Green Ways

to develop environment friendly and sustainable projects

Budapest 2006

Green ways Published by:

Consultants for Sustainable Development (CSD)

National Society of Conservationists / Friends of the Earth Hungary (NSC-FoE Hu)

SFteam for Sustainable Future

Supported by:

Hungarian National Civil Fund – www.nca.hu

Hungarian Ministry of Environment and Water – www.kvvm.hu

Charles Stewart Mott Foundation – www.mott.org

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I. Introduction

1. Sustainable or stampeded development?!

Sustainable growth is an oxymoron. Growing is getting bigger, development is getting better. In simple words: sustainable development must be development without growth. (Herman Daly)

The EU poured billions of euros into the new Member States between 2004-2006, and at least four times more will be available from 2007.

Infrastructural investments, renovations and road construction may bring quick economic growth and social betterment, but may cause irreversible harm to the environment.

Greens are often accused as enemies of development. Again, what is development? The conquest of nature, the reign of bigger, faster machines, more capital and more consumption are all ideals of the industrial revolution, the 19th century. We admit: strong and exciting, but by now obsolete ideals.

The relation of economy, society and environment is still often misunderstood or misinterpreted. The current development strategies aim at growing GDP and a strong economy to solve social problems. But how can the economy grow, if not from natural resources?!

We have to see that the real purpose of development programs is social betterment and a good quality of life. The economy, competitiveness, jobs, investments and subsidies are tools, and the availability of natural resources is a precondition.

2. Regional development projects, green aspects

The experts of the Hungarian National Society of Conservationists participated in the monitoring committee of the Regional Development Operational Program (RDOP), and, after being commissioned by the Managing Authority, they ensured the quality control of RDOP project proposals from the point of view of environmental aspects of sustainability.

Our experiences in a nutshell: there is “room for improvement” for the next planning periods.

This booklet will suggest green aspects or “green ways” one ought to consider when developing a project. We highlight the most common mistakes, unintended misunderstandings and deliberate misinterpretations and bring several examples of “how to” and “how not to” approach development projects.

International case studies about successful model projects for sustainability are also included in this booklet. These case studies were collected by and demonstrate the work of the SFteam for Sustainable Future, a Central European NGOs network on Structural Funds, whose members have helped to develop these projects.

We hope that this publication will give aid to regional and sectoral projects in the next planning periods that reach win-win-win situations: economic, social and environmental sustainability.

- ***Small is beautiful (E.F. Shumacher)***
- *Little, local, slowly IS European and global!*
- *Systems thinking*
- ***Ecological footprint***
- *"land area necessary to sustain current levels of resource consumption and waste discharge"*

II. Incentives

Proper evaluation of ourselves, the partners and the circumstances is the key to successful projects. Before the case studies, let us share our approach with you.

1. Local interests are European interests...

"Think Globally, act locally!" (Vandana Shiva) Our small-scale neighbourhood level initiatives do have a direct link with the European and global systems. It is both an opportunity and responsibility!

A good shepherd and his herd of sheep out on the meadow...

Can you imagine that – as he is complying with the aims of the national Development Plan and the effective environmental polices of the European Union - he is eligible to receive support form the Structural Funds? Also, he is performing the best possible traditional landscape management practice and even realising the somewhat vague concept of sustainable development?! Let's see the correlations!

The countries of Central Europe changed from communists regimes into democratic, marked-oriented European Union member states in a short 15 years. Still, the people did not change much, in a sense that they live their life and seek their welfare in the new systems too. Some of them try to see, understand and even actively influence these enormous changes.

We all have to make real our knowledge that small-size local organisations with their humble little projects - such as a tree-planting with a few hundred euros and a couple of volunteers involved – directly suit the national, European and global systems from an economic, political, social and environmental aspect, too.

The world has really shrunk to a village. Mathematicians have proved that any of the 6 billion humans can be linked through only seven connections. The sport-shoe or computer we buy in Budapest has economic, social and environmental impacts in Indonesia or the USA – negative or positive impacts. The Ecological footprint of the wealthy west is on the "global south".

2. Systems thinking

The holistic, systems thinking approach is not eco-philosophy, but a basic feature of all good development projects.

In our projects we must find innovative ways to change institutional structures and influence individual behaviour. It is about taking action, changing policy and practice at all levels, from the individual to the international.

The basic way towards sustainability is systems thinking - seeing the cause and effect. Changing one element in a system will affect the rest.

