EU-funded programmes and projects;
- organising workshops, roundtables and payments of fees for high-level seminars, organised by respective sectoral business or governmental agencies (some fees in Bulgaria go up to several hundred Euros);
- quick funding for small (NGO, NGO + community, NGO + local authorities) projects, that are focused on easy, soft solutions of problems with impact on the local or regional communities and may be supported by EU funding;
- NGOs work for other related EU regional priorities e.g., Danube programme, Black Sea partnership, Eastern partnership, etc.;
- technical assistance for preparation of projects, etc.

Even though there are several schemes where NGOs are listed among potential beneficiaries, these schemes usually do not take into account the operational and financial characteristics of NGOs, therefore, they are often difficult to be accessed by NGOs.

Of course, such a tool must be very carefully designed and must protect both sides from allegations in conflicts of interest. It also should not put NGOs into dependence from institutions through selection criteria and selection process of the beneficiaries.

NGOs could be beneficiaries under some OPs or specific axes within OPs. But this makes them – as Bulgaria’s Minister of EU funds, Mr. Tomislav Donchev said – much more as “providers of services” and “consultants”, taking away civil groups from their initial mission of watchdogs and counterbalancing the institutions.

Some of the problems surrounding the funding of NGOs that need to be solved are:

- Removing all bureaucratic obstacles in application and reporting. In Bulgaria, there are cases (e.g. in Rousse), when civil groups have to spend all the personnel fees available for the projects for the reporting costs!
- CSOs, together with the government and various financial institutions should set up schemes for achievable co-funding;
- there should be some small grants for preparation of projects that involve several partners, especially ones from different countries.

A single case from Hungary gives an idea how NGOs could be supported within the frame of the existing OPs. Under the Hungarian Regional Operational Programme co-financing budget lines for NGOs will be available. They will focus on:

- development of civil society infrastructure;
- activities or programs of environmental NGOs, in some cases in cooperation with municipalities.

Different ROPs offer different conditions and budgets for NGOs. The calls for proposals are not open yet and it is still to be seen how effective and successful this approach will be.

Nevertheless, this is an “early bird” case that appears as a result of concerted efforts of major regional NGOs facilitated by environmental NGOs, that made regional development agencies and Managing Authority of Regional Development Programmes accept the innovation.

All we expect is that projects to be implemented from these funds will contribute to the improvement of the quality of the environment and for a more transparent, efficient use of EU funds in the interest of the public good.

Case Study (Hungary):

Financing of NGOs from SFs – Hungary

Between 2011 and 2013, the Regional Operational Programmes will offer EU co-financed budget lines for NGO activities in each region.

As a result of concerted efforts of major regional NGOs facilitated by environmental NGOs, regional development agencies and the Managing Authority of Regional Development Programmes supported the initiative of including budget lines for NGO activities in almost all Regional Operational Programmes. (The only exception is Central Hungary, where, due to the phasing-out status of the region different funding priorities and rules prevail and the call for proposal for NGO campaigns for “Sustainable Consumption Patterns” that were open in 2009-10 will not be opened again in 2011-13.) These opportunities are included in the 3-year implementation documents of operational programmes. The budgets and conditions differ from region to region. Total budget lines are between 715000 and 3 million Euros and the intensity of support is expected to be 90-95 %. Projects are expected not to be smaller than 35000 Euros approx. Measures include: development of civil society infrastructure and activities (North Great Plain, Northern Hungary, South Great Plain, Southern Transdanubia) or programs of environmental NGOs (Central Transdanubia, West Pannonia).

Apart from the above funds, there have also been some other calls for proposals within the framework of the Social Renewal OP (on networking, development of advocacy capacities, organizational development etc.) and the Environment and Energy OP (for awareness raising campaigns on sustainable consumption). These, however, were usually even larger projects requiring high administrative capacities. The new government intends to alleviate administrative burdens of project management; the results of this will be relevant later.

At the time of closing this report, it is not yet certain when the calls for proposals will be open. Still, the opportunity in itself is valuable.

Even though the measures and fundable activities differ among the above-mentioned Regional OP calls, projects to be implemented from these funds will contribute to the improvement of the quality of the environment and a more transparent, efficient use of EU funds in the interest of the public.

Theme 5: Delegation in Committees

NGO delegation systems have over a decade long history in various state and regional committees and working groups. For example, such instruments were established in Bulgaria and Hungary in the mid-90s of the 20th century. They were used a long time before EU funds became an issue in CEE countries and helped to develop a culture of community among civil society organisations.

The systems of nominating and electing representatives (SNER) often result from initiations among NGOs, and are developed within the community. For example, in Bulgaria SNER was initiated, discussed, tested and approved during regular meetings of environmental NGOs that took place annually in the period between 1998-2002. Several years ago, however, some of the NGOs which worked on the common problems were already discussing the need for a structured dialogue and participation within a growing number of formal bodies (working groups, consultative committees, etc.) initiated by the government. Few years after establishing BlueLink, the “internet arm” of Bulgarian civil society, it was approved as the bureau for the new online platform for nomination and election of representatives.

In a similar way, in Hungary the delegation system of environmental NGOs was discussed and approved at a national gathering in the mid 90s, which serves as an election body for representatives of NGOs since then. Through time, as the number of delegates grew and information flow accelerated, environmental NGOs realized that it was necessary to set up a Consultation Forum of delegates in order to be able to respond/react to urgent invitations to bodies and quickly changing processes. The framework of the Forum was introduced in 2004; its membership has been changing as delegates come and go. Each year, the Forum elects a five-member presidency, the members of which hold the chair of the Forum on a rotating basis. The Forum meets at least four times a year and its operational background (minute-taking, organization, etc.) is provided by a foundation elected for this task.

EU Funds and delegation

It is probably Hungary where monitoring committees have most NGO members; according to the government decree No. 255/2006 (XII.8), civil society organizations representing the horizontal aspects are involved in the Monitoring Committees. These are: one environmental NGO as well as the delegates of at least one civil society organization representing the Romany people, the people with disabilities and gender equality issues. As regards the latter three civil society groups, it is the national councils (advisory bodies to the government, including NGOs) who delegate representatives to monitoring committees. Therefore, the election system of environmental NGOs is unique.

The situation is slightly different in Bulgaria, where the election of NGOs is based on legislation, but the actual participation is decided by the respective Ministry, which coordinates each OP. For example, environmental NGOs are represented in the Monitoring Committees of OP Environment, OP Fishery and National Plan for Rural Areas, while other civil society groups are in MCs in some of the other OPs. Not all of their representatives are elected using the election platform; several are selected from a “short-list” of invited NGOs. Recently, NGOs from different sectors started a network for participation in the programming of the next financial framework (2004 – 2020) and the extended use of the platform is under discussion.

In addition, in all countries “social partners” (trade-unions and employers’ associations) are represented in OPs on the basis of the Regulations of EU on Cohesion Policy and national legislation.

A unique example came from Poland, where a Working Group for Civil Society within the Coordinating Committee of the NSRF is established with an aim of preparing proposals and recommendations for the Committee regarding the mechanisms of partnership in implementing NSRF.

The tasks of the WG are as follows:

- formulating opinions and recommendations concerning the process of implementing horizontal policies ensuring consistent realization of the development policy – WG is concentrated on the partnership principle as a cross-cutting principle of the structural funds and European Union,
- monitoring the alignment of operational programs with Polish Country’s Development Strategy, especially in the 4th priority “Creation of integrated civil community”,
- monitoring the managing and control systems for different OPs,
- monitoring the implementation of gender mainstreaming and sustainable development principles in OPs.

In Latvia the Environmental Advisory Board (EAB) is composed by representatives of 20 leading environmental NGOs. Representatives of NGOs are elected annually to the EAB, and any environmental NGO can apply for it. The Ministry of Environment of Latvia approached EAB at least once (2008) to nominate a representative of NGOs in the evaluation committee for large water infrastructure projects submitted for financing for EU funds in the financing period of 2007-2013. This body of NGOs is used as a platform for environmental NGOs to nominate NGO representatives to various bodies, i.e., monitoring committees, project evaluation committees, working groups, etc. In legislation related to the implementation of EU funds, such as Cabinet

Regulations about implementation of specific activities, EAB is mentioned as the body to nominate representatives to monitor the implementation.

Again, like in other countries, this initiative was started by NGOs, which came to the conclusion that if they wanted to be effective, they needed to find a good tool in order to be able to influence matters. They started discussions with other stakeholders (trade-unions and employers' associations) and at the end of the day a good mixture of representation of society came about. There are representatives of NGOs, trade-unions, businesses, academia, government and regional authorities in the working group.

