

**WORKSHOP ON GOVERNANCE FOR WSSD IMPLEMENTATION IN
COUNTRIES IN TRANSITION, ISTANBUL
September 16 – 18, 2003**

***SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND ROLE OF
CIVIL SOCIETY IN SERBIA***

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Do Serbia and Montenegro today, after Johannesburg, have a national strategy of sustainable development?

If they do, they keep it very well concealed, since representatives of the civil society, i.e. the non-government sector, find it extremely difficult to recognize any of the basic sustainable development assumptions in different segments of the national strategy, such as agriculture and rural development, water management, bio-diversity preservation, use of renewable energies, transport, waste materials segregation, dealing with poverty, gender equality.

During Slobodan Milosevic's rule, due to involvement of the former Yugoslavia in the Balkan conflicts and its isolation, the regime did not bother with sustainable development. Regretfully, the previous establishment is not the only regime indifferent to sustainable development and its implementation through the country's development strategy. Representatives of the democratic option have made little effort, as is now particularly apparent, to get acquainted with Agenda 21 and its related documents and protocols adopted or proposed, not only after Rio '92, but also after the 2002 World Summit of Sustainable Development in Johannesburg.

Before Johannesburg, representatives of the non-government sector were optimistic, trusting that the government was going to pass decisions that would mean a great step forwards as compared to the previous situation. Unfortunately, the worldwide occurring divergence between the two E's – economy vs. environment – has also caused adverse impacts to the economies of the transition countries, such as Serbia.

However, it seems to me that the main problem in Serbia is that sustainable development is not viewed as a general concept to be incorporated in all segments of our development strategy. Moreover, I dare say that most of the decision makers still do not have a clear idea of what the syntagm "sustainable development" means, neither they know what documents at the UN and EU levels are dealing with it, nor what priorities were laid out in Johannesburg. Here I have in mind for instance WEHAB, defining water, energy, health, agriculture and bio-diversity preservation as sustainable development priorities, as well as CARP and EU Agendas 2000 and 2007.

Legislation mass and lack of coordination in Serbia

For the time being, sustainable development is shyly mentioned only under the portfolio of the ministry of environmental protection. However, that is not an issue to be dealt with by the ministry of environmental protection only. As regards the strategy of agricultural development, and it should be born in mind that Serbia is primarily an agricultural country, terms such as "sustainable agriculture" and "rural development" are not even included in the vocabulary of the minister in charge. Or similarly, renewable energies are given only a partial mention in the Serbian Energy Bill, although they make an important segment of the strategies of both the

ministry of environmental protection and the ministry of agriculture. To put it brief, Serbia lacks coordinated action of the ministries of environmental protection, agriculture, energy, economy, health, and sports and tourism for example, aimed at developing a common sustainable development strategy. That further aggravates the fact that Serbia, as a transitional country having just started privatization processes, without yet resolving the issue of property nationalization during the communism era, and not yet adopting new laws on environmental protection and energy (with the bills being deficient), is having serious problems to become part of the global process called “sustainable development”. If on top of that we add up problems related to the criminalized society and corruption, we are bound to ask ourselves how indeed we can ensure accessibility of information on water pollution, or decide on what law should regulate the matter and who should enforce the law, when someone deliberately releases toxic substances into watercourses.

Let me illustrate my point with an example from the daily life of the rural province of Vojvodina. The issue is related to the bio-diversity preservation and management. In Serbia and Montenegro there is a practice called game hunting, the game being birds in this case. Due to the absence of a firm legal framework, combined with the poverty of the local community, it is allowed to shoot birds, such as quails (with a great number of other protected singing bird species killed illegally), with the use of bird-calls recorded on audio tapes that are then played in the field. Even if one disregards the fact that the shooting takes place in fields inhabited with traditional farms and people living on them, playing audio tapes in the field to draw up birds is utterly inadmissible. Most of the hunters that use those methods, helped by the locals of course, come from Italy. They travel to Vojvodine on organized tours arranged by travel agencies. Appeals of bird protection societies are in vain. The ministries of environmental protection, agriculture and sport and tourism in Belgrade remain silent to all protests. Finally, it should be noted that no reaction of the police has been heard of. It is possible that the police have no instructions, nor law to rely on in such cases. Thus, the absence of an adequate legal framework makes the environment protection management at the local level impossible in many aspects. Such an association between the business and the management is entirely wrong and unsustainable, as it will inevitably lead to extinction of many bird species in Serbia.