Already in the project data sheets and the project log-frame matrix it is expected to show the necessary inputs, the actions, direct results, the mid-term and long term effects and how all these fit into the European and national strategies and how they will lead towards a brave new world.

- ***EU Lisbon strategy 2000***
- *Economic, social and environmental renewal*
- *Driving force is innovation and growing a "learning economy"*

- ***EU Gothenburg strategy 2001***
- *Impressive, but weightless strategy on sustainable development*

3. At the end of the pipe

"HOW we do it?! – is important. "WHY we do it? – should be vital, but is often forgotten. A nuclear bomb can also be produced with minimised environmental impacts!

The fist paragraphs, the general aims of the EU and national development strategies and the relevant legislation seem to grasp the philosophy of sustainable development. Still, the enforcement or realisation of these strategies always seems to fail. Several strategies are harmonised only in legal terms - for instance the Lisbon strategy for a dynamic and competitive Europe virtually overrides the Gothenburg strategy on sustainable development, putting the emphasis on GDP-boosting end-of-pipe solutions, the environmental industry instead of making reductions, savings and avoiding pollution. The economic or social interest is always seems to be stronger, than the environmental.

We do not despise the importance of green innovation, but we have to recognise that these methods only hide and cover the environmental damage, postponing effects in time and space, but rarely offer an integrated solution – on the contrary, they preserve fundamentally wrong approaches!

For instance, selective waste collection and more and more effective recycling systems reduce the total amount of waste, but secondary raw materials don't ease significantly pressure on the ecosystem. New generation low fuel consumption cars temper oil consumption, but they do not bring real solutions to the real problems of transportation, such as traffic jams.

Environmental damages must be minimised during an investment, and an environmental impact assessment (EIA) is obligatory with regard to all larger projects. Unfortunately the EIA does not question whether the investment is necessary or not.

The new strategic environmental assessment (SEA) goes beyond the impact assessment approach (forecasting). SEA examines not only **how** the negative impacts can be minimised, but also dares to ask **why** the investment is necessary (Objective-led appraisal, "backcasting": integration of environmental objectives into sectoral planning and programming).

Sustainable development has over 100 definitions - the most frequently quoted ones:

"Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." Our Common Future (the Brundtland Report)

"Development without growth beyond environmental carrying capacity, where development means qualitative improvement and growth means quantitative increase." ***Herman Daly***

4. Partnership is not begging!

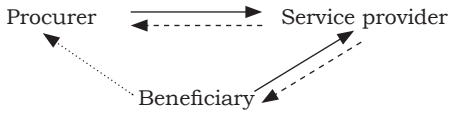
No slaves and masters, but partners! We are not talking about charity aid. The sponsor would commission a professional service provider for the benefit of a third party. By the way, the agencies tend to forget, too! Remind yourself, remind them!

Project development and proposal writing is not begging for a living! In a support procedure two or more organisations with a mission and legal entity enter into a partnership, through a regulated and transparent proposal, common decision making, and a detailed contract.

In a business partnership the procurer and service provider are in direct relation. (The repairman would fix our bicycle and we can directly check the result and pay the agreed fee for the service.)

Procurer ⟷ Service provider

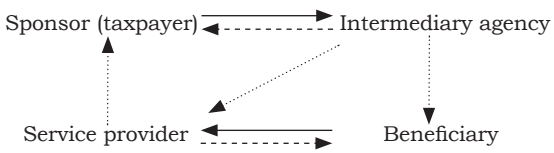
In a non-profit cooperation the beneficiary of the services is a third party, a beneficiary. (The beneficiary is not necessarily a natural person, but can be an animal or the environment).



Therefore, the NGO – the "repairman" – has a very complex task.

1. Sometimes 'he' has to educate the potential sponsors so they will see the problem and become responsive;
2. he has to give the best proposition both from professional and financial aspects in order to get the assignment form the sponsors;
3. he must provide a proper service for the beneficiary and
4. through a transparent report has to prove good service towards the sponsor and the public

Structural funds and other governmental sources are public money. The monies do not belong to the ministries and agencies – they only re-allocate and channel public money for pre-defined purposes.



We must recognise that intermediary agencies are not adverse parties, but they have the same purposes. They are service providers, too, their interest is to see good quality, effective and professional projects from the "repairmen".

By the way, NGOs may have to highlight this approach towards the governmental agencies.

III. The Regional Development Operational Program (RDOP)

The Regional Development Operational Program focused on a NUTS II level geographic area; the projects were about employment and competitiveness, training and education, tourism, rehabilitation of settlements and infrastructural investments.

