

International Development of NGOs: Danube Environmental Forum (DEF)



Abstract: The Danube Environmental Forum (DEF) is a network of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) which is dedicated to protecting the Danube River and its tributaries, their biodiversity and national resources by enhancing cooperation among governments and stakeholders. Targeting pollution reduction and transboundary cooperation in the same basin, the UNDP-GEF Danube Regional Project (DRP) has worked to build and strengthen the DEF regional NGO network and to establish a Regional Secretariat to coordinate its widespread, multi-country activities and projects. DEF now has a strong Secretariat, 174 member organizations and national focal points from 13 Danube countries. Activities such as an annual basin-wide Danube Day as well as their participation in the International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River Basin (ICPDR) are among its successes. DEF challenges included selecting a small set of common issues to focus network efforts and developing financial sustainability. DRP seed funding to support such efforts and institution-building was critical for the DEF and its members to reach new heights in positive regional impact. Through a similar process, other projects and NGO networks can take advantage of regional economies of scale and networking to support public involvement across their transboundary water basins.

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Experience of the GEF - sponsored

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

GEFID: 1460/2042, (RER03/G31/A/1G/31 00036337)

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

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

The **project's** objectives were:

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

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

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

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

programme for non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

THE EXPERIENCE

(a) Transboundary Water Management (TWM) Issue:

The cooperation of civil society, and in particular of national and local NGOs, is essential for achieving the objectives and goals (for pollution reduction and trans-boundary cooperation) of the GEF/UNDP Danube Regional Project (DRP) and those of the International Convention for Protection of the Danube River Basin (ICPDR). Public participation and the involvement of NGOs are core principles in sustainable water management.

With this in mind, a significant proportion of the entire DRP is devoted to public participation and stakeholder communications through a range of targeted activities and projects. These include: the Small Grants Programme (SGP);* communications, campaigning and awareness-raising projects; a project devoted to improving public participation in environmental decision-making and access to environmental information; and activities specially designed to support the NGO community.

* See "*Small Grants Programme (SGP) in the UNDP/GEF Danube River Basin Project (DRP)*," another in the *IW Experience Notes series*.

Opportunities exist for NGOs to participate in and influence the development of environmental plans and programmes that are effective and have the consent and trust of affected stakeholders, especially at the local level. NGOs are often important stakeholders in addressing controversial issues.

One DRP challenge was to provide guidance and information to governments on how they

should comply with their environmental public participation obligations at all levels (international, regional, national and local). How should they inform and involve other stakeholders in appropriate public participation activities and structures at different levels (i.e. increase transparency)? An opportunity exists here for NGOs to facilitate this exchange as a “voice of civil society.”

(b) How was the issue addressed

Particular attention has been given to establishing and strengthening the capacities of the Danube Environmental Forum (DEF), the umbrella organization of NGOs in the Danube River Basin. The DEF’s mission is to protect the Danube River with its tributaries, their biodiversity and resources by enhancing cooperation among governments, NGOs, local people and stakeholders towards the sustainable use of natural ecosystems. The DEF receives support from the DRP in order to raise the capacities of the network and its members to inform and work to resolve Danube water pollution issues.

GEF/UNDP has supported Danube NGO structures and specifically the DEF for the last 10 years. The DRP (2001-2006) provided extensive support to build and strengthen the DEF regional NGO network and to establish a Regional Secretariat to coordinate its widespread, multi-country activities and projects.

DEF strengthening was linked with other DRP public participation and communications activities. Many DEF NGOs received DRP grants and were able to participate in pilot projects for improving access to governmental information at the local level in five countries in southeast Europe.

While a strong DEF Secretariat led management of the network, it was important that national member organizations took responsibility for activities not only at the national and local level but also for the network as a whole.

It was important for DEF to have a clear strategy and mission to identify its realistic role as a stakeholder at the regional and national levels. Since the Forum is a network of local NGOs with various priorities, it was challenging to select a few key common issues and focus on these in communications and activities.