A good example of merger between economy and sustainable agriculture

So, what can one do in a poor country undergoing transition, such as is Serbia today, and burdened with the kind of “baggage” as mentioned above, in order to develop a concept that would resemble a sustainable development strategy? *Green Network of Vojvodina*, as a non-government organization, has focused its work on issues related to the sustainable agriculture and rural development of Vojvodina. This year we have launched a pilot project consisting of several parts, i.e. interconnecting traditional farms in the rural region around the city of Novi Sad, educating farmers on organic food production and developing agri-bio tourism and local community tourism on such farms. Our aim is to support small farmers that engage in the organic food production and to initiate restoring of the rural growth of Vojvodina. We feel that by developing agri-bio tourism and community tourism we can help the farmers strengthen up their economic position. The project also included a one-day tour of several traditional farms near Novi Sad that are in the process of transition to the organic food production. It should be noted that many of the traditional farms in Vojvodina have been abandoned over the years, so that they have become rare. Invited to take part in the tour were representatives of the Secretary of Agriculture

of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, the local community and the media. The invitation met favorable response by representatives of the Department of Agriculture and the media (two daily papers, one agricultural magazine and national TV), whereas municipal authorities showed no interest in the project. On one of the farms a green market was set up for health safe produce grown on the farms – vegetables, honey, eggs and dairy products. The project has been very well accepted both by the farm owners and the town people who have started to visit the farms not only to buy their products, but also to listen to interesting stories of the local farmers on their ways of living.

Problems

Together with the farmers we have identified several problems. In spite of the fact that there is a law on organic food production, organic food production has not been incorporated in the development program of the agricultural ministry. Thus farmers who decide to shift to the organic food production can count on no stimulating benefits over the period of transition. Most of the farms are faced with the problem of not having roads and electric power grid, although some of them are not more than 15 to 20 km far from Novi Sad (the capital of AP Vojvodina). There is no scheme at the state level that would stimulate utilization of renewable energies on the farms. Water supply is also a problem. However, without loans granted on favorable terms the farmers cannot finance the infrastructure on their own. And thus we end up with almost a vicious circle. In Vojvodina there are about 20,000 abandoned rural houses and hundreds of abandoned farms. A lot of young people are jobless and many of them would be eager to join a rural development program. But, there is no such program at the state level.

What can the non-government sector do?

- First of all, educate local population on sustainable development, sustainable agriculture, and all other aspects of sustainability related thereto. People are eager to learn, particularly youngsters and women.
- Educate decision-makers. A lot of government officials lack adequate education, and quite often they are reluctant get educated.
- Initiate education on sustainable development at universities. It is astonishing that most of professors at the agricultural faculties in Serbia are not familiar with the concept of sustainable agriculture, which is best illustrated by their bibliographies.
- Lobby. Our experience shows that activities of the non-government sector can bring improvement in some segments of the sustainable development implementation through development programs of a country.
- Cooperate with the media, which can offer extremely valuable support.

Having outlined the situation in general terms, let me conclude this presentation with the following message: the developing countries and the countries in transition need assistance of the developed countries to build up their potentials and meet required standards, likewise they need to be transferred respective technologies and knowledge to be able to join in the process of sustainable development. Without such assistance, I am afraid, the developing countries, Serbia among them, will continue to increasingly leg behind the developed world.