

Via Baltica Campaign in Poland

Coalition building - learning by doing

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In the beginning of 2000, Polish government started to appoint the routes for motorways and expressways in accordance to TEN-T transport corridors. For the first time public opinion heard about Via Baltica route through the valuable nature areas protected by law. The first attempts of setting the coalition of ecological NGOs opposing the most dangerous for nature, so called Białystok variant of the Via Baltica route, were not successful. Several local NGOs were determined and involved in this initiative, however they were lacking in experience, capacity and consistency.



At the end of 2002 WWF Poland and Polish Society for the Protection of Birds (OTOP)ⁱ reactivated/continued the idea of cooperation for changing of Via Baltica route and minimizing its effect on precious nature areas of international importance. That time both organizations had limited but stable capacity and what is important - good relationship with their foreign representations. Two months later CEE Bankwatch Network joined the Via Baltica campaign. The coalition of three NGOs was eventually confirmed by the common statement concerning Via Baltica route through northeast areas of Poland.

Map: The two alternative roads considered for the Via Baltica in Poland. The dark route may affect four sites of EU importance for the conservation of birds, other animals, plants and habitats, while the lighter route via Łomża is more environmentally safe.

Difficult beginning

The reliance is the basis of good cooperation. Some people arouse reliance automatically, for others this takes years. In the case of our coalition, mutual reliance has generated gradually. Firstly common assignments were signed as a document making sort of agreement on cooperation.

However, this step, despite its advantages and utility in the first phase of coalition building, could not replace ones calls reliance. Soon we were convinced about this in the beginning of the campaign when each organization initiated action on its own. During the rough discussions we were appealing to the particular points included in the agreement, however we realized (maybe just instinctively) that this is not a good manner of solving problems.

Better communication

Good communication is a basic condition of efficiency in coalition activities. Therefore in the first stage we focused on improving communication between all members of coalition. The possibility of exchanging information by phone (including tele-conferences), fax and Internet is very useful however such way is not able to replace face-to-face contacts. That is why we used to organise one day working meetings. Then our discussion was led via Internet (closed e-mail discussion list) and during the meetings organised by Via Baltica project promoter (General Directorate for the Public Roads and Motorways).

Reliance building

Definitely it was much easier to cooperate after we know each other better, not only as representatives of particular NGO. Relationships between people are also very important according to the golden rule saying that people usually ascribe devil intentions to those they do not know. Therefore through the frequent relations we establish sort of personal involvement and mutual reliance. The excellent occasions for initiating closer relationship were evening discussions accompanying the events concerning Via Baltica expressway construction (e.g. “late night ☺ football party” after the information meeting with representatives of the government and project promotor)

Understanding of work and organization culture

Of course, mentioned reliance is not the sole condition of good cooperation. Understanding of differences between organizations is another important factor. Our organizations differ in dynamism and style of work. The question is how we can take advantage of these differences. I believe that we can better understand of our partners’ organization culture, their internal mechanisms of consultation and making decision. Definitely this is not the official secret.

Let me exemplify this issue! WWF structures are more expanded therefore this organization can spend more time on public outreach via media. Accepting the rule that press release, depending on the subject, is prepared by particular coordinator, then co-edited and finally accepted by all coalition partners, the matter of its technical service is not significant any more.

The conditions of stable and efficient coalition

Problem recognition

Compare how things are now and the way, you would like them to be.

Information and experience exchange help us to set common goals and objectives that are targeted directly at the problem. By developing sound goals, we made road map which enable us to address issues of today and tomorrow. Such a map includes information about the target groups, campaign needs, priority list ...etc.

Coalition members

Basing on the example of the Via Baltica campaign, important condition of coalition building is what kinds of organizations enter new coalition. In case of our coalition, all organizations were similar in their capabilities.

Appointing coordinators

Each organization in coalition appointed its coordinator responsible for Via Baltica campaign. In fact, this is initial condition of coalition building mechanisms.

Keeping identity and specialties

Bankwatch, OTOP and WWF are almost natural partners for each other. Each organization specializes in different complementary fields. An experience and the knowledge of each partner enable coalition identify the problem and set campaign direction.

Good contacts with foreign representations

Our campaign would not be the same without cooperation with our representations abroad. Only thanks to international contacts of WWF, Bankwatch and OTOP, we manage to achieve the goals as well as reinforce NGOs cooperation on international level.

¹ Polish partner of BirdLife International