Conclusions, weaknesses, recommendations

The representation of civil society in various working groups and committees, related to the use of EU funds is one of the best developed cooperative practices. Despite that it was introduced as an obligatory practice by the EU, it seems that the understanding of the benefits such a practice may bring, is growing. More institutions and local authorities from more countries are willing to start partnership in practice. It took years for the institutions to recognise that the expertise of NGOs is not only big enough (sometime even bigger than that of the institutions themselves), but it could be focused on genuinely sustainable solutions for communities, regions or the country.

But, as both sides – institutions and NGOs in CEE countries – are at the beginning of the road to the sustainable use of EU funds use, there are a number of problems that need to be solved:

- The political will for cooperation should be steady and untouched by the changes of government and should follow guiding principles set out by the EC. For example, the new government in Hungary (in office since April 2010) replaced the decree on the operation and management of EU funds without proper public consultation and this new decree does not mention civil stakeholder groups specifically. At the same time the EC emphasizes the importance of broad public involvement and NGO participation;
- The presence of the representatives of NGOs in monitoring committees is mostly important as a source of information, since they have relatively little influence on the actual realization of programmes due to the low capacities and minority status among members, even if they have voting rights. This requires changes in decision-making to allow the meaningful participation of non-governmental stakeholders. Also, the role of MCs has to be strengthened;

- Low NGO capacity withholds them from using their rights even in situations where NGOs are allowed to participate. Often there are dozens of documents that need to be reviewed before each MC meeting or during written decision-making procedure. However, most of this work is done voluntarily and NGOs tend to focus only on issues that are likely to be problematic, thus probably missing out other important aspects of the implementation of EU funds. Low NGO capacity prevents meaningful participation.
- The community of NGOs should also make continuous efforts to improve their system of representation in EU funds management, self-control, even in the case of the absence of conflicts of interest. They also should organise themselves in a way to use the resources and knowledge they offer to the other stakeholders effectively.

But probably the biggest threat for NGOs is to turn them into providers of services and consultancy, thus diminishing their natural mission as watchdogs and protectors of public interest. This threat may be reduced by clear and just rules about access to resources for NGOs and separating EU funding for civil society from political and other pressure over them in case they may run unfavourable campaigns against some decisions of the government.

Definitely, the upcoming programming for 2014 – 2020 is a challenge that could provide answers to some of the questions. Both sides must use it for improving their efforts for a better utilization of EU funds in our countries.

Case Study (Hungary):*Delegation Processes - A 15-year-old Electoral System of Environmental and Nature Conservation NGOs in Hungary*

The legitimate electoral system of NGOs working in the field of environmental protection and nature conservation has a history of 15 years. It is based on the National Gathering, organized each year by a different organization since 1990. At the National Gathering, all registered green organizations have voting rights. Nominating candidates is an open process, while election is made by secret ballot. At present, this forum of organizations elects a delegate for about 50 bodies, including all the monitoring committees of EU funds. Its delegations are acknowledged by the government.

The National Gathering served as a forum for professional exchange initially; however, from 1996, it also took on the function of an electoral body because environmental NGOs first got opportunities then to delegate representatives to various – advisory, grant-making, professional decision-making – bodies. This made it necessary to create internal Rules of Operation which includes regulations on the election process. Delegates are basically elected for two years; however, this is not a problem for monitoring committees, where the low turnover of delegates is preferred, because the NGO community usually grants trust to the delegate for the whole EU budgetary period. Delegates are also obliged to inform the environmental NGO community about their work through a general mailing list regularly. If they don't perform, they can be recalled – however, this has not yet been the case so far.

With the progress of time, as the number of delegates grew and information flow accelerated, environmental NGOs realized it was necessary to set up a Consultation Forum for delegates in order to be able to respond / react to urgent invitations to bodies and quickly changing processes. The framework of the Forum was introduced in 2004; its membership has been changing as delegates come and go. Each year, the Forum elects its five-member presidency, the members of which hold the chair of the Forum on a rotating basis. The Forum meets at least four times a year and its operational background (minute-taking, organizing etc.) is provided by a foundation elected for this task.

It is probably Hungary where monitoring committees have most NGO members; according to the government decree No. 255/2006 (XII.8), civil society organizations representing the horizontal aspects are involved in the Monitoring Committees. These are: one environmental NGO as well as the delegates of at least one civil society organization representing the Romany people, the people with disabilities and gender equality issues. As regards the latter three civil society groups, it is the national councils (advisory bodies to the government, including NGOs) who delegate representatives to monitoring committees. Therefore, the election system of environmental NGOs is unique.

This methodology is not necessarily fit for each branch of civil society, but it is probably worth considering it. An NGO platform promoting the transparency of national programming also welcomed the description of these processes and spread it to the wider NGO community. The 15-year existence of the system proves its resilience and quick responsiveness. The internal rules of cooperation have been developed along natural internal needs and they observe democracy and equity in networking.

However, even the relatively high number of civil society representatives in monitoring committees raises several questions. 1) The new government (in office since April 2010) replaced the decree on the operation and management of EU funds without proper public consultation and this new decree does not mention the above four civil stakeholder groups specifically. However, thus far, these groups still have their seats, even if delegates have changed. 2) The presence of NGO representatives in monitoring committees is mostly important as a source of information but they have relatively little influence on the actual realization of programmes due to low capacities and minority status among members, despite their voting rights.

Case Study (Bulgaria):*Participation of NGOs in OPs Monitoring Committees: Broadening the System for NGOs Representation*

Bulgarian environmental NGOs have more than 12 years of experience in selecting their representatives for various working groups, steering committees and inter-institutional bodies. Though during the pre-accession funding period (2000 – 2006) in Bulgaria, representatives in Monitoring Committees for SAPARD and ISPA were not elected, but selected by the respective institutions, right after 2007 (the first Structural funds period for Bulgaria), the use of the self-developed election system for NGOs went in use for the MCs. The use of the system is likely to be extended nowadays and more civil society groups are to benefit from it.

The system for nomination and election of NGOs in various committees and working groups, organised by the governmental institutions, was created at the end of 90s of the 20th century. (1998 – 1999). It was discussed and agreed upon at a series of meetings of all environmental NGOs, thus became one of the first of its kind for NGOs in CEE countries. The system has gone through improvements throughout the years. The secretariat was moved to BlueLink Foundation and the system became an online platform, open for any NGO which registers as participant.

Already in 2005, environmental NGOs started to use the system for election of their representatives for some of the working groups for operational programmes. Afterwards it was used for the election of representatives in some Monitoring committees of OPs (OP Environment, OP Transport, etc.). A discussion started in 2010 among broader NGO community in Bulgaria (environmental, social, health, regional development, human rights, etc. NGOs) to use the system for the election of joint representatives for the programming process for 2014 – 2020 EU funds. A special project proposal was submitted for financing that would help with the broadening and improvement of the system.

NGOs used the system for the first time at the beginning of 2011 to exchange their representative (for the Monitoring Committee of OP Transport) due to the fact that the task was not fulfilled appropriately.

There is a development in the institutional coverage of the use of the system. In the beginning only the Ministry for Environment and Water agreed to use it, while others used their own selection criteria. Now several other ministries are willing to use this approach, including the Ministry for Regional Development and Public Works, the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, etc. The other main goal of the NGO community is to spread the system on a regional level in order to guarantee meaningful participation in regional development policies, which are the core of cohesion policy.

There are good examples how the representatives of environmental NGOs in MCs in various OPs are working towards promoting the viewpoints of NGOs at the debates. The representatives in the OP Environment and OP Fishery in particular are very active in their work. They are providing NGOs with information about upcoming events (meetings of MCs, etc.), and documents and information about important decisions. They also request support, information and feedback from the community as well as direct actions (e.g. letters to the managing bodies).

Conclusions and Recommendations

The system for the nomination and election of NGOs representatives has been created as a unique but simple tool for the representation of NGOs in virtually all forms of partnership between civil society and public constructs. The decade of its use in Bulgaria shows that it is very useful also in cases where strong partnership is needed, such as regional policies and the use of EU funds.

Although the system for delegation of the representatives of NGOs is well defined, there are shortages that could be improved in order to make the work of NGO representatives in various committees more useful and effective.

Firstly, there is a need to improve the system itself. There are elements missing that civil society should define and add to the system in order to guarantee that elected representatives could work effectively and in line with their mission and goals. It essentially needs:

- to define the way the representatives will report to the community;
- to define how the community would support its representatives in their work;
- to define the procedures for recalling the representative, who does not fulfil continuously his/her tasks.

Secondly, there is a need to broaden the use of the self-election system in both ways – by NGOs and by institutions. There are several best practices, but in fact it is civil society that should work to promote and purposely use the delegation system in order to “teach” the institutions its broader application. It is in particular important to promote the system.

