

SUSTAINABLE WATER MANAGEMENT AT THE LOCAL LEVEL: INITIATIVES THAT CAN GUARANTEE IT

by Kalin Anastasov, NGO Ecosouthwest, Bulgaria

In the Strategy for Sustainable Development of the European Union and the measures defined in the general guidelines for the future development of environmental policy there are four priority areas. Two of them deal with public health and natural resources. Food safety and prevention the spread of infectious diseases are closely connected with the management of waters, and in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) – with the construction of the necessary water supply and waste water treatment systems. The reduction of water consumption and the minimization of losses in the water supply systems are unthinkable without carrying out a dialogue with the public and the introduction of adequate economic measures for these purposes. For the implementation of the common policy for reduction of the quantities of used and waste industrial waters it is necessary to carry out a debate with the business community as well.

For the sustainable water management and the reduction of the health risks, in the CEE countries have to design and implement urgent measures, both on national and local level, for finding out the most appropriate forms for involvement and public participation in the process of decision-making. The European Framework Directive gives the necessary basis and the premises for undertaking of urgent initiatives in this direction. The legal and executive documents on the national and local level in this area in CEE are almost lacking. Irrespective of that the local authorities, business sector and non-for-profit organizations could undertake the first steps in the direction of building partnerships on the local level among the different economic sectors and stakeholders. Such steps will guarantee the success of the process of development of river basin management plans along.

The major part of the construction of water supply stations in Bulgaria up to the present moment is non-environmentally friendly, whereas the water supply facilities and systems were built and used in contradiction to the priority requirements in water supply. There are no mechanism for cooperation among the different ministries and authorities at the national and local level. Even nowadays, there are still cases when water supply projects for a given industry or economic branch are being made, without having in mind the overall water needs.

The facilities and equipment for water supply and sewerage are in general very expensive and the sole investor in their building is usually the State. Inadequate technical solutions directly affect the population in two directions: on one hand, the tax payers have to pay for expensive, ineffective and non-environmentally friendly sites, and on the other – they pay high water consumption prices afterwards.

The most striking example, however, is the loss of fresh water in the conduit system for water supply as the average figures for the country in this aspect are about 60%. At the

same time, there is a lack of economic interest the Firms for Water Supply and Sewerage to minimize this loss.

The design of sites for a complex usage of water, the finding of the cheapest, most effective and environmentally friendly solutions, the minimization of losses in the water supply systems are the motives that could and have to mobilize the specialists and all water users to participate actively in the process of decision-making. They could also attract other investors besides the State for the financing of such sites.

During the spring of 2001, Regional Association “Ecosouthwest” with the financial support of the Global Water Partnership established a water club in Blagoevgrad. It attracted as its member experts working in different sectors of the economy, and other local stakeholders. The uniting of the ideas, visions and efforts of these experts and water users was necessary with respect to the existing conditions in the region for complex water usage and its integrated management. Through uniting citizens and creating conditions for their gathering in a common locus, one of the aims of the water club initiative is to create the necessary management potential. In order to increase the knowledge of the club members, “Ecosouthwest” organizes discussions and distributes publications among them. Experts are engaged in the preparation of proposals dealing with improvement of the performance of water supply and waste water treatment facilities, as well as in developing solutions for overcoming problems in those facilities. The water club also attempts at creating conditions for integration at the operations level: between the water management organs and the other economic sectors that are directly dependent on water management decision-making process.

Our vision is that the State has to create a National Information Center, which will collect and process the entire information for the country with respect to water management issues. At the local level have to be create Consultative Coucils of the respective insitutions’ managers from the sectors mentioned above.

What is necessary to do at the local level to guarantee participation of the public in the preparation of the river basin management plans and sustainable water management? “Ecosouthwest” suggests the following eight steps:

Necessary Steps at the Local Level for Sustainable Water Management

STEP	ACTIVITY	GOALS
STEP 1	Creating of independent information centers in the cities where the headquarters of the river basin directorates are situated. Their activities can be organized by non-for-profit organizations with experience and capacities to guide the process of informing the public and of its involvement in the process of decision-making.	Creating conditions for public information.
STEP 2	Collection of the necessary information materials for servicing interested users and experts.	Setting up of a database which creates premises for public involvement.
STEP 3	Creation of the necessary contacts at the local and national level for information update and requesting executive authorities at both levels to appoint contact persons.	Creating of a permanent and active partnership and mechanisms for guaranteeing regular supply of up-to-date information.
STEP 4	Setting up of water clubs with the participation of experts from the different sectors of the economy, business, citizens and NGO representatives who live and work on the territory of the river basin councils.	Creating of meeting loci where the activities of interested stakeholders will be united and organized by the water clubs.
STEP 5	Designing of a web site, uploading and regular update of the collected information on the site.	Spread of information and access by all interested citizens and organizations in the water basin region.
STEP 6	Organizing discussions with the members of the water clubs.	The interested citizens will meet to discuss and unite their efforts towards an improved water management in the borders of the water basin, to elect representatives in the basin councils, to prepare opinions and proposals to the executive authorities, to co-ordinate the common position of the representatives in the water basin councils.
STEP 7	Organization of round tables with the participation of representatives of all water users and members of the water clubs.	Searching of ways for overcoming of the existing problems, reaching of consensus over debated issues, etc.
STEP 8	Organization of educational seminars.	Increasing of the potential of the local experts from the different sectors of the economy, as well as of independent experts and non-for-profit organizations.

PROPOSED SCHEME FOR PUBLIC INFORMATION