Another key challenge is to ensure DEF remains financially sustainable after the DRP ends. The project has contributed by funding regional meetings and travel for DEF members to participate in DRP deliberations and at Commission meetings as well as for other specific activities of the network. Fundraising strategies and other mechanisms for sustaining the network have also been developed.

RESULTS AND LEARNING

DEF now has 174 member organizations from 13 Danube countries. DEF National Focal Points operate in each of the DEF countries and constitute the DEF Board. The Board meets regularly to discuss common issues and activities to be undertaken in the Danube Basin. The DEF has become an important stakeholder and to the ICPDR and participate and give valuable input to the ICPDR expert meetings. Activities at national and regional levels are being implemented. Examples include: production and dissemination of information materials; national and regional meetings and training; development of local and regional scale projects; and communication activities such as public service campaigns.

Effective tools for communication were deemed essential for DEF work so a communication strategy was developed with reference to branding, challenges, language barriers, target audiences and key messages. DEF improved communications and information exchange internally and externally. This improved the public participation and cooperation of NGOs in governmental forums, programmes and initiatives. Transparency in planning processes and access to governmental information increased, as were communications between local and national NGOs, industry, media and local residents.

One DRP-related project provided support to International Danube Day, coordinated by the ICPDR and celebrated at the regional and national level in all Danube countries. In 2005, 400 organizations implemented 300 related events in the Danube region – many of them by DEF NGOs, many focusing on awareness-raising activities. A lesson was the value for a new network to cooperate on one common event to strengthen an internal feeling of unity.

A DEF expert data base was developed. This led to the establishment of DEF Water Policy Teams (with working groups for DEF key priorities including wetlands, public participation and hydromorphology). This further enhanced their influence in external forums, expert groups of the ICPDR and in discussions with other institutions at the regional and national level.

Addressing sustainability was a very important lesson in the DEF history. DEF had no institutional support between the first two GEF projects and was not fully functional prior to 2001. Over the last five years, through the support of the current DRP, the overall goal of sustainability was a key target. This included capacity building in project preparation and management. Funding to maintain the regional Secretariat has been a challenge, but DEF successfully applied for and has since received funding from the EU.

REPLICATION

The most important conditions for replication are initial funding support to the network and its members, as well as long-term strategies for sustainability, so an NGO forum like DEF can continue to interact with its respective basin agency and national partners after the GEF project ends.

In addition, there is a need for strategic capacity building support and guidance on stakeholder involvement. One way to achieve this is to link partner organizations and individuals that have regional vision with those with experience in public participation at regional and national levels. Finally, specific activities promoted by the GEF project – such as Danube Day, small grants, experts databases and policy teams – can help NGOs to build the skills and team confidence to continue their efforts well beyond the GEF investment.

SIGNIFICANCE

Through this experience, DRP has been able to build and strengthen capacities of a large NGO network of more than 174 NGOs in 13 countries. These capacities have been used and will be used in the future to raise and work to tackle environmental challenges, public participation and access to information in the basin as well as to strengthen transboundary cooperation in the region.

Despite universal agreement that public participation is of key importance in water management, few international river basins are far in implementing public participation strategies. The DRP has been using the DEF forum to support Danube participation over 5 years, thus providing Danube countries with an excellent opportunity, but also giving them a major challenge to sustain active NGO involvement in the future. It is an important experience for the GEF, that SAP implementation projects need to engage local community groups and NGOs as part of the implementation of on-the-ground measures. Such an NGO Forum is critical to taking advantage of regional economies of scale and networking to support public involvement across transboundary water basins.

REFERENCES

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KEYWORDS

- ◆ Danube Environmental Forum (DEF)
- ◆ Danube Regional Project (DRP)
- ◆ NGO Forum
- ◆ NGO Network
- ◆ NGO Participation

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