Thirdly, NGOs should negotiate changes with the Government on the statute of their representatives. By now, most of the representatives in the MCs have only consultative rights (no voting rights), unlike the official “social partners”, thus they are deprived of even the minimal power to influence decisions. Another associated problem is the so called “confidentiality clause”. This problem should be solved also on a higher governmental level by negotiations and campaigning.

Case Study (Poland):

Working Group for Civil Society within the Coordinating Committee of the NSRF in Poland – Ensuring Effective Participation of NGOs and Socio-economic Partners in the Committee Responsible for the Overall Coordination of EU Funds in the Country

The Working Group for Civil Society was formed within the structure of the Coordinating Committee (CC) for National Strategic Reference Framework 2007-2013. The initiative has been taken on a national level. The Working Group concentrates its activity on the 1st horizontal strategic aim of the NSRF: “Improving the functioning standard of public institutions and development of partnership mechanism”.

The Working Group was established for preparing proposals and recommendations for the Committee regarding the mechanisms of partnership in implementing NSRF. It includes consultations and monitoring of the implementation of the sustainable development principle, as well as gender mainstreaming in Operational Programs (OP's). Recommendations of the Group are provided to the Committee as draft resolutions and opinions.

The tasks of the WG are as follows:

- formulating opinions and recommendations concerning the process of implementing horizontal policies ensuring consistent realization of the development policy – WG is a concentration of partnership as a cross-cutting principle of the structural funds and the European Union,

- monitoring the alignment of operational programs with Poland's Development Strategy, especially in Priority 4: "Creation of an integrated civil community",
- monitoring the managing and control systems for different OPs,
- monitoring the implementation of gender mainstreaming and sustainable development principles in OPs.

The WG was established by the Coordinating Committee on 14th April, 2008, as an initiative of representatives of all 5 non-governmental organizations – the members of CC. They came to the conclusion that if they wanted to be effective in the CC, they needed to find a good tool in order to be able to influence matters. Participating in plenary sessions twice a year did not guarantee an active and effective representation of the civil sector.

NGOs started cooperation with representatives of other social partners in the CC. There are seven such organizations in Poland: four unions of employers and three unions of employees. They supported the idea of the WG and were interested in taking part in it. Subsequently, representatives of NGOs asked a few selected representatives of governmental and regional authorities for their support and participation in the Group. Everybody gave a positive answer. All of the socio-economic partners, which were members of the Coordinating Committee, became part of the Group. Representatives of ministries and regional authorities joined the group as well. Overall, the Working Group comprises:

- non-governmental organizations - Caritas Poland, Foundation in Support of Local Democracy, Foundation in Support of Business and Science, Polish National Federation of NGOs, Polish Scouting Association,
- social partners (employees' and employers' unions) - Forum of Trade Unions, Independent Self-governing Trade Union "Solidarity", The All Poland Alliance of Trade Unions, Business Centre Club, Employers of Poland, Polish Confederation of Private Employers Lewiatan, Polish Craft Association,
- academic organizations - Central Council for Research and Development Units, Council for Higher Education, Polish Science Academy, The Conference of Rectors of Polish Academic Institutions,
- governmental administration – Ministry for Regional Development (as Managing Authority for Human Capital OP and Coordinating Authority for NSRF), Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, Ministry of National Education,
- regional authorities – Pomorskie, Opolskie, Lubuskie and Wielokopolskie Voivodships (regions) and the Common Committee for Regional and Local Government.

Twenty-five institutions and organizations cooperate in the WG. Observers and experts participate in sessions as well. They have the role of observers. Obviously, not every member of the Group has a similar level of involvement.

It was six months after establishing the Working Group for Civil Society, when the Committee actually accepted its first recommendation. WG is financed by the Technical Assistance OP. This financing includes costs of the organization of the sessions, secretarial office of the WG, reimbursement of travel costs for members from outside Warsaw and expert support if necessary.

The Working Group has been functioning for 2,5 years now. It is a stable solution, so its work will finish only with the end of the programming period 2007-2013. An internal set of rules was accepted during the first session, where the election of the Chairman and Vice-chairman also took place. WG makes decisions by consensus. Its sessions take place according to need, but not less frequently than once every three months. The Group is managed by the Polish National Federation of NGOs as it was a leader in the process of establishing the Group. The Vice-chairman is the Director of the Department of Managing European Social Funds in the Ministry for Regional Development.

Results of the functioning of the WG are as follows:

- closer cooperation between representatives of the different socio-economic partners in the Coordinating Committee,
- adoption of a resolution by the CC about the importance of civic consultations and civil dialogue in the implementation of OP's (2008),
- organization of a 2-day session for members of MC's from all over Poland, the representatives of socio-economic partners (2009) – 10% of the representatives participated in the session, preparing sets of recommendations in four fields: civil society, evaluation, project selection criteria, equal opportunities,
- establishment of the National Thematic Network for the Partnership (2010),
- two meetings of the Network: state conference and a 2-day regional session (2010),
- a common proposal by the socio-economic partners in reply to the mid-term consultation initiated by the European Commission

The Working Group functions dynamically and effectively. Members of the Group carry out their tasks voluntarily. In spite of limited capacities the results are visible. Factors contributing to the success of the Group are:

- cooperation with socio-economic partners and search for common aims,
- expert and financial involvement of the Ministry for Regional Development, the crucial institution in the field of structural funds and planning and the implementation of the Cohesion Policy in Poland,
- expertise and competences of the members of WG,
- openness for nonstandard prepositions,
- thinking about the common interest and moving beyond narrowly understood interests of their own environments by all members of the Group.

Unavoidably, the Working Group is facing challenges. Most important of these are:

- the development and effective use of the National Thematic Network for Partnership,
- securing the involvement of the Cohesion Policy in civil dialogue in the current programming period (being active in the process of the midterm review) as well as the next one (participation in the consultation of the Fifth Cohesion Report).

To summarize, the efforts put into the creation of the Working Group for Civil Society were worthwhile. The Group became a place for discussion and cooperation of representatives of very different circles and interests. In Poland, MCs, the Working Group and other similar working groups related to Monitoring Committees are the only institutions/bodies that can exert real influence on the decisions concerning public policies of the representatives of the Polish government, regional authorities as well as social and civil organizations and academics. Even if not all recommendations are taken on board, the Working Group is still a good example of effective cooperation.

Theme 6: Participation of NGOs in Project Evaluation

It is a pleasant surprise for us to see interesting positive cases that uncover various aspects of cooperation between NGOs and institutions regarding the evaluation of projects. It seems that authorities (regardless of being central or local, specialised or general ones) throughout CEE become more open to the involvement of NGOs in such evaluation. At the same time, it is not an irreversible process; changes in governmental leadership may change the attitude towards NGOs due to unexpected and sometime far not better proposals.

The cases show that initiative for involvement of NGOs comes from both sides. In the case of Poland, it came due to interventions from NGOs that evolved in the creation of the special position of Environmental Manager. In other cases, the initiative comes from officials and is materialized in legislation or contracting, upon direct or random selection.

The most successful is the case from Poland, where the initiative of NGOs led to the establishment of a new system for evaluation of projects submitted to the Regional Operational Programme (ROP). Though it was established by the Marshal's office of the Dolnośląskie Voivodship, the initial case came from NGOs, which tried to prevent a river from a controversial project, envisaged to be funded by ROP. The cooperation among all parties involved – the conservation authority (RDE), the investor (Regional Water Management Authority), funding institution (Marshal's Office, Dept. of ROP), civic organization (FER) and individual experts, as well as the contractor for the works (Skanska) – was well managed. The decisions were consulted broadly and all parties searched for a solution to the situation.

The success of this first case led to a boom of cases assessed under the Environmental Manager scheme: some 700 – 800 applications were surveyed by the end of 2010.

In general, the system of Environmental Manager is a positive result at the meeting-point of several factors. Citizen involvement was very important in indicating the particular and systematic problems. Positive approach and maturity of the NGOs and the regional administrations led to the structural constructive change which helped to avoid wasting public money on environmentally destructive projects, and prevented a lot of conflicts, which would have caused further direct and indirect economic and social costs.

The participation of a representative of Latvian environmental NGOs in the project evaluation committee for large water infrastructure projects submitted for financing from EU funds in the financing period of 2007-2013 seems to be like representation in any other steering or monitoring body. But in this particular case, the representative of NGOs shares the same rights as all other members who represent the Ministry of Environment and the Union of Municipalities. This also carries equal obligations and even an interesting drawback we didn't see in any other countries: the NGOs representative was obliged to obtain the status of a state official.

Hungary presents us a case where a relatively good system of involvement of NGOs (in this case the National Society of Conservationists, NSC) was removed and replaced by "a rigid, though much more objective, system (...) which, however, is, as experience shows, for various reasons, unable to consider the real overall impacts of projects".

