Sustainable Development in the Carpathians

The Carpathian countries, mostly being new EU member states or candidate countries, have been and probably will be highly focusing on the common market of the European Union. This disproportionately large emphasis on economic development often sacrifices the rural lifestyle of the local population and works against sustainable land use patterns. However, the Carpathians is probably one of the last regions in the EU where “working” rural communities can still be found, that live in a more adaptive way to the natural conditions and thus better implement sustainable natural resource use and maintain natural and manmade semi-natural habitats. Thus the preservation of the traditional rural economies can only be ensured by the creation of a competitive regional environment through an integrated and multi-sectoral approach, taking into account natural and cultural values as well as socio-economic factors. Increased service-based industries, viable local markets and a competitive local economy are all crucial to the sustainable use of the rich heritage in the Carpathians—in line with the Convention of Biological Diversity and its relevant guidelines and work programs. The Carpathian Convention has identified strategic priorities for the protection and sustainable development of the Carpathians with a view to improve inter alia the quality of life, to strengthen local economies and communities, and to conserve natural values and cultural heritage.

In the spirit of the Carpathian Convention the mission of the present project was to discover, understand, and support the still existing self-sustaining mechanisms and help developing models that can be used for similar rural areas in other areas of the Carpathians. The main objective of the project was to initiate and assist the development and implementation of a sustainable rural development plan of a selected small Romanian municipality in the Carpathians.

The implementing team has been the following:

**CEEWEB** (Central and East European Working Group for the Enhancement of Biodiversity), an international network of non-governmental organisations dealing with nature conservation issues in Central and Eastern European (CEE). CEEWEB is made up of more than 60 environmental organisations in 18 countries with cooperating partners from all over Europe, working together to protect the biological heritage of CEE.

**Association “Milvus Group”** a non-profit, non-governmental organization acting in the field of education, research, and advising in order to make Romania a better place for birds, wildlife, and people. Being one of the most active and effective nature conservation NGOs in Romania, Milvus Group started to get involved in sustainable development projects in 2002. At present it is coordinating two similar initiatives in Central Transylvania.
Future Vision

We started the project with the firm belief that in order to get good results it is essential to build upon the ideas of the local community. We also thought that it was imperative to raise the awareness of the community about this project. So in August 2005 in cooperation with the Romanian Environmental Partnership Foundation, Milvus Group organized a series of events called “Neaua – Workshop for the Future”. To ensure the success of the process we also involved two professional facilitators from ARC (Association for Community Relations).

The first step was to evaluate the opinion of the community about the main problems, strengths, and developmental opportunities. In each village a poll was carried out by two or three previously trained locals. (We chose this method in the hope that the chance for honest answers would be higher.) Questions were asked about both village and parish levels. A total number of 130 people from the 5 villages were questioned.

The next step was a two-day workshop: we invited opinion leaders from each village to build up the vision of each parish based on the preliminary results of the poll. During the first day five main thematic lines of development were identified: Agriculture, Tourism, Society-Culture-Youth, Infrastructure, and Nature Conservation. These five issues were then further discussed by participants and a list of priorities and wishes was developed. On the second day a public debate was organized in order to present the newborn vision. Every household of the parish received a written invitation and as a result approximately 80 people attended the debate—a number local opinion leaders considered as very satisfactory. During the public debate new ideas surfaced and potential allies were identified for the implementation of the concrete plans. Thus the basis for the Local Sustainable Development Plan was set.

Study trip to Hungary

Following the workshop in September 2005 the most active participants took part in a study trip to Hungary. The purpose of the trip was to help participants observe similar initiatives and gather new ideas after having an already formed their own ideas. (This order ensured that these ideas would be suited best for the region.)