The RDOP does not cover all the development of a region, but concentrates on investments that consider the local geographic, social, economical and cultural circumstances and are realised with the involvement of the local communities.

The purposes of the RDOP for 2007-13 in Hungary:

- Development of the regional economy;
- Strategic development of tourism potential and leisure-time capacities;
- Regional infrastructure and urban development;
- Human and community infrastructure, effective public services;
- Regional and integrated programs and priority areas;

The priorities are to be accepted in the autumn of 2006. The following case studies are from the previous period, but the priorities were essentially the same.

Every human activity does have an environmental effect. Whether we build or destroy, our every action bring a change. Even the very physical existence is "material and energy", in continuous interaction with the outside world.

1. Project without impacts?

The common misperception that projects 'don't have impact on the environment' appeared over and over again in different proposals.

Our green experts exercising quality control of RDOP kept coming back with the same three arguments in the project assessments:

1) Every project has a **direct impact** on the environment. Trainings one use a room and few sheets of paper: this is a small impact, but an impact nonetheless. Not every reconstruction falls under obligatory environmental impact assessment requirement, but the renewal of a degraded building obviously will generate noise, dust and a large amount of broken stone and chippings.
2) Every project is "input – change – output". The operation of a service after the actual project closes still has **long-term or "butterfly effects"** that may appear long years from now. (Butterfly effect: In a system when a small change results in an unpredictable and disproportionate disturbance, e.g., a butterfly flapping its wings in Budapest might change the weather in New York.) Road constructions and canalisation may be similar Pyrrhic victories – and the consequences are far not so unpredictable.
3) Many projects mean **opportunities missed and lost**. Education without awareness raising, a building renovated as shopping mall instead of a community cultural centre, roads instead of railways… many signs of un-sustainable growth.

Building renovations

- *Rehabilitation of dilapidated **urban areas***
- *Modernisation of **tourist** facilities and services*
- *Reconstructions of **school and kindergarten buildings***

2. Renovations of buildings

Words and figures agree?

Environment protection was many times a pain in the back. Meaningless buzzwords are worse than clumsy, but dedicated ideas! Words and figures do not always agree.

A significant part of the ERDF in regional development was utilised for renovations of buildings: run-down urban areas, outdated tourist accommodation and old school and kindergarten buildings.

The renovation of a building always has significant direct impacts, but the long term effects can be more significant.

Several proposals completely missed out the environmental aspects, superficially mentioned the potential impacts or declared that the project had no effect on the environment. It was easy to sense: the proposal writers included some environmental considerations because it was obligatory.

Smart professionals worded devious texts, comprehensive argumentation about the environmental and sustainability aspects of the project, with plenty of "Euro-speak", "green buzzwords" and quotes of eco-patterns.

Were these proposals any better? The committee often sensed real dedication in the clumsy, idealistic texts of simple, sober-minded teachers or activists. We are not saying that bluntly-worded projects are better, it's surely worth learning and using the appropriate expressions – but smooth words are not everything!

Sometimes so called "ecological model-houses" turned out to be regular buildings with a fake eco-label. In many cases permits from the environmental ministry or other authorities were not yet available, but taken for granted. Some project plans referred to EMAS, but often the "eco-management and audit schemes" disappeared form the technical and operative plans and the budget.

"Greenovation"

Know the place! Involve locals!

Don't "repair" the nature, develop brown fields!

Nature is not golf-course or Japanese garden!

Good projects build on substantial knowledge of the location. Good developers examine each and every factor that may have an effect on the environment, analyse all the aspects of the actual reconstruction and also the future operation. They minimise negative effects and try to avoid protected areas. For an environmentalist the ideal development means rehabilitation and positive function change of an already polluted area – an industrial estate, illegal waste-dump or a barrack.

Green-field investments change the function of the area and are often a cause of significant landscape modification. In some cases the applicant indicated a protected area, a marsh or meadow as degraded land and stated their intent to "repair" them: converting a riverside wetlands into a beach side with port or a marsh into grassy golf-courts!

Preserving bodiversity will not bring cash returns, but re-organising nature is not sustainable development!

Best available technologies and eco efficiency

- *Avoid peak seasons*
- *Building materials*
- *Time switch, water saving taps, natural air conditioning*
- *Access for the disabled*
- *Cars only?! Bikes too!*
- *Heating and cooling*
- *Water and waste*
- *Ecological Gardening*

Eco-efficiency and BAT

Maximizing efficiency of production processes while minimizing impact on the environment.