NSC was contracted to help with the assessment of the submitted Regional Development Operational Programme (RDOP) project proposals regarding environmental sustainability as a sort of quality control. With the help of an expert team, they managed to assess about 1000 proposals per year only. About 10 percent of the projects were proposed to be rejected, 20 percent to be amended. Some projects were rejected due to financial reasons. The majority of the rest was supported by the Committee, but strict environmental conditions were set for contraction.

The benefits of the system are strongly linked to the outcome. As long as the Managing Authority kept sending back proposals with low level of environmental quality, the regional agencies and project owners themselves started to understand how important it was to consider "environmental sustainability" in their proposals.

Although the new system introduced for the period between 2007 – 2013 is more objective and unified for all OPs, experience shows that for various reasons, it is unable to consider the real overall impacts of projects. Even worse, instead of promoting an increased understanding of horizontal issues among project owners, it is counterproductive due to high administrative burdens. Later, unfortunately, the new government abolished the mandatory involvement of NGOs in project evaluation teams by a change in legislation.

The Slovak case represents the usual situation, when the participation of NGOs is restricted to participation in Monitoring Committees. Despite this, according to our

remains a relatively closed system, there are promising signs and initiatives in the ESF that indicate change in the level and art of NGO participation in control and monitoring processes.”

There happens to be a change in the management of the OP Employment and Social Inclusion, so important changes are likely to happen in the field of NGO participation also. From September 2010 on, NGOs have been involved more intensively in singular control processes of ESF financed programmes under the control of the Ministry of Employment, Social and Family Affairs (MESFA).

There are a number of lessons to be learnt from these cases, as well as a few recommendations for stakeholders.

- The information flow between environmental specialists and decision makers need to be improved. Blaming NGOs for their poor understanding of the specialist language and information among decision makers does not solve the problem. There is a clear need for structural changes.
- One has to acknowledge that it is also in the interest of the investors and decision makers to investigate the environmental impacts of proposed projects on NATURA 2000 areas and on habitats and species protected by the European Directives in order to avoid conflicts with legislation.
- Participation in project evaluation processes brings better understanding of how project evaluation works in practice, including on how well project evaluation criteria are formulated, how horizontal criteria are applied and to what extent they serve the purpose etc.
- The involvement of NGO experts in project evaluation ensures impartiality and enhances professionalism and is therefore unavoidable, along clear and transparent guidelines. Also, for professional reasons, the evaluation of horizontal criteria (ie., environment, sustainability, equal opportunities) should take an integrative approach, with a focus on the performance of projects, instead of that of the project owner.
- The work of NGO representatives in project evaluation committees is often done on a completely voluntary basis. NGOs often lack capacity to participate in these kinds of activities, thus not all valuable knowledge and skills are utilized in this work. Sometimes environmental NGOs even refused to participate in the work of project evaluation committees due to the lack of capacity. Therefore, a special system for covering the costs (both human and direct) of such participation is needed.

- NGO representatives are not allowed to share information about project applications, thus, mostly they have to rely on their own knowledge and expertise. This situation seriously burdens the efficiency of NGO participation.
- To create commonly acceptable solutions for NGO participation, systematic work on the institutional and organizational structure of the cooperation needs to be carried out both by authorities and NGOs.

Case Study (Poland):

The Environmental Manager Prevents Harm and Conflict

The Marshal's Office of the Dolnośląskie Voivodship (provincial government) implemented procedures that are quite unique in Poland. The main idea behind it was to prevent possible conflicts around particular investments supported by European Funding via the Regional Operational Programme at as early a stage as possible.

The process has many different roots in the Dolnośląskie Voivodship. One of the important events that led to this structural solution was an intervention by the representative of NGOs in the Steering Committee, concerning plans for the regulation of three small rivers. This was a case when problems could not be prevented and caused a lot of work and costs and cost a lot of time both on the part of the investor and the funding institution.

The new structures of the ROPs replaced the Steering Committee with the Monitoring Committee. The Dolnośląskie Voivodship was the only one in Poland where the NGOs were represented in the Committee. This caused an intervention in The European Commission, which questioned the remaining voivodships about the NGO representative and in consequence, the other regions adapted the same structure for their committees.

Meanwhile, the Marshal of the Dolnośląskie Voivodship proposed a systematic solution to the environmental aspects of the project application survey. The proposed solution was inspired by the British model and implemented the position of Environmental Manager. The Environmental Manager is responsible for consulting applications to the ROP with regional authorities responsible for the environment and with NGOs. Formal procedure was designed to implement these consultations in a timely and structured manner.

The procedure predicts action depending on the response from the consulted partners. The process takes 22, 24 or 34 days, depending on the number of concerns raised. When both consulting parties have concerns, and the Environmental Manager has doubts about their interpretation or when the consulting parties have different opinions and cannot agree in their statements, the Environmental Managers calls for external expertise.

The NGO representative in the Monitoring Committee cooperates with NGO-related experts from different environmental fields. They all receive the applications and share the responsibility to provide their opinions.

Until the end of 2010, about 700-800 applications were surveyed. There were objections to a certain proportion of it, which were reported back to the applicants, who then adjusted their applications in the appropriate way. The application procedures assume possibility for a formal complaint. However, until now, there no such action was needed. All the conflicts were resolved at an early stage of the process.

In many cases, experts feel the need for a field visit or screening the existing documentation, such as EIA (Polish OoŚ) or Specification of the Important Building Conditionings (Polish: SIWZ). With the large number of projects, there is still a possibility to let through a project by accident that does not fulfil the environmental requirements, which would lead to a conflict in the implementation phase. However, many potential damages have been avoided by redesigning of or resigning from the proposed actions.

The case of the Włodzica river is an example where the threat of environmental damage was initially overlooked. Thanks to the active NGOs and a project of Natura2000 Watch, the project was terminated and redesigned.

The Regional Water Management Authority in Wrocław planned the regulation of the Włodzica river in the town of Nowa Ruda, to prevent erosion and reduce the risk of flooding, as well as improving migration conditions for fish. Application WND-RPDS.04.04.00-02-002/09 for about 19 million PLN (about 80% of the cost) was submitted to the Regional Operational Programme for the Dolnośląskie Voivodship 2007-2013, under Priority 4, for the improvement of the natural environment and improvement of the ecological and flood safety in Lower Silesia ("Environment and Ecological Safety"). The project was endorsed in June 2009, and approved by the public hearing held with the presence of environmental NGO representatives. However, when the work started, a local branch of the NGO „Workshop for all beings” reported potential damage to Natura 2000 habitats (Habitat Directive codes: 91E0-5, 8220-3 and 6430). WWF Poland appealed to the Director of the Regional Water Management Authority for suspension of the works until clarification of the issue. In July 2009, the Lower Silesian Foundation for Ecodevelopment, in accordance with the Parliamentary Bill of 13 April 2007 on the Prevention of Environmental Damage and Harm Repair, sent a notifying letter to the Regional Director for Environment (RDE) in Wrocław about the threat of environmental damage and petitioned for

urgent intervention preventing the start of the planned work. In September, The RDE arranged field visit with experts and main stakeholders, which confirmed the occurrence of natural habitats in the river bed and on the slopes. RDE put the investment on hold until agreement was reached on the preventive measures, methods to minimise negative impact and on post-investment monitoring. ROP Department of the Marshal's Office for Dolnośląskie Voivodship convened a clarification meeting with interested parties. The appropriate solution was found and the works were carried out according to the modified plan.

The parties involved included the mayor of Nowa Ruda, the County Governor (Starosta) in Kłodzko, the Public Sanitary Inspector, the contractor for the works – Skanska corporation, the Local Authority Appeal Board in Wałbrzych - competent to cancel decisions taken at County and Town levels. The decision-making and consultation processes were organized properly, and in accordance with the procedures for planning of investments and the distribution of funding. However, the decision taken happened to be wrong. How was it possible?

First, the decision of the County Governor and Public Sanitary Inspector were based on inadequate, and, in addition, misinterpreted information. The nature inventory of the town of Nowa Ruda was produced at a generalized level – as any such research – on which it was impossible to base individual decisions about the location of investments. Using these types of documents with such low level of detail for planning purposes is not justified. The expertise commissioned for the purpose of the investment were: inventory of trees for the logging permit, ornithologists designation of trees not to be removed before the end of the breeding season, and an opinion from the angling association. These opinions, however well made, do not cover all circumstances.