16 locals traveled to Hungary assisted by two coordinators (one from Milvus, the other from CEEWEB). Some highlights of the visit: presentations about sustainable development, brainstorming sessions and visits to sites working in various aspects of sustainable development (rural tourism, organic farming, preservation of traditional animal breeds and fruit varieties). The sites visited included the villages of Gömörszőlős, Jósvafő, Irota, Bercel, Kálló, Kékkút, and Győrőrjbarát as well as the National Parks of Aggtelek and Lake Balaton.
Main Development Themes and Selected Objectives

In August 2005 Milvus Group, in cooperation with the Romanian Environmental Partnership Foundation and the Association for Community Relations, organized a series of events called "Neaua—Workshop for the Future". The purpose was to identify and develop a "future vision" based on the opinions of the local community alongside with a set of concrete developmental themes and ideas. The resulting five development themes as well as the connected concrete ideas formed the basis of our Sustainable Development Strategy.

Environmental and nature conservation
- evaluation of the area's biodiversity;
- conservation of the area's natural or semi-natural habitats by integrating them into the national and European network of protected areas;
- development and implementation of environmental education activities targeting the local population;
- testing and implementation of effective damage prevention methods in order to decrease human-wildlife conflicts and increase the social acceptance of wild species;
- development of a landscape rehabilitation plan and program (maintenance of pastures, water management);
- conservation and enhancement of agro-biodiversity through the introduction and implementation of agro-environmental schemes;
- sustainable forest management through the introduction and implementation of FSC Forest Certification System;
- environmental-friendly waste management;
- establishment of a sewage system and environmental-friendly waste water treatment (on village levels);
- use of renewable energy sources.

Society, Culture, and Youth
- preservation and revival of the parish's cultural heritage;
- support for socially marginalized groups, ensuring their integration into social life;
- tolerance, education and employment of the Roma population;
- caring for the ill in their homes;
- social attendance and care of elders;
- revival of the village stewardship;
- support for cultural initiatives targeting the general public;
- support for various training activities and courses;
- organization of courses targeting community development;
- initiation of youth activities and ensuring the necessary infrastructure (e.g. a Youth House).

Infrastructure
- creation of a non-profit institutional frame (NGO) in charge of the region's sustainable development;
- improvement of roads in the area;
- preservation and improvement of public buildings;
- improvement of communication network;
- realization of environmental-friendly waste management;
- establishment of a sewage system and environmental-friendly waste water treatment (on village levels).

Sustainable Tourism
- development of tourism-related infrastructure,
- establishment of a traditional livelihoods museum and model traditional farm;
- development of a forest school with programs offered (also for environmental education purposes);
- establishment of a tourist center;
- development of officially registered eco-guesthouses;
- identification of local possibilities for developing sustainable tourism;
- creating a brand of traditional local products;
- market research, identification of demand for traditional
local products;
- identification and training of locals interested in providing various tourism-related services;
- development of tourism;
- development of a specialized database on the region’s natural, historical, and cultural characteristics;
- marketing of the developed services.

Agriculture
- encouragement and support for agricultural products suited to local conditions (animal husbandry, production of fruits and vegetables, production of medicinal plants);
- presentation and gradual introduction of organic farming:
  - presentation of the possibilities and advantages offered by organic farming;
  - presentation of organic farming methods and techniques;
  - support during the conversion period;
- identification and development of market opportunities;
  - contracts between producers and buyers (direct marketing), development of the network;
- animal husbandry
  - preservation of existing cattle population numbers
  - solving the problem of hygienic milk storage
  - solving the problem of selling milk as well as ensuring the buy-off of milk at reasonable prices
  - rehabilitation of traditional local breeds and encouragement of keeping such breeds

- fruit production
  - rehabilitation of traditional local varieties
    - identification of still existing varieties
    - establishment of a gene pool-demonstrative orchard
    - encouragement and support for the reintroduction of traditional local varieties
  - ensuring the selling of locally produced fruit
  - strengthening and creating fruit processing possibilities
    - brandy distilling
    - drying
    - canning

- vegetable production
  - enhancement of the competitiveness of local vegetable production through the use of alternative technologies
Concrete Activities: Model Traditional Farm

The creation of a model traditional farm has had several objectives: (1) to enhance the “living experience” for the visitors of the Traditional Livelihoods Museum; (2) to rehabilitate and popularize traditional animal breeds which used to be widespread in the region; and (3) to create an example on how sustainable farming can be achieved by the use of traditional livestock breeds.

