

Partnership principle: NGO involvement in Steering and Monitoring Committees

Experience from Hungary; The work of Monitoring Committees at national and regional level

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Basically, we can speak about various official monitoring and/or steering committees at the national and regional level. In Hungary, we can extend this by an unofficial, NGO initiative called „civil monitoring committees”. I will discuss these three in my presentation, with a quick look at international experiences.

At the national level, we find six monitoring committees dedicated to each of the five operational programmes and the Community Support Framework. As a result of several years' struggle, environmental NGOs (ENGO) got a seat in each of these committees.

The history of NGO efforts goes back to the time when the Government started to elaborate the National Development Plan. The first stage of the process was closed towards the public despite NGO requests. The situation changed with the new Government in the summer 2002. From this time on, NGOs got several NDP documents for commenting, usually with a very tight deadline, though. Both the government and NGOs organised consultations on the documents with several stakeholders. NGO comments were in the end hardly reflected in the documents but still, ENGOs achieved that Government officials learnt to respect them. The National Society of Conservationists played the initiator's and the coordinator's role in this process.

We also asked for a right to participate in SF monitoring committees, had meetings with Government officials on this and initiated that the ENGO AGM elected delegates to each of the above monitoring committees. (Earlier, ENGOs already had the right to delegate two people to the sectoral monitoring committee at the Ministry of Environment. This started to operate as an MC for ISPA and Phare but later, ISPA projects were taken out of the competence of the committee.) Due to the efforts made, the Government already referred to ENGOs as good examples towards other members of civil society when it came to delegation of NGO members in August 2003. The committees had their first meetings in September 2003.

First experience suggests unfortunately that, the Government wants to operate MCs to meet formal requirements of the EU but not as real decision-making bodies. Decisions aren't prepared well enough and made in a rush.

At the regional level, it is a big achievement that the new draft Act on Regional Development as adopted by the Government provides two seats for environmental NGOs in the National Regional Development Council and one in each Regional Development Council (RDC). We hope that this draft will also be adopted by the Parliament and enacted.

To have these provisions in the Act is the result of both national and regional level activities. On one hand, environmental NGOs have had a seat in the National Regional Development Council, a consultative body with various stakeholders in regional development issues, since 2000. This was one of the forums – apart from public concept papers and meetings – where we could lobby for the partnership principle in the new Act since 2002.

On the other hand, to promote the institutionalisation of participation at the regional level, as well, NSC launched a complex program in the seven regions of Hungary (in two phases: Oct 2001 and Nov 2002). In the frame of this program, we worked with seven half-time regional

coordinators who organised forums (22 of them in 2003, with the participation of 340 organisations) on regional development and EU-related issues for the public, served as info points (newsletters in 7000 copies countrywide, library etc.), built formal or informal regional NGO coalitions on the issue (e-lists, webpages) and followed the activities of Regional Development Agencies and Councils. (RDCs can be considered steering committees of funding practically.) To follow the activities of RDCs closely and influence it, our partners set up civil monitoring committees of 4-5 NGO experts who kept contact to the Agencies, tried to acquire draft development documents and arrange for NGO comments. Where possible, these experts also visited RDC sessions regularly. In our experience, it depended largely on the goodwill of RDC officials if they let NGO experts visit the sessions. The new Act, if adopted in its current version, will put an end to this varying practice and ensure institutionalised right to participate.

International level

Finally, considering that similar experiences and activities in different countries could strengthen each other, with the assistance and co-ordination of Milieukontakt Oosteuropa (The Netherlands), we have built up co-operation with NGOs from the Visegrad countries (CCO – Czech Republic; EEC/ECSD – Poland; CEPA – Slovakia), Latvia (Green Liberty) and Romania (Focus Eco Center) gradually and followed the preparation of the National Development Plan in each of these countries from the aspect of public participation. We published our findings in several rounds: in a position paper as a result of a seminar in November 2001; as a draft for a conference in April 2003 and now in the booklet “Partnerships for Sustainable Development?”

In the project, we evaluated the partnership principle in the programming, implementation and monitoring of Structural Funds. Our key recommendations towards national governments and authorities, summarized at the end of the booklet are the following:

- Implement strategic environmental assessment (SEA) on each programming document and in a participatory manner;
- Adopt clear, binding, enforceable rules or guidelines to implement the partnership principle;
- Strengthen regional structures, institutions, partners that are target of EU Structural Funds;
- A thorough evaluation of current programming process and implement lessons learned;
- Invite (environmental) NGOs into the planning teams for period 2007-13 from start;
- Ensure active dissemination of information, as well as timely and full access to information;
- Ensure real consultation with partners;
- Invite NGOs and other partners to monitoring and project selection committees of operational programmes and working groups preparing calls for project proposals;
- Ensure transparent operation of monitoring, project selection and steering committees;
- Make finances available to cover costs of NGO representatives in the process.