Based on the available documents, and lacking an EIA or at least a Report on the effect of the works on nature, the investor presented the case at the public hearing as having no harmful effect on nature, as being planned in the highly urbanised area, without any habitats of substantial importance. In spite of the fact that high quality experts of Natura 2000 were present at the hearing, they did not see the reason for objection and the project was approved. The start of the work was, by coincidence spotted by an environmentalist from the Workshop for all beings, who intervened notifying the Local Authority Appeal Board in Wałbrzych and the Foundation for EcoDevelopment (FER) running the Natura 2000 Wardens project. The intervention to the RDE in Wrocław on the basis of the Bill on prevention of environmental damage and harm repair caused a series of events, starting with the immediate suspension of the work.

At this stage, the involved parties were: the conservation authority (RDE), the investor (Regional Water Management Authority), the funding institution (Marshal's Office, Dept. of ROP), civic organization (FER) and individual experts, as well as the contractor for the works (Skanska). The cooperation was good within the group, with decisions consulted broadly and seeking for solutions to the situation. The RDE commissioned an expert and stimulated advice on how to redesign the project and implement compensatory measures. ROP Dept. called a forum to discuss the proposed solutions and come to an agreement. Finally, the new project was approved and the work implemented successfully. It was required by the RDE that the effectiveness of the preventive measures be monitored in the 4-year post-investment period by checking the habitat status over the Summer months.

The intervention by NGOs, supported by the Marshal's Office Dept. for ROP and the RDE in Wrocław helped to avoid damage to the natural environment. However, this case is an example showing some deficiencies in existing systems and procedures.

The main issue seems to be a matter of using the available information. The information flow between environmental specialists and decision makers calls for improvement. Blaming the poor understanding of the specialist language and information among decision makers does not solve the problem. Structural change is needed. One of the solutions may be taking the decision on whether to apply the Environmental Impact Assessment or the Decision on Environmental Conditionings away from the bodies, which do not necessarily have the required high profile knowledge and skills. Or at least making the advice on this question by the appropriate specialists or institutions (preferably RDE) obligatory, and not an option "when in doubt". In the case described here even the specialists fell into the same trap as local decision makers. The scientific inventory concluded that the habitats were in unfavourable condition. This was interpreted as a green light for investment, instead of realising the need for efforts to recover the habitats.

Another improvement may be made in the role and standards of nature inventories. It is worth considering replacing or rather expanding the traditional approach of a once-upon-a-time inventory by a continuous data collection system. Such system should be based on a public database, preferably using the GIS technology, updated regularly, and at different levels of detail. The decentralized data centre should have a mechanism for the verification of data, and an institutional base at conservation authorities, with the involvement of scientific institutions and voluntary providers of data.

As for the aspect of decision makers, the legislation on Natura 2000 forbids to depreciate the status of species and habitats of EU importance. When the decision is wrong, and taken without proper assessment, there is no excuse and no legal way to avoid the responsibility of investor for the damage. So it is in the interest of both the investors and local decision makers to investigate the environmental consequences on Natura 2000 areas, and even outside these sites on habitats and species protected by European Directives.

Finally, the system described here is the positive result at the meeting point of several factors. Citizen involvement was very important to indicate particular and systematic problems. Positive approach and maturity of the NGOs and regional administrations led to a structural constructive change, which helped to avoid the wasting of public money for environmentally destructive projects, and prevented a lot of conflicts, which would have caused further direct and indirect economic and social costs.

Case Study (Hungary):*Sustainability Assessment of Regional Development Projects*

Between 2004 and 2006, the Managing Authority (MA) of the Regional Development Operational Programme commissioned the National Society of Conservationists (NSC) to cooperate in the assessment of the submitted RDOP project proposals regarding environmental sustainability.

That time, project proposals were assessed and scored at regional levels; the Managing Authority, however, also assessed them against several criteria such as environment, equal opportunities, and financial questions as a sort of quality control, by involving external experts or organizations, NSC for environmental criteria in specific. NSC commissioned several local experts to cooperate, so that people with adequate knowledge of the region in question could assess each project. The expert team has the opportunity to propose whether the project proposal should be accepted, rejected or sent back to the project owner for amendment. Based on the opinion of experts and regional development agencies, the Decision Preparation Committee made a final suggestion for or against funding.

Within a year, NSC experts assessed about 1000 project proposals. About 10 percent of the projects were proposed to be rejected, 20 percent to be amended. Some projects were rejected due to financial reasons. The majority of the rest was supported by the Committee, but strict environmental conditions were set for contraction. Some of the project proposals were not adequate enough from an environmental perspective and were therefore rejected. In many cases, this happened because of the determined stance of the representative of the Ministry of Environment and Water. This gives a strong example of successful cooperation among NGOs and government offices.

The benefits of the above system are strongly linked to the outcome. The main advantage of the re-assessment and quality assurance system of project proposals was that as the Managing Authority regularly sent back project proposals with low environmental performance for amendment, regional agencies and project owners themselves also started to understand the importance of considering “environmental sustainability” more deeply and try to present it in the proposal; as it was revealed by the quality of the proposals. This was due to the fact that even the project guide

on “environmental sustainability” tried to take an integrative approach. However, critiques of the system considered it too costly and time-consuming to be applied to all projects of all OPs. Even though several officials and the NGO experts found the system beneficial and proposed it for all operational programmes of the 2007 – 2013 period, it was discontinued.

Instead, a rigid, though much more objective system applicable to all OPs was introduced to track the performance of projects on “environmental sustainability” and equal opportunities, which, however, is, as experience shows, for various reasons, unable to consider the real overall impacts of projects. (Even worse, instead of promoting an increased understanding of horizontal issues among project owners, it is counterproductive due to high administrative burdens.) Some level of involvement of NGO experts in decision-preparation was still ensured between 2007 and 2010. NGO experts, among others, had the opportunity to apply along strict criteria, for membership in a pool of experts. Members of each project evaluation committee were selected from this pool by drawing lots. (It is also a major step forward that the government published a searchable database of EU-funded projects, with basic information about each project, including the list of names of the members of the project evaluation committee.) However, the ruling government (in office since April 2010) changed the rules of procedures and abolished the mandatory involvement of NGO experts in project evaluation (i.e., decision preparation) teams, by the government decree 4/2011. (l. 28.).

An ideal solution would probably combine the two practices described above. The involvement of NGO experts is unavoidable, along clear, transparent guidelines in order to ensure impartiality and professionalism. Also, for professional reasons, the evaluation of horizontal criteria (i.e., environment, sustainability, equal opportunities) should take an integrative approach, with a focus on the performance of the projects instead of that of the project owner.

Case Study (Latvia):

Participation of Latvian NGOs in Project Evaluation

Representatives of environmental NGOs in Latvia are involved in the work of several project evaluation committees. One of them is the project evaluation committee for large water infrastructure projects submitted for financing from EU funds in the financing period of 2007 – 2013. For financing in that activity, the so called “limited competition” rule was applied, i.e., only those municipalities that were shortlisted by the Ministry of Environment based on environmental criteria were entitled to apply for funding. NGO participation in this situation is liable to increase transparency of decision making.

Description of Activity

The aim of the activity “Development of water management infrastructure in agglomerations with more than 2000 residents” (activity No. 3.5.1.1. under national framework documents) is to improve the quality of water management and waste-water treatment, as well as improve accessibility of water management services to inhabitants in certain inhabited areas. This activity was designed to allow towns and municipalities to meet EU requirements in the area of water management and waste-water treatment. The total amount available for public financing in the programming period 2007-2013 is 477,7 million EUR – most of which constitutes financing from the Cohesion fund. The implementation of this activity is guided by the Cabinet Regulation, which describes general terms and conditions, the application process, project evaluation and the monitoring of the implementation, etc. As mentioned above, the Ministry of Environment prepared a list of municipalities that were entitled for this financing – the list of municipalities was included in the annex of the Cabinet Regulation. The criteria for listing municipalities were based on the present quality of drinking water and waste-water treatment against the targets laid out by EU directives in the field of water management. When the calls for applications were opened, the Ministry of Environment sent out letters to municipalities inviting them to apply for financing.

Project Proposal Evaluation Committee

All project applications are evaluated using administrative and quality criteria by the project evaluation committee. Cabinet regulation on implementation of this activity prescribes that the project evaluation committee is created by the Ministry

of Environment. This regulation further stipulates that the committee is composed of representatives from the Ministry of Environment, the Union of Municipalities and environmental NGOs. The number of committee members is not pre-defined by the Cabinet Regulation and it may vary, but usually they have 6-8 members, out of which one is a representative of environmental NGOs. All members of the evaluation committee have the same rights. Thus, the NGO representative is equally taking part in the decision making process along with the representatives of other institutions.

In the evaluation process itself all members of the committee have access to all project documentation. Prior to the beginning of the evaluation process, each committee member is obliged to sign a declaration stating that he or she has no conflict of interests and he or she will not disclose any information about project applications or applicants to third parties.