Most of the traditional farm buildings were renovated according to the original setting except for the ones that were in such a bad condition that the only solution was to rebuild them according to the traditional plans used in the region.

The animals kept on the farm are breeds which used to be widespread in the region but today they are a real curiosity even to villagers. (For example buffalos and “mangalica” pigs have been missing from the parish for the last couple of decades.) As a result of the project some of the villagers have already expressed their interest in keeping these breeds: Some piglets from the first two litters of the breeding stock have been bought by local villagers at favorable prices.

Currently (end of 2007) the farm is housing more than 50 animals, including two buffalos, four mangalica pigs (1 boar and 3 sows), 10 sheep, 4 goats as well as several ducks, geese, hens, and turkeys. The farm is managed by the members of a local family who are also the caretakers of the Traditional Livelihoods Museum.
Concrete Activities: The Gene-pool Orchard

Under the theme of “Agriculture” fruit production holds a special place. Neaua parish has always been renowned for its fruits (especially for the traditional apple varieties). The hilly terrain and small valleys make the area an ideal setting for orchards—no wonder that local fruit production has several hundreds of years of history.

Nevertheless, during the socialist era many of the old orchards vanished to give place to agricultural fields or to a new kind of orchards—the intensive ones. Traditional local varieties were exchanged for new, highly productive ones. Quality was abandoned for quantity together with the traditional knowledge about caring for fruit trees and the old methods of processing the products.

Still, traditional local varieties present a number of advantages compared to their modern relatives: they are highly resistant and adapted to specific local conditions and they usually live and bare fruits for a longer period. Although from the point of view of quantity modern varieties are better, the traditional ones produce superior quality. These factors combined with a growing demand for high quality, homemade products generated the idea of an initiative to save what is left from traditional local fruit varieties. The plan also included the “re-invention” of the old ways of processing fruits (thus also providing an incentive for locals to reintroduce them).

In 2006, led by several locals and with the aid of a fruit-expert from a nearby town, samples (slips) were collected from 20 apple and 10 peer varieties (all traditional ones). In many cases the samples came from the only “survivors” of the respective varieties. More than 400 subjects were successfully grafted, ensuring the perpetuation of all identified varieties. In parallel, an area of approximately 1 ha was purchased and fenced in, serving as the future, extensive gene-pool orchard. The first step was to conserve these varieties. In the end of 2007 small fruit-trees were relocated to the orchard. Later on we plan to extend the number of local varieties and start spreading them once again in the region—but this time accompanied by traditional know-how on caring and processing as well as with a hoped market incentive.
Concrete Activities: Local Newspaper

Under the theme of “Society, Culture, and Youth” one of the main priorities identified was the improvement of the circulation of information within the five villages forming Neaua parish. During the consultations with local opinion leaders the idea of a local newspaper was raised.

Thus a paper titled Kolompszó was born (in approximate translation the “Sound of the Sheep Bell”). It is the parish’s own newspaper written by and for locals. It is a 12-page-long, quarterly publication, printed in 1000 copies. The newspaper is delivered to all households within the parish free of charge.

A group of four people (three locals and one person from Milvus Group) is in charge of the publication, with an editor-in-chief from Neaua village. Milvus Group is in charge of finalizing texts, design, layout as well as publishing. Each issue is printed in a professional printing-house. All costs are covered by Milvus Group.

