

Name of Exercise: Public participation in the Local Environmental Action Plan (LEAP) process in city of Veles

Location: City of Veles, FYR Macedonia

Participation Exercise under which Article? *Article 7*

Purpose of Participation Exercise:

The selected case deals with public participation in preparation of the Local Environmental Action Plan for Veles.

Background:

This is a case where an NGO was involved in both the preparation and public awareness phases of the LEAP. The case explains how NGOs and local municipalities can share authority as well as responsibility for preparation of local strategy documents.

Participation Techniques Used:

The Ministry for Urbanism, Construction and Protection of the Environment informed Veles municipality that it was selected as a polluted area and that the preparation of its Local Environmental Action Plan (LEAP) would be funded by the Royal Netherlands Embassy. Preparation of the project was co-ordinated by the Ministry and the Regional Environmental Centre for Central and Eastern Europe (REC).

All citizens were given the right to take part in the preparation of the LEAP and sixty citizens from various backgrounds set up a Civil Committee. The members of the Civil Committee were selected by research undertaken by the NGO "Vila Zora". There was no publicity in the process of selection of the participants. However, as the city of Veles is not very populated (40.000 inhabitants), it was not difficult to identify possible participants and determine their availability. This was done in accordance with the requirement of the Project Task.

The Civil Committee comprised competent citizens, lawyers, doctors (medical), professors, and representatives of industry. The aim was to reach a consensus. In this civil committee no political, personal or institutional interests were specially represented. Any citizen of Veles who was interested in ecological problems could take part. Since the establishment of the arrangements for implementing the LEAP was considered to be one of the major achievements, the preparatory meetings as well as the actual set-up were covered by the local media (television and radio) and one State television channel. The press covered the events in short articles.

The Civil Committee was broken down into the following groups: information, environmental education, representation of the injured, round-table discussion, and a group for information materials. This demonstrated a high level of awareness among the local government authorities to adopt the methodology proposed by the local NGO and to assign it the task of developing the LEAP.

Who participated?

An initial meeting was organised which included the participation of local authorities, NGOs, political parties, industrial interests and the media, where the primary environmental concerns of the town were identified and the concept of the LEAP was introduced. The initial meeting was also a great opportunity to bring together the main stakeholders in order to enable consensus building for decisions. The meeting was attended by the Municipality (local government counsellors), representatives from the political parties, the Ministry of development, the Ministry of urban planing, construction and environment, the general public (notified by publicity in the local press and radio) and representatives from the business sector. In all, there was around 50 participants. The public was also informed of the possibility and importance of their participation. Given the very high levels of air and water pollution in the city, the initial meeting was fully covered by the media and represented as a first real step towards identifying problems and proposing solutions.

Stage at which the public participated in the process:

When the city of Veles was given the task to make a LEAP, local authorities contacted the local NGO "Vila Zora" and started negotiations regarding participation in the development of the LEAP. At the first meeting, led by the chairman of the Committee for Protection of the Environment (municipality), the president of "Vila Zora" offered a concept of a LEAP, which was accepted by the Committee. The decision was made that "Vila Zora" would prepare the Veles LEAP based on the proposed methodology. The technical expert work was done by the Institute for Metallurgy from Skopje. A contract between the mayor and the NGO was signed, followed by a contract between the NGO and the Ministry for Urbanism, Construction and Protection of the Environment.

The NGO "Vila Zora" emphasised that every stage in the preparation of the LEAP should be subject to public participation. It was also expected that the public could gain access to more environmental information after adoption of the document. The main public participation in the process was done through the Civil Committee. The NGO initiated the public participation through:

- informing the public through leaflets (4,500 copies were distributed, mostly in schools and institutions);
- educational publications; and
- questionnaire to survey public opinion.

As a part of the public campaign, the NGO Vila Zora organised four themed workshops providing the public with all the relevant data and working documents for the LEAP.

What information was made available?

The NGO interviewed 30,000 citizens by questionnaire, and asked questions concerning the state of air, water, soil, traffic, urban planning and public health. The information gathered through the questionnaire showed that the concerns of the public related to the environmental planning procedure. Independent experts were involved in sharing information from the official database and comparing it with the non-formal information.