Each representative is asked to allocate the necessary time and review all project applications with a supporting document and then fill out a project evaluation form (an electronic file), where they can provide comments and assign scores where necessary. It is mandatory for an application to comply with all administrative criteria, but as for the quality criteria, each application gets a certain score. During meetings committee members discuss contents of project applications, including all questions that are unclear and any other related issues. The committee can also ask the applicant to submit additional documents or explanations. All communication with the applicant is done in writing. The decisions of the committee are a basis for approval of project applications. All decisions are included in the official minutes of the committee meetings. The Committee seeks to make all its decisions by consensus.

Project applications include complicated financial forms and might also involve some unclear legal issues, e.g., the ownership of water management infrastructure, licensing etc. The evaluation committee doesn't always have the necessary knowledge, therefore, there are financial and legal experts also involved in the evaluation process. The members of the project evaluation committee have access to experts' analyses.

Selection Process of NGO Representative to the Committee

The Cabinet Regulation doesn't specify how the representative of environmental NGOs is to be chosen – there is no mention of specific institutions or selection process. The Ministry of Environment approached the Environment Advisory Board

(EAB) to nominate a NGO representative to the evaluation committee. The EAB is composed of representatives of 20 leading environmental NGOs, its meetings are open to anybody interested in environmental policy issues and therefore, it is de facto perceived as a platform of leading environmental NGOs in Latvia. NGO representatives are elected annually to the EAB and any environmental NGO can apply for it. Thus, the EAB is seen as a trusted and transparently functioning institution to nominate a representative to the project evaluation committee.

The NGO representative was nominated by the EAB to work in the project evaluation committee in July, 2008. Basically, environmental NGOs could choose a representative whom they believed would represent environmental and public interest the best. The NGO representative is asked from time to time to report back about his or her work in the committee. The project evaluation committee will act as long as the particular activity of water management projects is under implementation. There were already several rounds of application – in 2008 and 2010. The evaluation of project applications from last round is still continuing in the beginning of 2011.

The drawback of the participation process seen by NGOs is that respective NGO representative who gets involved in the project evaluation committee, needs to become a civil servant. This status involves an obligation to submit an annual declaration of civil servants, declaring all positions, income, liabilities, properties, etc. This precondition was required by state legislation, ruling that NGO representatives who take part in decision making about public money should also ensure full transparency. Although this requirement is justified from the transparency point of view, some NGO representatives have been critical about this requirement, because they see themselves as representatives of organized civil society, and not as state official. In addition, it has to be highlighted that all the work of the NGO representative is done completely voluntarily, (or using the resources of the NGO), thus, becoming a civil servant is seen as a bureaucratic and time consuming burden.

Conclusions

- Participation in the project evaluation process brings about a better understanding of how the project evaluation process works in practice, including on how well project evaluation criteria are established, how horizontal criteria are applied, etc. This knowledge could be used in the next programming period in order to improve the project selection and evaluation process.

- The work of the NGO representative in the project evaluation committee is done on a completely voluntary basis. NGOs often lack capacity to participate in this kind of activities, thus, not all valuable knowledge and skills may be utilized in this work. Sometimes environmental NGOs had even refused to participate in the work of project evaluation committees due to the lack of capacity. There might also be a risk of the lack of institutional memory, i.e., the knowledge acquired in this programming period may not be transferred to the new programming period if the NGO representative leaves.
- The NGO representatives are not allowed to share information about project applications. Thus, mostly they have to rely on their own knowledge and expertise. For example, the NGO representative is not allowed to disclose information to other members of the Environmental Advisory Board, even though the NGO delegate was nominated to the project evaluation committee by this Board. This situation seriously hampers the efficiency of NGO participation.

Case Study (Slovakia):

NGO Participation at the Control and Monitoring of the OP Employment and Social Inclusion

Background

Traditionally, the participation of the NGO sector in control and monitoring of the OPs in Slovakia was more or less on a formal level. Public participation in EU funds governance was guaranteed only in Monitoring Committees, while other processes were inaccessible to NGOs. This, together with inadequate access to information, created a strong barrier against the effective public control of the implementation of programmes. Although the implementation of the OPs financed through ERDF still remains a relatively closed system, there are promising signs and initiatives in the ESF that indicate change in the level and art of NGO participation in the control and monitoring processes.

The change in the management of OP Employment and Social Inclusion (OP EaSI) has brought important changes in the field of NGO participation. The new management sent a clear signal that they were willing to cooperate with NGOs active in the fields the OPs were addressing and that on more than just a formal level.

From September on, the NGOs have been involved more intensively in singular control processes of ESF financed programmes under the control of the Ministry of Employment, Social and Family Affairs (MESFA).

NGO participation

A. Monitoring:

In 2007, the former management of the MESFA didn't respect the nominations for NGO representatives to the monitoring committees (MC) approved by the Government Council for Non-governmental Non-profit Organizations (Council). This resulted in a mere formal participation of the civic organizations in funds monitoring, while those NGOs that have been most active in the funds control were deprived of the opportunity to participate in the MC sessions.

In September 2010, the new management organized an informal meeting of MCs, where the NGOs not officially represented in the MCs were also invited. The main topics discussed included the possibilities of future effective NGO participation in monitoring. Opening the work of the MC to other organizations involved in the topic is an innovative way of sharing information and enhancing public discussion in Slovakia. The remaining problem is the inappropriate representation of the civic sector in the MCs. However, the management of OP plans to approve the membership of those representatives who have been nominated by the Council in the first place.

B. Evaluation and project selection:

In the majority of OPs, the processes of project evaluation and selection are seen as the most problematical part of programme implementation. Although this fact should be the reason to strengthen the public control of processes, NGOs do not have the possibility to participate in project evaluation and selection.

In the past, there were cases when certain evaluators were repeatedly engaged in the evaluation processes without any clear mechanism for their selection. At present, the evaluators are being selected by poll, with NGO representatives present to oversee the equal opportunities. This is a direct step towards transparency.

NGO representatives also participate as observers at the sessions of the selection committees. This presents a certain guarantee that project selection will be objective and there will be no space for personal interventions (for example of Ministry officials) in the process.

However, the quality of project evaluation still remains to be the weak point. Formal control of project applications and evaluation are often carried out under time pressure. Evaluators have to assess large quantity of projects in a short period, which reduces the quality of evaluation, especially the assessment of past activities and experience of applicants and the quality of activities and methods proposed in the projects. Apart from that, there are no effective mechanisms for quality control of the work carried out by evaluators and no sanctions for low quality of work or contravening the rules.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This development presents a clear step towards active participation of NGOs at the control and monitoring processes. It is crucial to develop the cooperation with the

with all managing authorities. Close attention should be paid to the thorough evaluation of experience through the OP EaSI and the dissemination of this good practice.

Another way of increasing the transparency of evaluation and selection in the OP is the involvement of NGO representatives as observers.

To create commonly acceptable solutions for NGO participation, systematic work on the institutional and organizational structure of the cooperation needs to be carried out both by authorities and NGOs. The formulation of a singular authority must be utilised to the maximum as its management has access to forums that are closed to NGOs and can influence top decision makers. This indirect influence needs to be combined with active advocacy with the aim to establish bilaterally convenient relations between MAs and NGOs.

Theme 7: Cooperation among NGOs

Cooperation among NGOs on problematic projects, funded by EU money or for promotion of good practices to be supported by the EU Cohesion policy and CAP has over a decade long history. It was mainly environmental groups that started to cooperate on national and on international levels among themselves in order to save nature protection zones, wetlands, forests from highways or to fight against problematic energy, waste, etc. projects for clean air or healthy living conditions. Later NGOs joined forces and started to propose alternatives – in the beginning for particular projects, then – for programmes and policies. NGOs also work together to improve conditions for public participation, access to information, etc.

Cooperation among NGOs is widespread in CEE countries due to the fact that most of them are small groups with sometimes very focused objectives and expertise and limited resources (finances and manpower). This process naturally covers the work (campaigning, advocacy) on EU funds, where NGOs from CEE have been involved since the mid-90's in connection with some PHARE-funded projects.

With the process of pre-accession and then the accession to EU, more NGOs in new member countries became more active in the field of EU funds and naturally increased cooperation among themselves. Today there are developed national coalitions that work on EU funding in almost all CEE countries as well as international networks such as the CEE Bankwatch Network. Some of the older networks e.g., Friends of the Earth – Europe, WWF and BirdLife also included work on EU funds in their portfolio, thus increasing cooperation among themselves and with NGOs in CEE countries.

