

“BORDER LAND IS BOUNDLESS LAND : Sustainable Development of the Countryside”

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ABSTRACT

Project “BORDER LAND IS BOUNDLESS LAND : Sustainable Development of the Countryside” is jointly run by two NGOs - Eko Liburnia from Croatia and VITRA from Slovenia. The Project is introducing new methodology of revitalization and development of the border zone around rivers Kupa and Čabranka, which is a typical marginal rural area in decline. Main goals of the Project are: promotion of the regional sustainable development; launching of the local environmental action programme through systematic entrepreneurship; and providing a mechanism for ensuring enabling environment for general improvement of the quality of life and working conditions within the countryside. As the outcome Project should develop a network of family-owned small- and medium-scale enterprises and handicrafts, with emphasis on development of the rural tourism and economic activities related to it. The paper is briefly describing the Project's region, goals, philosophy, strategy, follow-up and present status.

1. INTRODUCTION

Political changes in 1990s, resulting in forming of the the new states within former Yugoslavia, have created many new borders. One of such borders between Croatia and Slovenia is the region comprising **river valleys of Kupa and its tributary Čabranka**. These two clean and unpolluted rivers are culturally, historically and economically connecting people for centuries, and this fact has not been changed under the new political circumstances.

In the past, especially during the period of the communistic rule, insufficient attention was paid to the development of this homogeneous border region, comprising total of **3,264 sq. km** (1,273 sq. km in Croatia and 1,991 sq. km in Slovenia), mostly due to the fact that it did not have any political and economic importance for ex-Yugoslavia. Its economy on both sides of the border was characterized by forestry and small-scale agriculture, while industry, mainly wood processing, was located in a few bigger settlements..

In order to change the past development practice, two NGOs, *Eko Liburnia* from Rijeka, Croatia and **VITRA** from Cerknica, Slovenia, decided to commence with the project **“BORDER LAND IS BOUNDLESS LAND : Sustainable Development of the Countryside”**.

2. PROJECT REGION

Project region can be best described as **marginal karstic mountainious area**. Broader Project area comprises territory of **seven border communes**: Čabar, Delnice and Vrbovsko in Croatia (region known as *Gorski Kotar*); and Cerknica, Ribnica, Kočevje and Črnomelj in Slovenia. Basic data on Project region's area and population are presented in Table 1.

Main **natural characteristics** of the Project region are:

- It belongs to Dinaric mountains system characterized by numerous **karstic phenomena** such as: sinking rivers, karstic fields (*polje*), caves, springs, etc.
- Predominance of **forest & woodlands** which cover approximately 2,000 sq.km (900 sq.km. in Croatia and 1,100 sq.km. in Slovenia) or 60 % of the total land area.
- Permanent **meadows and pastures** represent two thirds of the total agricultural land, while rest is arable land and land under permanent crops (<1%). Therefore, Project region is predetermined for livestock growing.
- **Natural heritage** is well-preserved and unpolluted. The most valuable attractions within the Project region are: National Park “Risnjak”, Natural Reserve “Bijele i Samarske stijene”, springs of Kupa and Čabranka, highest Croatian settlement Begovo Razdolje (Croatia), karstic field Cerčniško polje, Škocjanska cave, (Slovenia), as well as several lakes (Cerknica, Lokve, Fužine) and numerous mountain peaks such as Snežnik, Risnjak and Snježnik.
- **Wildlife wealth** – Project region is habitat for a wide variety of wild plants and animals (bears, lynxes, wolfs, foxes, deers, boars, otters, grouses, etc.).

Within the broader Project region, Project activities will be mostly directed to the revitalization and development of the narrower area of the composite river valleys of Kupa (59.2 km) and Cabranka (13.4 km), known as *Kupska dolina*, due to the fact that this area is in constant demographic stagnation on both sides of the border. For example, Croatian side of the *Kupska dolina* had population over 16,000 inhabitants in 9 bigger and 25 smaller settlements. At present population decreased to 9,000 inhabitants and 8 settlements are completely uninhabited.

This trend has been going on for years and has created all the well-known troubles related to an abandoned countryside. Population is becoming scarce and old, communal infrastructure is getting worse, employment opportunities do not exist. Therefore, any development project in this area will reach success when:

- principles of **sustainable development** are well known among local population;
- demographic, employment and other important **trends** are positively **changed**; and
- **environmental protection** and improvement is achieved.

If this happens, basic conditions for survival of this border land will be reached. The **success of development project** will be measurable by number of people who will join different newly formed interest groups; and by number of those who will start with various sustainable entrepreneurial activities, such as rural tourism, production of eco-food and wooden products, efficient managing of existing renewable energy sources, etc.

3. PROJECT GOALS

Main goals of the Project are:

- ◆ promotion of the **regional sustainable development**;
- ◆ launching of the **local environmental action programme (LEAP) through systematic entrepreneurship**; and
- ◆ providing a mechanism for **ensuring enabling environment** for general improvement of the quality of life and working conditions within the *Kupska dolina* countryside.