Eco-efficiency can be achieved by using new technology, using fewer inputs per unit of product such as energy and water, recycling more and reducing toxic emissions.

Eco efficiency is doing more with less.

Using BAT – best available technology – may not be the easy way, but nor an unaffordable high tech solution either! Finding the BAT needs deliberate planning and research, not more money!

You may want to consider the following:

- Reconstructions by default cause disturbance, dust, noise, and truck-traffic. With planning you can avoid sensitive time-periods such as vegetation, nesting or the "culturally" sensitive tourist seasons and national holidays.
- Eco-conscious builders choose locally available building materials, brick, paints, tiles etc. and refrain from using exotic rainforest woods like mahogany.
- During reconstruction the investor must ensure the proper use, storage and naturalisation of hazardous materials.
- The modern building engineering uses time-switches for the lights, automatic water-saving taps and toilets, organic wastewater treatment technologies like reed-beds and separate waste collection, recycling and composting.
- In the past years thermoelectric cooling and heating systems have become a "must". With appropriate siting and shading, proper isolation of the walls, doors and windows, and with the use of natural ventilation the use of energy-glutting climate-equipment can be avoided. Floor and wall heating is more effective than traditional radiators.
- Although it's an EU requirement several applicants forget to provide clear access for disabled to the buildings, or were uprepared to host other groups with special needs (blind, elderly persons or families with young children).
- Around new buildings or tourist facilities large car-parking lots are planned, while the conditions of community and environment-friendly transport remain poor. A bicycle rack is always useful, in case of a hotel a rent-a-bike service, a horse-carriage or an electric car may be tourist attraction in itself.
- Renewable energies are always preferable: solar cells, thermal heat-pumps, combined or biomass-heating is environment-friendly and will return the costs. Changing old windows and doors to isolated ones with double-glazing can also be supported with Structural Funds.
- A nice garden will improve the quality of the establishment. It is important, that the plants are not exotic ones but match the local vegetation. "Inviting" wilderness – putting out dens, shelters, and small lakes will host birds, squirrels, frogs and fish – for the pleasure of the hotel guests.

A building is a message

- *How it's used?*
- *Public or private?*
- *Avoid over-use*

Room for sustainability ?!

How we build? What we build!

From a sustainability aspect it is important how a building is used, but much more important is what the building is used for.

A familiar shelter for eco-tourists, or an exclusive five-star hotel? A community centre or shopping mall? A public park or golf-court?

The Structural Funds provide funding for renewal of ruined industrial sites and run-down urban areas, but the future function is not deeply considered. Public parks and museums obviously don't clear their costs ever while they deeply influence the wellbeing of people. Consequently, a number of economy-intensifying renovations received a green light. Don't get it wrong: they may be needed – but greens doubt that these "easy renovations" should receive priority.

Avoid intensive use

Intensive use of a building, a mall or a tourist facility will disturb and harm the environment and biodiversity. Ultimately, natural values may disappear as result of over-use. It is a threat especially for tourist facilities. In protected areas the hosts should be ready to guide the visitors – education of the hosts can be part of the project. Some hotels also pay attention to monitoring of how the tourists use the environment. With careful planning and management the overuse of the area can and should be avoided. It is especially laudable if the hotel returns resources for the maintenance and development of the neighbourhood and involves the local community.

Inform about the values!

Public information about natural and cultural values is an important expectation towards the tourism-industry. Flyers, handbooks, info-billboards, verbal orientation, etc. should call the guests' attention to the protection of the environment and protected natural values. By the way, info brochures about green technologies used in the accommodation (solar cells, combined heating, selective waste collection, etc.) are also a good idea.

A school is more than a building

Schools and kindergartens are the most important "indoor" places for environmental education and awareness-raising where youths may meet the principles of sustainability and learn to think globally and act locally. Pupils spend literally years in their school building. The circumstances (e.g. materials used, school garden etc.) could indirectly influence them.

In the Netherlands several schools introduced solar collectors and photovoltaic panels, special wall, door and window isolation and also the pupils have to take responsibility by cleaning the school. The practice of environmental education is traditionally very strong in Hungary, but the best practices of school-building reconstructions are still far from the central European reality. From an environmental aspect it was already a breakthrough when the surroundings such as a school garden was planned to be renewed.

Our conclusion: **a building is a message.** A message about growing, possessions, material or a message about sustainable community values.