One of the oldest and among the most famous cases for cooperation among NGOs with regards to a particular project is the “Save Kresna gorge” campaign of sixteen Bulgarian environmental and scientific organizations. It is about the protection of a precious natural site from destruction during the construction and operation of Struma motorway, part of the TEN-T corridor No 4. The campaign started in late 1997, passed through the whole pre-accession period (2000 – 2006) and is still going on. Throughout the years the NGOs involved set a huge number of precedents and good practices in cooperation, work with national and EU institutions and international NGO networks.

With the accession and the prioritising of the national network of highways, the work of the “Save Kresna gorge” coalition (16 NGOs) gained impetus. The NGOs managed to prove their positions on alternative routes for the motorway and the

final agreement between the EC and the Bulgarian government, made in 2007 was that an alternative route that does not destroy Kresna gorge NATURA 2000 site should be chosen and developed. The Coalition has a very good working relationship with present governmental institutions (the Ministry for Regional Planning and Construction Works, Road Infrastructure Agency and to some extent the Ministry of Transport, Information Technologies and Communications) and are to work out the Steering Committee for the project and other important works (e.g., clarify EIA conditions, CBA, etc.).

Other NGOs' coalitions in Bulgaria are working more or less the same way. Some of them ("For Nature" Coalition, etc. as well as a number of grassroots initiatives for the protection of different natural areas) are focused on concrete projects, related to EU funding and the protection of NATURA 2000 sites. They are also active in solving problems between nature protection and the development of wind and solar parks. Others, like the Coalition for Sustainable Use of EU Funds (CSUEUF) is focused on monitoring all the OPs and a set of associated problems.

In the Czech Republic, we have an example with two very structured platforms for NGOs. The Association of NGO's in the Czech Republic was founded in 2003, and involves nearly 900 NGOs from the country by now. The Association defends and promotes the common interests and needs of the entire non-profit sector, creating a space for communication and partnership among NGOs and with other social actors (public administrations, parliaments, councils, employers, trade unions, political parties, etc.). The NGO Association also helps its members and other NGOs to adapt to the conditions of the European Union.

The Association of NGOs set a range of priorities as targets, which are currently regarded as the most significant strengthening point of the partnership of NGOs and public bodies and prepare them for the use of European Union support programs in the next programming period 2014 and beyond.

The Governmental Council of Non-Governmental Organizations is a standing advisory, initiative and coordinating body of the Government of the Czech Republic in the area of non-profit organizations. The Government Council for NGOs was established in 1992 as Council for Foundations, and in 1998, it was transformed to Council on Non-Governmental Organizations.

Members of the Council are nominated by the national government, but in fact the Council consist of the representatives of the Czech branches of main NGO networks. The Council is not an autonomous body of NGOs, but in fact it is an open

discussion forum for NGOs with wide authority. The Council has three working committees: the Committee for Regions, the Committee for EU and the Committee for Legislation.

The Council shall perform, among others, monitoring, analysing and publishing of information on the status of NGOs within the EU and on participation in EU-related decision making that affects NGOs and financial resources for them, work with ministries and other administrative authorities responsible for the financial management of EU sources in the Czech Republic to make NGOs eligible to apply for EU funds.

The case of Poland (see the case study from Poland in Theme 2, sub-theme 1) gives an example how NGOs and other socio-economic partners, presented in the Monitoring Committees cooperate among themselves and with public institutions. The National Thematic Network for Partnership was established in June 2010 by the Coordinating Committee for the National Strategic Framework 2007-2013. The Network will exist till the end of the current programming period. The aim of the Network is to provide concrete support to the members of Monitoring Committees (MCs), especially to those who represent socio-economic partners. The support should make their activities more effective and eliminate problems related to the implementation of structural funds in Poland.

The Network strives to strengthen the entire civil society in Poland indirectly, too. In a country with a communist inheritance, the lack of trust in working relations and communication between different groups still exist. Therefore, it is of crucial importance to have a platform, where representatives of different social/civil groups can discuss problems in an open and honest manner.

The Network has six instruments to operate:

- a national annual conference on various aspects of partnership;
- regional meetings – held every 2/3 months in one of the 16 Polish regions, meetings are dedicated to actual difficulties in the work of members of MCs, training, workshops and exchange of experiences;
- analysis and expertise – possibility to order thematic studies;
- competition for the monitoring committee with the best partnership application ;
- horizontal exchange of information - using the Knowledge Base administrated by the Ministry for Regional Development;
- miscellaneous educational activities, depending on needs.

So far about 150 people attended the meetings of the Network. They gradually join the information system. We estimate that there are about 800 members of the MCs and their alternates who represent socio-economic partners.

The experience from Bulgaria, the Czech Republic and Poland, as well as from the other countries shows that there is widespread cooperation among NGOs in the fields of EU funds. They vary from forming ad-hoc or permanent coalitions to joint civil-institutional platforms and initiatives. From local and national to international ones. Organised bottom-up or governmentally initiated.

All of them represent real life situations and needs – whether it be a fight for the protection of natural, cultural or social heritage, or the need to involve stakeholders in decision-making for strategies and projects for their village, town, region, or monitoring the use of public (incl. EU-granted) funds.

From the other side, the support for NGOs in new member countries is getting limited as more donors believe that the conditions in CEE became more friendly to civil initiatives and citizens, socially responsible businesses and governments are willing to donate more for civil initiatives. Unfortunately this is not the case. The resource shortages are also among the reasons for cooperation – an attempt to use money and goods in the most efficient way.

The cooperation also helps to build trust among partners and is an investment in social capital.

There are a number of problems however, that should be overcome:

- there are always new and inexperienced partners, so open-mindedness and a method for learning the ways of how to cooperate is needed;
- there are always new situations, inspired by internal or external factors (e.g., EU legislation) that request new innovative forms of cooperation;
- there is always the threat that some authorities would decide to limit the role of civil society, so there is always need to defend the right for public participation and other associated rights of civil society.

Many civil activists in CEE had the opportunity to see the rise of freedom in their countries, and although nothing can be perfect, they have learnt many lessons how to work together for improving the conditions of life and save nature.

Case Study (Bulgaria):

Cooperation among NGOs to Save Kresna Gorge

There are number of cases for cooperation between Bulgarian NGOs with regard to Pre-accession and Structural funds, but one is already remarkable and could be assessed as a pioneering approach for cooperation both among NGOs and between NGOs and institutions. The Strouma motorway (part of TEN-T Corridor 4) between Sofia and the Bulgarian-Greek border (towards Thessaloniki) became the most famous campaign related to an EU-funded project since 1997. Now the project is moving ahead to some extent, aiming to get money from the OP Transport for both the 2007-13 and the 2014-20 financial periods. After some fourteen years of strong campaigning to save Kresna gorge reserve and NATURA 2000 zone, the NGOs from “Save Kresna gorge coalition” launched a new phase of the campaign. Now they are working in cooperation with the Ministry for Regional Development and Public Works (MRDPW) and the Ministry of Transport, Information Technologies and Communications (MTITC) and other institutions, e.g., the Ministry of Environment and Waters (MOEW) and the Programming of EU funds Directorate within the Council of Ministers.

At an extensive meeting in 2007 with the participation of all involved institutions and NGOs with a moderation of EC representatives, agreement was made that the Kresna gorge section of the highway should be constructed following the alternative proposal initiated by the NGOs in their attempts to save the gorge. Both alternatives envisaged the protection of the gorge and the construction of a highway at the same time. Three years afterwards still no development was made. Moreover, the government decided to pass by the agreement and propose only sections outside the gorge for EU funding, thus foreshadowing future problems with bottlenecks and the salami approach.

As the EU commission did not accept to support such approach and in late 2010 the MTITC and later on MRDPW took the initiative to invite NGOs for a set of meetings to move the project ahead. The present government is very much focused on the construction of highways and fast roads until 2020. Therefore, the institutions were open and asked NGOs to provide all the knowledge they have to support faster development of the project. Namely, NGOs are involved in:

- Proposals and discussions around alternatives within the “Tunnels alternative”;
- Clarification of EIA conditions;
- Setting up of the Steering committee. The steering Committee is one of the conditions to start Strouma highway project at all. It was proposed by NGOs and accepted by the EC and others before 2007. This form of an ongoing monitoring body for a single project is an innovation for Bulgaria.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The so far positive progress promises that both environmental and transport goals would be met and EU funds would be utilised properly. Nevertheless, as there is still a long way ahead, NGOs should continue their excellent cooperation on the case. Their position is strong enough due to several factors, namely:

- The EU does not allow the motorway application to be submitted in sections (no “salami approach”);
- The Bulgarian government aims to complete some seven major highways by 2020⁹ including Strouma motorway by 2015¹⁰ ;
- From an economic point of view, Thessaloniki is the nearest big port to Sofia and besides the highway, a new high-speed railroad should be constructed within the next 5 to 10 years.