Project philosophy is based on **Chapter 14** of the *Agenda 21 (Sustainable Agricultural and Rural Development - SARD)* guidelines, as well as on similar rural development concepts, such as **LEADER II** of the EU and **UTSYN** of Norway. Project activities are based on direct contact and interaction with the Project beneficiaries (local population) and aimed towards achievement of the three principal outcomes:

- ◆ **education and training** of the local population on sustainable development;
- ◆ **promotion of the environmentally friendly economic activities**, with emphasis on development of the rural tourism and activities related to it;
- ◆ revitalization of the Project region through development of the network of family-owned **small- and medium-scale enterprises (SMEs)** and **handicrafts**.

Using this approach the Project team, composed of Croatian and Slovenian experts, is trying to motivate local population towards implementation of the regional sustainable development. As sustainable development blueprint does not exist, Project team envisaged systematic development of the most promising selected ecologically and socially sound economic activities to be introduced and implemented within the Project region:

- ◆ Development of the **specific (“goranski”) model of rural tourism**, based on:
 - preservation of local tradition and customs, as well as protection of the natural, cultural and historical heritage of the Project region;
 - touristic services provided by the Project-trained family-owned touristic agencies, boarding-houses and eco-farms.
- ◆ Development of the **organic agriculture** and **eco-food production** for domestic and touristic consumption and possibly for export. According to the Project region's agroecological characteristics and local tradition, main productions would be: livestock growing (dairy cattle, horses, sheep, etc.) and local meat & milk processing; bee-keeping and honey production; fruit and vegetables production (especially berries, potatoes and salads); mushroom and herbs & spices growing; production of wines and brandies; and aquaculture (trout farming).
- ◆ Introduction and development of the presently non-existing concept of **agroforestry**;
- ◆ Sustainable development of **forestry** and **wood processing** based on family-owned SMEs and handicrafts;
- ◆ Development of family-owned ecologically sound **SMEs** and **handicrafts** other than food and wood processing;
- ◆ Introduction and development of the environmental protection activities, such as production of energy from renewable sources, waste management and treatment, etc.

Project team will provide direct technical assistance to Project beneficiaries, as well as assistance in providing of different kinds of financial and non-financial support from the state and other sources.

4. PROJECT STRATEGY

Taking into account that concept of sustainable development is completely unknown within the Project region, Project strategy is based on step-by-step approach during 30-months long Project life from January 1998 – June 2000 , as presented in the Table 2.

4.1. PRELIMINARY PHASE

Preliminary phase consists of :

- Presentation of the Project to the local communities, local and central governments of the two states, as well as foreign and international institutions in order to ensure financial and non-financial support for the Project.
- Promotional press conferences.
- Preparation of the exhibition through which two partner NGOs and Project goals, objectives and activities will be presented in Croatia and Slovenia. Exhibition will be on display in all selected Project sites prior to lectures and workshops. Production of the promotional Project film is also envisaged.
- Convening of the Project Forum attended by the representatives of Croatian, Slovenian and Project region local governments, members of the Project team and other invited guests.

4.2. LECTURES

The aim of lectures is to provide general information about sustainable development and Project itself to Project beneficiaries. Lectures will be organized in at least 8 Project region settlements (4 each in Croatia and Slovenia) from October 1998 - May 1999. Project sites will be selected according to interest, i.e. results of the initial Project enquiry following the Forum. Besides education, lectures should animate local population for the following workshops and assist in selection of appropriate topics for the future workshop participants.

The basic strategy for the lectures' location determination process is to start from a wide approach, which means that Project will be equally open to all parts of the Project region. During the implementation of the Project, the team will get a much better sense of the local population interest and openness for the Project.. This will enable Project team to point out the areas most acceptable to the Project ideas and goals, allowing directing of activities towards these areas.

All technical necessities (agreements with municipalities & communes, informing, invitations, inquiries, etc.) will be settled by the lecture host-partner. The lecture will be produced as a summary of the topics described in the Chapter 3 and prepared by the Project team.

4.3. FIRST EVALUATION

The first Project evaluation will be held from June - August 1999. The aim is to allow members of the Project team to analyse data collected during lectures (every participant of the lecture would be asked to fill-in the appropriate questionnaire) and on the basis of analysis: (1) select future workshops participants; and (2) select the most interesting topics for the workshop. Therefore, during the first evaluation all materials for the workshops and the study circle should be prepared, including preparation of the new exhibition.

4.4. WORKSHOPS

During holding of at least two workshops (one each in Croatia and Slovenia), scheduled for September - October 1999, selected Project beneficiaries will actively participate in the Project. Introduction of the idea of sustainable development requires specific knowledges. Thus, Project experts will represent different topics and their practical use. At each workshop the entire Project team will be present. The objective of workshops is to produce precise definition of the study circle contents and animation of participants for it. At both workshops the SWOT analysis will be prepared.