The paper covers mostly topics of local interest, each issue being made up of independent articles as well as a number of permanent topics. Permanent topics include articles about public health (written by a local doctor); a series about the region's still existing traditional handicrafts; medicinal plants and their use; traditional ornamental flowers; recipes; local stories; interviews etc. Also, each issue contains an article about the Sustainable Rural Development Project’s activities written by Milvus Group and one regular article reserved for announcements and information coming from the local Mayor’s Office.
Concrete Activities: Traditional Livelihoods Museum

As a theme under the title “Society, Culture, and Youth” one of the main priorities identified was the conservation and rehabilitation of the traditional cultural heritage of Neaua.

To address this need we purchased a traditional house in Sânsimion, the smallest village of the parish. The house and its subsidiary farm buildings were in a very bad condition but they were built in a traditional style without significant modifications made in the last decades. The house had been empty for more than five years and no local villagers expressed their interest in buying it as a living place.

The infrastructure needed full renovation. This included the rebuilding of the access bridge to the property which for practical reasons anticipated all other works. During the renovation only local entrepreneurs were contracted (with some minor exceptions where specialized manpower was needed).

In two of the three renovated chambers of the house as well as in the so-called “summer kitchen” (a subsidiary building traditionally used in summertime for cooking) the donated traditional fixtures were installed in a way to recall the look of old-time households. The vast majority of the fixtures (several hundreds of items in all) was kindly donated by the villagers from Neaua parish and were identified and labeled with the help of local amateur ethnologists.

Additionally to the exhibition inside the house, traditionally set farm areas were created in the backyard as well, including a beekeepers’ corner presenting the tools of traditional beekeepers and a special roof under which traditional tools used in agriculture are exhibited.

The Traditional Livelihoods Museum in Sânsimion is more than just a museum. It is a “living museum” allowing for a full “hands-on” experience stepping into the past of these five villages. The ultimate goal is to provide visitors with a realistic insight into the every day life, customs, and traditions of the region’s villages and their inhabitants as well as to preserve the cultural heritage of the micro-region for future generations.
Concrete Activities: Tourism

“Tourism” was one of the five main development themes identified in the planning period of the Sustainable Rural Development Project. It was agreed that it was indeed a powerful tool to contribute to the region’s economic welfare. At the same time it can serve the conservation of Neaua parish’s natural, cultural, and historical values. It was also argued that an exaggerated and one-sided focus on the region’s tourism development can also have significant negative effects: an abandoning of traditional occupations (most importantly agriculture which would have a disastrous effect on the landscape and the region’s biodiversity); increased differences between incomes (thus also increasing gaps between different social groups); traditional local way of life could turn into nothing more than an orchestrated show for visiting tourists. As a result it was decided that the region’s tourism development should be based on a carefully planned, long-term process and, most importantly, tourism development should strive at sustainable tourism.

Almost instantly a series of problems surfaced: knowledge about the values possibly serving as future attractions was low; knowledge about how to create and later sell a tourism-program package was low; housing possibilities were not adequate (even in 2007 there was only one registered guesthouse in the parish); people interested in providing different services related to tourism were not known; and, maybe most importantly, there was a lack of coordination and joint effort.

In 2006 a German NGO called “Ecological Tourism in Germany” (also member of CEEWEB) provided the much-needed helping hand. Their experts, together with members of Milvus Group, conducted on-the-field research about the possibilities of the region’s tourism development. The final report titled Results of the Assessment of the Tourism-Related Potential of 5 villages in Mureș County, Transylvania proved to be a good starting point for future activities.

It was decided that the region’s tourism development would start in two main directions: (1) establishment of a Forest School and related programs offered (this would serve mainly as an educational center but would also provide income to local service-providers and activity coordinators); and (2) development of a sustainable tourism program to be sold through specialized agencies. Activities were developed and tested for the Forest School—a package consisting of approximately 30 different activities based on local natural, cultural, and historical values. The activities are mostly run by locals and serve as the base for the tourism package—basically planned to be a mosaic of the above. Housing will be provided by local, officially registered guesthouses. In this perspective, interested locals have already been identified and the process has been started. Simultaneously a process of tourism-related trainings was started, in partnership with the Romanian Ecotourism Association and the Mures County Tourism Association.