NGOs from the “Save Kresna gorge coalition” should:

- participate actively in the Steering Committee to be specially set for the project and work actively to insure the fulfilment of all requirements of the EU and national environmental legislation until the whole motorway is completed and put in operation;
- actively proposing solutions for the ongoing problems that would arise during the construction period;
- monitoring potential problems outside Kresna gorge and propose solutions to the respective institutions;
- communicate with international NGOs (Green 10, other NGOs of MCs that have similar expertise) to ensure that up-to-date proposals and solutions are taken into account;
- actively participate in the programming of Structural funds in Bulgaria for the period of 2014-2020 in order to guarantee that EU money will be spent on more sustainable transport projects.

⁹ The priorities for development of road infrastructure in Bulgaria by 2020 for roads of European and national importance. Ministry for Regional Development. Sofia, 01.02.2011. available at: <http://www.mrrb.government.bg/index.php?lang=bg&do=actual&id=2752>

¹⁰ Velikov, Georgi. By 2020 - 7 highways and 7 fast roads. Sofia, 24,01,2011. Available at: <http://www.trud.bg/Article.asp?ArticleId=753738>

Case Study (Czech Republic):

Advances of NGOs and the Public Sector in the Czech Republic

In the Czech Republic, the non-governmental non-profit sector is very young and is fighting various weaknesses. Czech NGOs simply work for better coordination among themselves in specific issues and trying to build fruitful partnerships with the public sector. One of these issues is the Structural funds.

After a euphoric period at the beginning of the 90s, Czech NGOs go through hard times in the process of differentiation for professional and citizens' bodies. After the admission of the Czech Republic to the EU, EU funds became the main source of financing for the nongovernmental sector. It started a new wave of founding NGOs, but a lot of these NGOs do not enjoy the wide support of the public.

Partnership is a frequently used term in the discourses on Structural funds and Cohesion policy. It is a helpful tool for improving the social and political impact of Structural funds. Discussion and partnership between NGOs, the public, and the government must be dealt with on different levels.

In the Czech Republic there are two platforms on which extensive discussion is going on between these sectors

Governmental Council of Non-Governmental Organizations

The Governmental Council of Non-Governmental Organizations is a standing advisory, initiated by and a coordinating body of the Government of the Czech Republic for questions in the field of non-profit organizations. The Government Council for NGOs was established by a Government Resolution in 1992 as Council for Foundations, and transformed by a Government Resolution of 1998 to Council on Non-Governmental Organizations.

The Council collects, discusses and (through its Chairman/President by government) comments on materials related to NGOs and the creation of a suitable environment for their existence and activities. In addition to its other obligations, the Council shall perform the following tasks:

- Initiates and coordinates the cooperation between ministries, administrative offices and local authorities in support of NGOs, including the subsidy policy of public budgets,
- monitors, analyzes and publishes information on the status of NGOs within the European Union (EU) regarding participation in EU-related decision-making affecting NGOs and financial resources, working with ministries and other administrative authorities responsible for the financial management of EU resources in the Czech Republic, if NGOs are eligible to apply,
- in cooperation with ministries, administrative offices, NGOs and other bodies and institutions ensures the availability and dissemination of information on NGOs and government policy measures which relate to NGOs, in particular, access and analyze information about grants from public funds for NGOs.

Members of the Council are nominated by the national government, but in fact the Council consist of representatives of the branches of main NGOs' networks in the Czech Republic. The Council is not a democratic autonomous body of NGO's, but in fact it is an open discussion forum for NGOs with wide authority.

The Council has three working committees: the Committee of Regions, the Committee for EU and the Committee for Legislation. The latter consists of experts and lawyers and is the most technical one among them in the whole structure of the Council.

The Committee for EU monitors the status of NGOs within the EU and financial resources associated with CR in the EU membership. In doing so, the Committee cooperates with other ministries and agencies that implement the EU's financial resources in the country and prepares proposals for improving the use of funds by NGOs. The Committee has gained access to information on the use of assistance from Structural Funds, Cohesion Fund and other funds.

In last programming period, the committee played an important role in the nomination of representatives of NGOs to monitoring committees of particular OPs. The Committee prepares calls for interested representatives of NGOs and prepares an open evaluation process for candidates. The successful candidate becomes delegate of the Council. Delegates of the Council were accepted in all cases by the implementation authority of particular OPs.

The Committee of Regions is a platform for the meeting of the non-profit sector, the government, local governments and the private sector. Its members are mainly representatives of NGOs and elected representatives of regional governments, representatives of the Union of the Czech and Moravian Production Cooperatives, the Ministry of Environment CR Economic Chamber, the Chamber of Agriculture, the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry for Regional Development. The Committee is particularly concerned with the institutionalization of relations between the voluntary sector and public administration at the regional level.

Weaknesses	Strong side
It is not an autonomous body of th NGO sector.	Natural authority in the NGO sector.
Motivation of some Council members.	Open discussion platform supported on governmental level.
Low authority by some governmental bodies.	Working structure functions - Committee of regions.
Dependence on governmental structures.	Support by secretary.

The Committee of Regions supported the most important partnership agreement between the NGO sector and regional Governments. The Association of NGOs in the Czech Republic, with support of the Committee of Regions, prepared a memorandum of cooperation with the Association of Regions in the Czech Republic. Important discussions were lead about the practical aspects of this memorandum within this Committee.

The Memorandum is followed by similar memoranda in most of the regions of the Czech Republic. These partnership agreements formulate principles for the cooperation of NGOs in particular regions with their governments, some of them promise structural support for the regional networking of NGOs.

About the Association of NGOs in the Czech Republic

Another important body for communication between NGOs and the public sector is the Association of NGOs in the Czech Republic. It is the association of legal persons, which was founded in 2003 as a result of a long process of strengthening collaboration within the non-profit sector, which began in the early 90 years. Members of the Association of NGOs are all regional multidisciplinary associations and some branch associations, as well as a number of nongovernmental organizations.

Its membership is nearly 900 NGOs, however, it defends and promotes the common interests and needs of the entire non-profit sector, creating a space for communication and partnership among NGOs and with other social actors (public administrations, parliaments, councils, employers, trade unions, political parties, etc.). The NGO Association helps its members and other NGOs to adapt to the conditions of the European Union.

The Association of NGOs in the Czech Republic is the largest association of this type in the country. It is based on a regional structure. However, it is not the only or main representative of the NGO sector in the Czech Republic.

The Association of NGOs has set a range of its priorities as targets, the most significant of which now is the strengthening of the partnership of NGOs and public bodies, and the preparation of them (via seminars and workshops conducted) for the utilization of European Union support programs in the next programming period 2013 and beyond.

The Memorandum about partnership with the Association of Regions of the Czech Republic is the most visible institutional improvement in partnership in the Czech Republic.

Internet sources (in Czech):

Governmental Council:

<http://www.vlada.cz/cz/ppov/rnno/zakladni-informace-767>

Association of NGOs in the Czech Republic:

www.asociacenno.cz

About SFteam

SFteam (“Structural Funds” Team) for Sustainable Future is a network of NGOs established in 2002 with the aim of guiding regional development and regional policy towards sustainability through promoting meaningful partnership and public participation in decision-making.

From the initial number of four, its membership has grown to eight and covers Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Latvia, the Netherlands, Poland, Romania and Slovakia by now. SFteam members are umbrellas or at least serve as communication points for the broader NGO community in their countries.

SFteam members realized that EU cohesion policy through its funding instruments is a key factor in determining the development path of CEE countries. Therefore, they agreed to promote the principles of partnership, transparency and sustainability in the programming, monitoring, implementation and evaluation of Structural and Cohesion Funds, including the elaboration of some pilot projects.

SFteam members work in the above fields with a diverse national focus but with the shared goal of helping communities, stakeholders and decision-makers agree on a path towards sustainability for the common benefit of all.

The majority of SFteam’s financial resources comes from the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation but SFteam also appreciated funding from the International Visegrad Fund, the Dutch government, the Hungarian National Civil Fund and other European and national funding sources.

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BlueLink Information Network, Bulgaria
<http://www.bluelink.net>

Public Environmental Centre for Sustainable Development, Bulgaria
<http://www.ecovarna.info>

Focus Eco Centre, Romania
<http://www.focuseco.ro>

Friends of the Earth – CEPA, Slovakia
<http://www.priateliazeme.sk/cepa>

Green Liberty, Latvia
<http://www.zb-zeme.lv>

Milieukontakt International, Netherlands
<http://www.milieukontakt.nl/>

National Society of Conservationists, Hungary
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Polish Green Network, Poland
<http://www.zielonasiec.pl>

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