

NGO Involvement in the Structural Funds: Influencing policy and Funding Conservation

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This presentation focuses on aspects of NGO involvement in the process of policy-making and implementation of the Structural Funds. The aim of the presentation is not to offer specific policy prescriptions but rather to set a conceptual framework within which NGO policy involvement can be articulated. In doing so, it is first essential to stress a few of the major characteristics of EU regional policy, and of the Structural funds as it's main funding mechanism.

As relevant to our work, the following four characteristics should be thoroughly understood:

- EU regional policy, as detailed in relevant regulations (1260/1999) and articulated through the implementation of the Structural funds constitutes an extremely wide policy, which is multi-faceted and multi targeted. The breadth of issues touched upon by the policy is huge and encompasses literally everything from industrial policy to the environment and from social policy to RTD.
- In addition to the breadth of it's policy goals, EU regional policy is also accompanied by various political implications and plays a major role in a variety of political matters. Issues of subsidiarity, administrative compliance and adaptation (Europeanisation), regulation mainstreaming, etc, are all examples of "high" political matters that are, by-large, negotiated within the framework of regional policy.
- EU regional policy is formulated and implemented under an extremely complex set of regulations, principles, procedures, etc. All these affect policy in different extents, while implementation procedures are not standardized and fixed between different countries and service departments. This gives rise to a very complex and differentiated realm of policy making and implementation.
- The structural funds, and EU regional policy in general, constitute a very progressive piece of policy and one that is constantly altered and redefined. Changes are rapid and the points altered often regard slight verbalisms with huge implications.

A proper understanding of the above characteristics, leads to one unchallenged conclusion: NGOs do not have the capacity, in terms of know-how and resources, to fully cope with the totality of EU regional policy. Important policy decisions must be made regarding which aspects of the policy are of interest to each NGO and which aspects can be successfully touched upon. The need for focus is imperative!

This focus should regard three distinctive policy levels, and should decide in which ones and how to get involved. The three distinctive policy fields are the following:

1. "High" Policy. The design of Support Frameworks, the content of Ops, the development rationale.
2. "Low" Policy. The implementation of the programmes and projects. With environmental relevance are such issues as the application of EIA, funding for environmental projects, integration and coordination between departments and services, etc.
3. "Getting Funding for NGOs". Which funding mechanisms can be utilized by NGOs to finance their conservation goals and projects.

In the following, I elaborate a bit on the characteristics of each and exemplify my point on the need to focus with aspects of WWF Greece involvement in the issue.

Involvement in “high” regional development politics

As involvement in this field would mean participation in at the point of strategic decision-making (prior to the drafting of the programmes), its extent is absolutely dependant on the willingness of the respective government to allow it. As the latter is usually restricted, involvement in “high” politics is usually lagged and reactive. In such a case the aim should be to affect decision makers’ understanding of the issue and in this way affect future programming decisions and/or interim changes in the policy content. Involvement in the field of “high” policy-making is a very sensitive area of action, as it deals with a variety of important “technical” issues, between which it is often easy loose policy orientation. It is, though, the one field where long-term results can be best targeted.

In Greece, we have decided to focus our work on two distinctive parts of this field: On the one hand we have tried to evaluate the true amount of finances that are directed to environmental protection and asses whether these are sufficient, both in absolute terms and in comparison to the amount of money spent on projects damaging or consuming the environment. In doing so we are trying both to anticipate alterations in the programmes that may wish to lessen environmental finances and also to create a momentum for more finances spent on the environment in coming periods. We have also tried to introduce a “pedagogic” distinction between finances spent on environmental protection (ex. conservation or awareness) and finances spent on the management of natural resources (ex. irrigation management or land reclamation). On the other hand, we are trying to pose strategic issues regarding the general understanding of the development process in Greece. In this we are trying to stress the role of the environment as a development competitive advantage of the country and also try to “reveal” the “perverse” effects of many development tools utilized: Tools like transport infrastructures or FDI attraction do not assure regional development, while at the same time reserve important environmental impacts.

Involvement in “Low” regional development politics

This policy field is probably the most difficult one to get involved in, as it is hugely diversified, fragmented and differentiated in scope. A minimum involvement can be found in the participation in monitoring committees or other relevant collective instruments. It is our opinion though that detailed monitoring and evaluation of programme implementation on the field goes far beyond any single NGO’s capacity.

In our involvement in the issue we have limited ourselves in the “high” part of this policy section. That means that we are actively participating in monitoring committees pursuing not a detailed monitoring of each implemented action, but rather the upholding of specific regulations and procedures. Distinctive among the latter are EIA procedures, proper spatial planning for implemented projects etc. In this same level we are strongly pressing for more effective evaluation of implemented projects and programmes, in an attempt to generate results and conclusions that can latter feed into the design of policies (“high” politics).

Getting Funding for NGOs

In attempting to guarantee funding for NGOs’ environmental work, two alternative, but not exclusive, courses can be followed: presenting the NGO as a beneficiary and gaining direct financing for it’s work, or trying to influence and support other entities in their investment decisions. The first course of action depends on the design of the programmes and on whether NGOs have been included as potential beneficiaries.

The second course presupposes an involvement with benefiting authorities and institutions, to such an extent that meaningful interactions can take place.

In Greece, environmental NGOs have been included as potential beneficiaries in only a handful of programmes and thus our work on this issue has been quite limited, despite the fact that we have attempted to target almost every possible source of funds. On the other hand, our work has been much more extensive in providing “educated” advices to local authorities for preparing application for funding and for guiding their investments to environmentally favourable projects. The latter, include not only conservation work but also, and most importantly, supportive investments, like ones for eco-tourism, awareness, etc. Such “supportive” investments have been considered of immense importance for our conservation work, as they provide a very important elements of local peoples’ involvement and for the generation of alternative income sources.

In outlining the above, two things should have become clear: Involvement in the structural funds means getting into a extremely complex policy, with many alternatives for action and many potential benefits accompanied by an array of probable pitfalls. In getting involved an NGO should always preserve a clear focus on what it wishes to attempt and of the goals targeted. It is imperative that a distinction between the different policy levels is made clear, when deciding upon potential courses of action. To guarantee maximum effectiveness, a proper combination of actions should be effective separately at each level but should also guarantee maximum synergistic effects between the levels. This final comment is important in highlighting the interconnected nature of the different levels, where “higher” levels create the implementation circumstances for the “lower” ones and where experiences and results gained from lower levels feed in the decision making of higher ones.