Water Knowledge Hub

CASE STUDY

Bulgaria: Creating a watershed council along Varbitsa river

Summary

In preparation for the new Water Law in Bulgaria, as well as the EU Water Framework Directive, the watershed council was set up as a pilot to test on-site effective and participatory approaches to river resource management in the Varbitsa River. The key lesson drawn is that participatory, open, citizen-friendly and bottom-up approaches are more efficient than top-down administrative approaches.

Background

The Varbitsa river is situated in the heart of the Kardjali region of Bulgaria – one of the country's most interesting and challenging regions. It is a mixed area (three languages, two main religions – Christian and Muslim – and three ethnicities) which was once expected to blow up inter-ethnic strife and destabilization.

Varbitsa is the lifeline of the area, providing water for industry, drinking and irrigation, and receiving refuse, sewage and industrial waste. Initially obvious problems included: the pumping of untreated industrial waste and sewage into the river; the leaking of a tailings reservoir situated on the sources of the river and the resulting severe health problems of the population in Zlatograd.

The Mayors of the 8 Varbitsa communities had for many years tried to find, separately, government funding to resolve the various problems along their respective parts of the river, such as funding for sewage depots and safe rubbish dumps. The Mayors had largely failed to share their problems with each other (due to competitive jealousy), with the result that the Mayors downstream had very little idea of the problems they were facing coming from upstream.

The Centre for Social Practices (CSP) was set up by civil society activists in 1994 with the express intention of working towards citizen empowerment in a post-totalitarian situation. One of the more durable lines of work since then has proven to be the issue of community involvement in the decision-making regarding rivers (their defence against degrading interference, resolution of conflicts arising out of access to water issues, river enhancement and development in the framework of sustainable development). From 1998, in preparation for coming Bulgarian Water Law and EU Water Framework Directive, the Varbitsa watershed council was set up as a pilot to test on-site effective and participatory approaches to river resource management and, while contributing to regional development, also to provide models for replication across the country and become the basis for new

legislation. The Council covers the Varbitsa river, tributary to the Arda in the Eastern Rhodope Mountains of Bulgaria (Kardjali region).

Actions taken

Initially an arena for inter-community dialogue and co-operation, the Council evolved into problem-solver and development arena particularly favoured by local authorities who abide by the Plan drawn up by the Council's general meeting in 2001 (solving problems on a river-scale rather than a municipality-scale). The approach was stakeholder meetings (between officials, the Council, watershed enthusiasts from other parts of the country, NGOs, local authorities and media) and common planning, plus media presence, and lobbying. The Council produced a Development and Hot Spots Action Plan in the autumn of 2000. The key problems addressed – with quantifiable outcomes – over the period 2000-2002 include:

1. Lack of integrated data: The entire length of the Varbitsa was mapped out and scientifically tested by independent scientists, with a full picture of problems and issues emerging.
2. One-sided approach to water resource management: With the inclusion of regional-level Forestry officials the Council began addressing issues of re-forestation, which it had initially not included into its work.
3. Lack of strategic thinking in fund-raising: Municipalities down-river dropped their separate claims for funding in favour of municipalities up-river and developed a multi-year plan for sewage works (and safe rubbish dumps) to come down, town by town, from up-river to down-river.
4. Leaking tailings reservoir upstream from Zlatograd: Immediate pressure was put and within six months a second reservoir wall was completed, and the reservoir stopped leaking.
5. Gravel extraction: The Council protested and put pressure on the Ministry of Environment and the Ministry of Construction to reduce uncontrolled gravel extraction and re-direct gravellers outside the riverbed. By June 2003 the issue was resolved together with the Ministry.
6. Awareness raising of clean water issues: E.g. It was discovered by Council inspections that, in Momchilgrad, the sewage was pumped into the river up-stream from the point from which the town extracts its drinking water.

Outcomes

The case study shows both the advantages (in terms of collecting and focusing unused energies) and the difficulties (in terms of "selling" the participatory result to a central government largely suspicious of local initiative) of an NGO-initiated, bottom-up local approach to IWRM. The Council's general meetings over 2000-2001 decided to use the Varbitsa experience as a pilot test-case that was to be used for:

1. the construction of realistic, citizen-friendly and efficient national legislation on Water Councils as privileged tools for integrated water resource management;
2. the construction, once national legislation was in place, of a Council along the entire length of the main river, Arda, with its seat in the regional centre of Kardjali, funded by the Kardjali municipality.

The lack of a civic tradition in the region and the lack of understanding, on the part of the Municipalities and the Regional Governors, of the potential for getting results outside the conventional government channels and budgets led to initial problems of implementation. These problems were overcome by the rapid production of visible results, focusing on limited local and single issues. Local stakeholders, particularly the Mayors also discovered that when acting as the representatives of a group – the Varbitsa Council – they command greater attention from funding agencies (state budget, EU-related and other project funds) and have a clear market edge over less organised localities, in terms of getting additional funding for river-related development projects. Media visibility also unlocked a certain local pride of achievement. Immediate benefits included: cessation of inter-community conflict over access to water; stoppage of leakage from tailings reservoir; removing the Zlatograd rubbish dump, source of much pollution, to a safer area; a full analysis of river “hot-spots”; increased control over gravelling company activities; and defense of river against industrial plans.

Lessons Learned

Participatory, open, citizen-friendly and bottom-up approaches are more efficient than top-down administrative approaches (the latter being traditional for the country).

The approach works if conducted openly and by reputable groups and individuals. Then comes the problem of convincing governments to come on board, rather than oppose or at least stay aloof from the process.

It is desirable to include models like Varbitsa into official government policy – so that Mayors, while doing their work in Council, represent not only the interests of the local communities, but also act as agents of official government policy.

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