Employment education

→ *Paper, waste, travel to the venue – small direct impacts*

→→ *Can he practice his new job? Will he have to move or commute?*

→→→ *Will he save resources or use up the world through the rest of his life?*

Employment trainings

- *Skilled workers, not one-trick-ponies*
- *Tele-work*
- *Traditional occupations*
- *Eco-jobs*
- *Social helpers*
- *Civil workers*

3. Human development

Organised education is the best places to raise awareness

Under the Regional Development Operational Program several re-training and adult education programs have started for the unemployed. By their nature the direct environmental impacts of these re-trainings are not very significant.

It is very positive that the training-organisers thought of paper-use reduction, use recycled paper for the handouts or introduce selective collection in the classrooms. Some even considered the location of the training and the schedule of public transport, so the participants could come by train or bus instead of car.

On the other hand, limiting the consideration of environmental impacts to direct impacts was the most common mistake. The environmentally friendly circumstances are important - it is right to save a few kilograms of paper - but still ancillary compared to the fundamental importance of ***what*** is taught!

Train skilled workers with complex knowledge, hunky hands are not welcome anymore

These trainings are unique awareness-raising opportunities. If the education emphasizes the energy and material-saving alternative technologies, the freshly educated carpenters, masons or farmers may avoid significant pollution and save lots of energy during a lifetime of employment. Unfortunately, a majority of the proposals remained on a general level, did not detail the training program and didn't mention whether and how environmental and sustainability aspects were incorporated in the curriculum. Probably many opportunities were missed between 2004-2006.

If the course is only about assembling one particular piece of equipment, the knowledge may become useless once the technology changes or the training participant will loose job again if the company choose to move the factory to another location. From a sustainability aspect, complex trainings are preferred that consider the local circumstances, build on the local resources and provide long-term subsistence irrespective of the actual economic situation.

Language, project management or computer trainings are important and therefore very popular. Still, it's worth considering whether such education fits the life conditions and prospects of the future employees. For instance, from a sustainability aspect it is questionable whether it is appropriate to educate inhabitants of a rural area in a way that they can utilise their knowledge exclusively in large cities – so they either move out of the village or travel daily to town again aggravating environmental impacts.

One exception may be telecommuting – working form home. Tele-work is flexible, it reduces the direct impact of traveling and may include the circle of employed disabled persons, mothers with young child or any family members who for various reasons can not leave home.

It is worth examining the circle of traditional occupations because these probably have adapted well to local needs and natural resources. For instance, local handicraft relying on local resources: potters use clay, basket-workers use reed or willow, wood-carvers the trees – materials that have been and are available.

It is not very common to educate casters, smelters, miners or lumberjacks within EU frameworks. Still, its worth mentioning that certain jobs may be by default damaging the environment. On the other hand, environment-friendly occupations like organic agriculture and farming bring multiple benefits. Chemical-free agriculture is good for the environment, healthy bio-products serve the local market and local community, and financial revenues stay on a local level, too.

Social workers and helpers may play a very important role in the maintenance and development of local communities. They raise the awareness of the community; re-include excluded persons, the unemployed or drug or alcohol addicted. Personal connections are extremely important in our estranged society and therefore the education of social helpers is a priority for sustainability. Working at non-profit, public benefit and civil organisations may be similarly expedient for environmental or social aspects. NGOs may utilise the knowledge of highly-educated individuals and thus the very existence of NGOS in a rural area or a village may be beneficial.

Road constructions
- *More capacity → more traffic → more noise and pollution*
- *Negative direct and positive side effects*

4. Roads to sustainability?!

The Regional Development Operational Program provided significant funding for road reconstructions. Similarly to the building renovations, road-projects should have the same triple aims from a sustainability aspect: minimising direct impacts, calculating and optimising the mid- and long term effects, and not to forget elements that may be progressive from an environment aspect.

From a sustainability aspect there is a clear list of priorities starting with the most tolerable road constructions:

1. Improvement of no road through small settlements availability
2. Lower level copulative roads
3. Bypass roads around settlements with reconstruction of existing paths
4. Maintenance of main roads and highways
5. Bypasses around settlements on new trace
6. Building completely new track roads

Present international and national governmental priorities are exactly the opposite…

From a green aspect the maintenance of the existing road network should be more than enough, most of the new roads through green fields are unnecessary projects.

More is better?

Make one thing clear: more road capacity is not positive from an environmental aspect. More, better and bigger roads attract more, better and bigger cars! See the 6-lane highways in the USA!