Extensive data on air pollution was obtained from industry (accessible because the NGO was acting as a contractor of the municipality). In the first workshop, the public discussed the topics of urban planning and pollution caused by urban development, mostly related to waste operations. At the second workshop the main topics on the agenda were: the impact of industrial waste water on the quality of the River Vardar, the flora and fauna in River Vardar as an indicator for pollution, and water supply of the city of Veles. At the third workshop, the public discussed the agricultural and livestock policy, irrigation and fertilisation of soil as well as forestation, in the Veles area. The fourth workshop included air pollution on the agenda including the health impact of high levels of air pollution.

All the workshops were publicly announced and leaflets described the specific topic for that meeting. The experts who were engaged for the LEAP on specific topics also presented their results to the public and leading discussions to receive comments. This type of workshop meant that the public participated in the process at a very early stage. It is very important that the experts also took into consideration the recommendations of the public on certain sections of the LEAP. The information disseminated for the workshops was mostly related to the main sectoral areas of the LEAP, for example: economic reforms, financing the public sector, demographic data and environmental impacts, urban pollution, air quality and sources of pollution (using data on emissions since 1985), water resources and quality of water, anthropogenic degradation of water quality (using data since 1985), water supply and water usage, contamination of soil with heavy metals (using data since 1985), the impact of waste on soil quality, the impact of the polluted environment on food production and quality, the condition of forestry resources, waste operations (particularly communal and industrial waste) (using data since 1990), and the impact of the polluted environment on public health based on data on respiratory and circulatory diseases. The participants at the workshops also discussed recommendations for improvement of the environmental living conditions.

It is worth mentioning that the general public and the NGOs expressed significant doubts about the official data presented by the relevant sources (e.g Institute for Public Health) requiring independent in-depth analysis. This is mostly because of the non-flexible information dissemination regulations for data from the health and other sectors.

What was the outcome of the public participation exercise?

A basic outcome of the aforementioned exercise was the development of a methodology for participation in creation of a local strategy. The local government decided to allow the NGO to participate in the creation of the LEAP by sharing authority and in the same time sharing the responsibility for the quality of the paper. By using this method, the municipality ensured that the LEAP would be a common policy document, making its implementation much easier. The local NGO was given a chance to participate in decision-making and to take responsibility for creation of a common policy document which will be a basis for further environmental development of the city.

The exercise was not based on legal provisions, but on the fact that the local government understood the advantages and the benefits of public participation in policy-making.

Comments of participants in process:

The comments of the participants in the process are a part of the general document. The President of the NGO "Vila Zora," Ms. Pandora Nikuseva, issued a statement which included the following: "Everybody worked very hard on the process for developing the document through which the couple of years' wish of the citizens and the NGOs to have such a strategic document is accomplished. With this document, it is endorsed that our municipality has to represent the interests and the demands of all of the citizens of city Veles for a cleaner and better environment, especially before the investors and international community to help in solving the very difficult problems."

Contact: Ms. Pandora Nikuseva
E.D. "Vila Zora"
Address: ul. "Dimitar Vlahov" bb. (hotel VILA ZORA)
1400 Veles, Makedonija
Phone: +389 93 33 023
Fax: +389 93 33 023 E-mail: bimadem@mt.net.com.mk

REC view on participation exercise:

This case represents a positive example of co-operation on the local level between a municipal government and an established NGO community. While the co-operation did not take part on a legal basis, it may serve as an example of the legal standards required for the involvement of NGOs in the development of plans, programs or policies with potential significant environmental effects.

International assistance played an important role in this case. While the case description indicates that the Civil Committee was selected in a reasonable manner from among "known" interested members of the community, the case does not provide any independent means to evaluate whether it was truly representative of the public concerned. Considering the fact that the NGO was so closely involved in the process, it can be concluded that time frames were reasonable and that participation, at least of the NGO, was effective, although it would be interesting to determine whether all members of the public concerned in Veles felt that they had ample opportunities to participate. Overall effectiveness depends of course on the real inclusion of the public in the Civil Committee.

Significant omissions from requirements of Article 7:

The public participation appears to have generally met the requirements of Article 7. Considering that this public participation procedure took place on an ad hoc basis, however, it cannot be said to have taken place within a "transparent and fair framework." That is, the legal background enforcing the effectiveness, fairness and inclusiveness of the proceedings is missing. For example, if a member of the public believed he/she had been wrongfully excluded from the Civil Committee, the lack of a legal framework would be an obstacle for independent supervision of the selection process. Thus, even a positive case indicates the need for the establishment of clear criteria and rules that can be enforced by an independent and impartial body established by law.