4.5. STUDY CIRCLE

As a form of training with education and operation objectives, study circle allows all participants a lot of creativity. They determine the characteristics of the selected topic themselves. Animation of participants for the study circle will be done during workshops. Study circle will be performed by two members of the Project team, one from each partner NGOs. The objective of the study circle is to create Project region's systematic entrepreneurial network through preparation of participants' business plans. It is planned that study circle will be organized for three hours/week for at least ten weeks. Therefore, it will last 4-5 months from November 1999 – March 2000.

4.6. SECOND EVALUATION, FINAL REPORT & FOLLOW-UP

The second evaluation will be held from April - May 2000 in order to finalize creation of the Project's entrepreneurial network, i.e. to submit business plans produced by the Project for financing to the banks and other financial institutions. During this phase the final Project report will be prepared.

Project report will be presented in June 2000 in Croatia and Slovenia. It is expected that its presentation will allow the Project's follow-up:

- Creation of the Project region systematic entrepreneurial network through financing and implementation of the Project produced business plans.
- Creation of network of the local NGOs in the field of sustainable development.
- Establishment of the Project region development agency and advisory service.
- Ensuring that all Project beneficiaries are continuing with activities in their settlements.

5. PRESENT STATUS OF THE PROJECT

Preliminary phase of the Project started as planned in January 1998. From January - May 1998 Project activities were as follows:

- Project was successfully presented and got support from the Project region communities, towns and communes, as well as from the County Primorsko-Goranska of Croatia.
- During regional Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) Meeting of Local Environmental Action Programme Practitioners, held in Szentendre, Hungary in January 1998, Project was internationally presented. The meeting was organized by the Regional Environmental Center for CEE.
- In February 1998 a paper on Project activities was accepted by the organizers of the International Conference “Rural Tourism Management : Sustainable Options”. The Conference will be held in Scotland in September 1998.
- From February - April 1998 **VITRA** Cerknica, has organized and convined 11 round tables in Slovenian part of the Project region. The topics of the round tables were different aspects of the future Slovenian admission to the European Union (EU) and its effects on the future development of the countryside. The project was financed by the EU PHARE & TACIS Programme for democracy and supported by the Slovenian government. Among lecturers and participants were representatives of the *Eko Liburnia*; Project region local governments; and Slovenian and Croatian central governments.
- In April 1998 some of the Project activities on the Croatian side of the border were incorporated into ongoing project titled “Professionalisation and Imbedding of Croatian Environmental NGOs into Local Communities”. The project is financed by the MATRA Programme, the Netherlands, and jointly run by the ETC Netherlands and Croatian NGO “CEEC”. The first meeting of the project team, including four collaborating NGOs (among them *Eko Liburnia*), will be held in June 1998 in Crikvenica, Croatia.
- At meeting held in Umag, Croatia (May 1998) *Eko Liburnia* presented the Project to the Croatian Ministry of Economy (MOE) and representatives of the seven counties bordering with Slovenia. The meeting was organized by the MOE as part of the national project titled “Economic Development of the Border Land with Republic of Slovenia”.
- At meeting held in Brod na Kupa, Croatia (May 1998) *Eko Liburnia* presented the Project to the Croatian Ministry of Tourism. The meeting was organized by the Department of Tourism of the County Primorsko-Goranska in order to discuss future development of the rural tourism within Croatian part of the Project region (*Gorski Kotar*).

TABLES

Table 1 – Project Region's Area and Population

<i>Project Region</i>	<i>Area (sq.km)</i>	<i>P o p u l a t i o n</i>		
		<i>1971, Total</i>	<i>1991</i>	
			<i>Total</i>	<i>Per sq.km.</i>
Croatian Part	1,273	35,485	30,545	24.0
Slovenian Part	1,991	60,210	64,581	32.4
Total	3,264	96,055	95,126	29.1

Table 2 – Activities and Time Schedule of the Project

<i>Project Month</i>	<i>A c t i v i t y</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Duration</i>
1 – 9	• Preliminary Phase	Rijeka, Croatia / Cerknica, Slovenia	Jan.1998 – Sep. 1998
10 – 17	• Lectures & Exhibitions	8 Project Sites in Croatia / Slovenia	Oct. 1998 – May 1999
18 – 20	• First Evaluation	Rijeka, Croatia / Cerknica, Slovenia	June 1999 – Aug. 1999
21 – 22	• Workshops & Exhibitions	2 Projects Sites in Croatia / Slovenia	Sep. 1999 – Oct. 1999
23 – 27	• Study Circle	Project sites in Croatia / Slovenia	Nov. 1999 – Mar. 2000
28 – 29	• Second Evaluation	Rijeka, Croatia / Cerknica, Slovenia	Apr. 2000 – May 2000
30 +	• Final Report Presentation & Follow-Up	Croatia / Slovenia	June 2000 -

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