Road construction may bring only secondary, external benefits: better roads don't damage cars, so savings may appear in service costs.

A well-positioned shortcut or a bridge may save several car-kilometres, but only if the redeemed road was long, and a large amount of traffic was diverted to the shorter way. As the number of cars is continuously growing, shortcuts or bypasses bring only short and little relief…

Greens do admit: good roads are part of the quality of life. An accessible village may keep its inhabitants; cut-off settlements die out. We have to see planned road-construction from a holistic approach: is there a real need, is road construction really the answer?

Road constructions have significant side effects. Parking lots, petrol stations, logistics, industry and trade and, recently, also fashionable green-field housing estates are mushrooming along the roads and occupy valuable agricultural or natural land.

Not only noise, dust and smoke, but solid packaging waste is growing. Noise isolation, protecting trees and bush zones along the road should be by default included, and there is a little positive side effect: parking lots can actually be excellent spots for selective waste collector bins.

5. Conclusion: Fulfil your need, but not your greed!

Build on local wisdom!

When starting a development project with assistance of the EU Structural Funds, the best approach is to become rooted in the local natural and cultural environment.

Plans must meet the local, county and small-region level development plans and strategic and environmental programs. It's worth coordinating with the relevant environmental authority, National Park directorate and being aware of their short and mid-term plans.

Involve the community!

Local non-governmental organisations are not necessarily opponents or enemies. Early involvement of the civil sector and partnership can be a major asset. Local inhabitants know best the local values and have information that the developers may not know. Public participation may seem a setback, but without public support our project will be a failure – one way or another...

Know what sustainability is

The most important thing: to truly believe that your project will develop the quality of life of the community and will be sustainable in all possible aspects.

6. Helping questions for self-assessment of projects

Road and building (re)constructions

- Is the (re)construction justified from a sustainability aspect?
- What are the direct and long term risks? By what indicators will you measure the direct and long tem environmental effects?
- Are there alternatives to reach similar social-economic effects? Can the size of the investment be reduced?
- Are we using the appropriate technology and work methodology?
- How could we reduce or avoid the noise, air pollution, waste and other strains while building and in operation?
- What positive external benefits do we plan?
- What kind of voluntary and obligatory quality control and audit schemes will we use?
- Does the planned development match the local cultural and architectural character and the natural landscape?
- What eco-efficient, energy saving or renewable-based technologies will you use?
- Is it brownfield remediation or green-field build-up?
- Have you considered alternative building materials, renewable or energy saving best available technologies, development of green areas and the garden?
- What role does the renewed building play in environmental education and awareness-raising?
- Have you included local actors in the project?

Employment, re-training

- Where can the participants utilise the knowledge after the course?
- Will they find an employer? If yes, is it local or they will have to travel or move to town?
- Will the planned employment use local resources?
- How you evaluate the job openings from a health aspect? Will a healthy working environment be provided?

- Are we teaching the best available technology, also from an environmental, energy and pollution aspect?
- Are we building on traditional occupations that have probably developed in the region for a longer period of time?
- How do we evaluate the to-be-assembled product from a sustainability aspect?
- Will it meet sustainability criteria through its whole life cycle form raw material till the final neutralisation?
- In the training curriculum are we using the opportunity to raise environmental awareness?

Tourism

- Have the ecological network and natural values been considered?
- What is the carrying capacity of the tourist attraction you wish to develop?
- How do you minimise land use?
- How you address the environmental awareness of the workers and visitors in operation?

IV. Case studies

Below, we present you six successful projects which are of model value from environmental and sustainability aspects and were initiated and assisted by NGOs, members of SFteam for Sustainable Future. We hope you can gain specific ideas and a sense of sustainability thinking from these examples.

Biomass (woodchops and sawdust) heating
Budget: 4,385 M EUR (75 % ERDF, 20 % state co-financing, 5 % municipal co-financing)
Contact: Friends of the Earth-CEPA ▪ Juraj Zamkovsky ▪ Tel/fax: +421 48 4193324
zamkovsky@changenet.sk ▪ www.priateliazeme.sk

1. Slovakia: Biomass for heating

Biomasa Bystricko alliance sees the wood for the trees. They have replaced the current obsolete heating systems in 32 public buildings in 9 rural villages in Central Slovakia with modern woodchips-based systems in the value of 4 million EUR.

The expected impacts are enhanced economic self-sufficiency of rural areas through the use of local biomass potential for local energy needs, decrease of municipal expenses for heating of public buildings, and reduction of approximately 8.5 thousand tons CO_2 emission in 10 years.

The cooperation of nine villages was initiated by CEPA – FoE Slovakia in 2003, the implementation of the project in started 2006. Three years of patient partnership-building, careful facilitation among the stakeholders and more brought not only municipalities but several NGOs and expert groups (CEE Bankwatch, Energy Center Bratislava, Fund for Alternative Energy, Technical University of Zvolen) together. The very involvement of the municipalities lasted months; they were not used to the idea that small villages can have access to funds of the European Union. The first 18 months was spent with meetings, discussions, brainstorming and situation analysis. It is not a secret that the preparation of such a multi-stakeholder project required a significant amount of non-financial investment, time, coordination and communication. In parallel, the eco-audit of the public buildings started and experts defined what alternative heating systems may be introduced – these engineering and networking tasks were funded

from own sources. The formal and administrative cooperation started in 2005, as a direct premise to the project.

In the small-region over 50 thousand tons of wood-chops and saw-dust are generated per annum and two local saw-mills fulfill the need of the 32 buildings. Every settlement will install the appropriate heating technology. In a school building the old coal furnaces will be replaced by new wood-chip and gas boilers. In another settlement the mini-power plants will be modernised, including the replacement of 800 meters of heat-pipes.

The local contribution is only 5 percent; state support and over 50 % EU funding will make up the total cost. Even the planning procedure alone brought new life and hope to the local communities. This project is a model value example for other marginalised and un-motivated small regions of Central Europe.

Barycz river sustainable development, Poland
Budget: 39.000 EUR
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http://barycz.pl/

2. Poland: Natural development

The Barycz river is 139 kms long and joins the Odera north-east of Wroclaw. The 5500 km² catchment is an important Natura 2000 area. The South-Silesian Foundation for Sustainable Development, the Pro-Natura Association and a group of local governments successfully matched the nature conservation and regional development in a strategic plan.

Cooperation started with three information meetings and a common conference. The organisers outlined the perspectives of a comprehensive regional development and sustainable development strategy, the main elements, needs and resources, and at one go grouped and introduced the stakeholders.

Five status and needs assessments were conduced by three working groups, on the 1) natural values, 2) human resource development, 3) sustainable tourism, 4) local products and services and 5) indicators of sustainable development. The closing conference adopted the strategic plans, and a positive side effect, a Local Action Group (LAG) formulated for the LEADER program.

Such planning processes have been conducted in many small regions of the Central European accession countries - for instance in relation with the SAPARD program. Lots of time, knowledge, human resource and effort have been invested, but some of these ended in disappointment: the promising plans were never realised - the local group was not able to raise the funds. The Polish were smart; they included elements in the project that brought success in the short run: a study tour to a Natura 2000 area in Saxony, a Stork festival, a Carp festival, a bicycle race – small victories, community building actions instead of huge distant promises.

Environmental health farms in Latvia
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3. Latvia: Re-inventing organic farming

After the rampage of industrial, monoculture-farming in the 20th century the traditional, human scale organic agriculture sounds like re-inventing the wheel. The main challenge of eco-farms is the lack

of economic interest and lack of so-called innovation. Still, the members of the Latvian Organic Farmers Association are proud to return to nature.

The European Union recently became more committed towards organic farming, although the logic of the current global economic paradigm is still completely opposing the small scale production of goods. Revealing, the clean organic product are marked as "exceptional" in the stores, not the mass predictions.

The network of Latvian healthy food farms has about 950 members from the total 2800 organic farms. They promote rural development, lobby for legislation changes and support for organic farming in whole production cycle "from the field to the table". Among the products there are vegetables, crops, milk, meat, honey and herbs but also textiles, handcrafts and traditional art. As part of the development projects they organise study tours, experience sharing occasions and trainings, fairs and open days.

It is important to emphasise: the argumentation of the European Union and the organic farms can be matched in project development. For instance farmers practice extensive agriculture with more human work and use machines only in justified cases – which is ideal form social aspects.

Have you considered why the EU spend over 50 % of its total budget on agricultural subsidies, and not on industry or trade? The simle answer: industry and trade are not sustainable. They mine the resources of the earth (raw material and energy), convert the resources to materials to sellable products and ultimately waste – and give back nothing to the earth.

Agriculture is a sustainable genre. One may not exhaust the soil, they have to give back the minerals and energy year by year. There are more signs that industrial agriculture is the past, the future is organic, or dead.

Niraj river valley eco-tourism, Romania
Budget: ~ 15000 EUR
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4. Romania: Eco-tourism in Niraj river valley

The Niraj is a 79 kilometres long tributary of river Mures. It is not very rich in tourist attractions, but the 63 settlements along the river still preserve the fresh air and a healthy bucolic environment, along with the delicious products of traditional organic agriculture. The Focus Eco Center proved that it's ideal for eco-tourists.

Eco-tourism is a complex challenge. Alternative tourist attractions, natural values, hiking trails, bio-products, and traditional bucolic circumstances have to be matched with professional hospitality, quality services and modern tourism promotion.

The key elements of the projects were also three-fold: First, existing natural values, the locations of traditional farming and agriculture, tourist attractions like water-mills, and human capacities were explored and assessed.

A promotion booklet was printed and offered through tourist expos. From an environmental aspect it is important that the booklet contained exclusively traditional houses, excursion tracks, bio-products - all assets of quality eco-tourism.

During the project a network of bed and breakfast services was established. The official certification and administration (invoices, tax) of the tourist accommodations was one of the main challenges.

Sometimes even conservative, elderly landladies were convinced to study a few sentence in English language, since they primarily hosted the tourists. The "east-west" communication gap was an obstacle, but also brought several funny moments.

In many cases the landladies became opinion leaders in their community, as they re-integrated into the labour-market and gained respect. They are promoting an environmental friendly vision and economical alternative that actually works, and doesn't cause harm to the environment.

Complex LEADER+ project in west Czech republic
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5. Czech Republic: Church-roof and bicycle path

26 small local governments of Konstantinolázeňsko and Stříbo small regions of the Czech Republic grouped into a successful LEADER+ alliance. Many a little makes a mickle!

Květoslav Válek, local farmer, purchased a small size seeding machine and a harvester, the Roman Catholic Church of Okrouhlé Hradiště received a new roof, and both small regions reconstructed an existing and built a new bicycle path. The size and type of the successful projects conducted by the Czech West Local Action Group (LAG) are different, but one thing is common: the paths all lead towards sustainable development.

The identification of project partners started in May 2003 and the projects started three years later. The region followed the classic methodology: after the kick-off conference a SWOT analysis of the small regions was prepared. Based on the findings 9 thematic working groups worked out the strategic plans that were discussed and adopted at a series of public meetings.

An EU-type but national source of match-funding scheme called LEADER ČR, administered by the Czech Ministry of Agriculture contributed considerably to the success of this project.

French experts and representatives of the Ministry of Agriculture were also involved in the preparations. Probably the presence of international assistance and the relevant governmental decision makers also contributed to the good positioning and success of the submitted LEADER + project proposals.

Grazing in Túrkeve
Budget: 300.000 EUR
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6. Hungary: Landscape management and employment

The Nimfea Association officially started a "complex rural development program with a long-term approach, based on the traditions of social activities and integration of the aspects of nature conservation and employment." It means they are educating 15 shepherds from local unemployed, mostly roma men. The sheep will do the grazing and restore the scruffy lands. Simple.

The Túrkeve project is an excellent bottom-up example of how simple traditional local wisdom means best practice to the European and global levels.

Maintaining land by sheep is not a breakthrough innovation, but a tradition of 100s of years. A tradition that has become devalued, un-feasible and forgotten over the past decades because of known political and economical reasons. Unfortunately – or luckily – nature, the plain grasslands don't consider these reasons.

The 15 local, minority unemployed men will receive 500 hours of accredited training by the Tessedik College of Agriculture. They learn all aspects of animal handling from health control to driving agricultural vehicles. Among the linked activities there are social and mentoring services for participants including day-care for children and regular community-development meetings.

The project is not only education: the Nimfea Association with a number of active partner organisations will organise the employment, reintegration to the labour market, renovation of sheep-pens and the attached accommodation buildings and start the grazing.

The project sounds like a success story but let's see the practice, too: the contracting lasted more then 3 years and there exists only post-financing; the partners have to bridge the cash-flow. Essentially, only those organisations that do not need financial support because they have the money can realise such projects.

It is important to see: after a positive decision it can take years till the funding arrives. In the case of complex projects it is important to regularly re-focus the attention of the partners, maintain and enhance cooperation, and with minor successes keep up enthusiasm. With preliminary agreements the leader has to prepare the partners for a "long walk" composed of many steps.