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CEEweb Academy on Synergies between Biodiversity, Water and Land use Policies **5-6 November 2012, Szokolya – Királyrét, Hungary**

As biodiversity, resource and water problems affect whole Europe, policies are already in place to address these issues at various levels. However, in order to apply these policy tools more effectively, it would be inevitable for all stakeholders group to understand the elements of these policies and the potential overlapping issues. For this reason, CEEweb for Biodiversity organized this academy to raise issues of water, land use and biodiversity policies and shed light on the probable synergies and possible cooperation opportunities. At the CEEweb Academy, 24 participants came together from various sectors (European Commission, state authorities, NGOs, etc.) during the two days workshop.

5th of November, Monday

Participants were welcomed and introduced to the venue and to the Academy's schedule by Mátyás Prommer, CEEweb's Secretary General. During the first part of the day a number of experts presented materials on the EU Water Framework Directive (WFD). This was followed by a plenary discussion about possible ways CEEweb should participate in water related themes and issues in 2013 with regards to EU policy development to achieve EU Biodiversity Strategy Targets.

- Our first presenter was Ágnes Tahy from the National Institute for Environment in Hungary who provided some background information on the Water Framework Directive and then went into the details of Hungarian implementation and current state of affairs. In brief, the participants found out that 90% of Hungarian water bodies are protected to some extent but only 1% of them are expected to have achieved a good ecological status by 2015. Most of the WFD management measures are directed to reducing nutrient and organic material and to improving the artificial and modified water bodies to a more natural status. Such measures include modernised manure storage for farms, agri-environmental schemes or sewage collection and treatment plants. Other measures are the implementation of mandatory buffer strips along the rivers and lakes starting from 2012, fish passes and hydromorphological rehabilitation. On the other hand, carrying out projects which are not in accordance to the WFD, such as hard engineering flood protection projects, was seen as one of the biggest issues with regard to the Directive's implementation.
- Next in the Academy's schedule was a phone presentation from Marta Moren Abat from the European Commission. Participants were offered an up-to-date image of the WFD implementation at the European level. It was shown that generally, there has been a high uptake of the Directive among the Member States (MSs) which lead to integration of ecological perspectives into water management, international cooperation, public participation, stakeholder involvement and an impressive improvement in the knowledge base. Nevertheless, there are still 4 MSs which have not yet submitted their plans, there is a low ambition in enforcing WFD related laws and MSs are usually adopting a business-

as-usual approach when considering WFD implementation. Also, Europe is facing an increasing danger from water scarcity and droughts and the current measures are not sufficient to revert this trend. Climate proofing and adaptation measures were seen as necessary when designing the River Basin Management Plans (RBMP). Problems with WFD implementation are usually down to conceptual, information, implementation and policy and governance gaps that still need to be filled. It was concluded that more work and cooperation between the Commission and MSs is needed and particular care should be shown to coastal waters.

- Balázs Tóth from the Duna-Ipoly National Park talked about synergies between WFD and Nature Directives. He offered a historical review of the Hungarian approach to ecological status and showed how it evolved from the first water management and fisheries which treated the biotic and abiotic parameters separately to the current EU WFD which implies a holistic, integrated approach. He pointed out that in Hungary, the 'good ecological status' from the WFD had to be clarified and agreed on by the experts from water management institutions, environmental inspectorates and national parks. A positive point of the WFD implementation in Hungary is the integration of all national monitoring systems into a single, comprehensive database. Nevertheless, finding data during implementation proved to be very difficult as information is sparsely distributed and thus hardly accessible. It was also shown that while there is no independent funding source for WFD implementation, all water management projects need to be in line with WFD requirements. As for a meeting point with nature directives, habitat restoration was given as example, with floodplain management as centre point to this idea. Moreover, sewage from farms was given as an example of common danger for Natura 2000 sites and water bodies.
- Ján Černecký from the State Nature Conservancy of the Slovak Republic presented the implementation process of the WFD in Slovakia. He highlighted that there is still not consensus on what 'good status' means and conservation and management bodies have different perspectives on the term. Another problem seems to arise from the fact that monitoring is done separately by nature conservation bodies and water management bodies, although the latter have more money. Initiatives for a common monitoring system do exist, but the recently agreed joint monitoring system is unofficial, voluntary and largely ignored. It is clear though that such system would be not only cost-effective but would also help in determining more accurately the state of water bodies' status and that of the biodiversity. Nevertheless, perhaps the most important issue which seems to be conflicting with both WFD and Natura 2000 at the moment is the building of a large number of small hydro powerplants throughout Slovakia, a number estimated between 500 and 700. While fish passes are included in the design of the powerplants, lack of maintenance would mean that only in the short-term will the fish be able to get through these structures. Another concern comes from illegal fly-tipping in and along the rivers and a very permissive Slovakian legislation that makes financial sanctions for dumping toxic substances into rivers more profitable than chemical treatment. There are, however, positive aspects in Slovakia and one is that some natural places are very well preserved. Also, NGOs are very active in the monitoring process for WFD and Natura 2000 and are commissioned by the national expert bodies due to shortage in monitoring staff. In this way, NGOs have access to data, a clear image of the current state of affairs and consequently, can take informed decisions and actions.
- The next presentation was also from Monika Kotulak from Naturalist Club Poland and it dealt with River Basin Management Planning (RBMP) procedures and deadlines. Monika highlighted several important issues that need to be considered during the elaboration of RBMP, such as establishing different objectives and targets for the particularities of each water body and making sure that water bodies are correctly delimited. Also, she stressed the importance of analysing whether the term 'heavily modified water body' (HMWB) is applied with a clear purpose and is based on solid scientific and practical knowledge. The

delicate matter here is that if a water body is mentioned as heavily modified, then it can be modified further in the future on its entire length. Naturally, this will adversely impact on the environment. Another factor that was discussed was the need for a cost and benefit analysis when considering RBMP. The presentation continued with a description of the state of affairs in Poland and it was pointed out that in the country traditional hard engineering measures are still largely viewed as good and people are not aware of the WFD benefits and the benefits of a sustainable approach.

- In the light of the above mentioned presentations, participants were asked to comment on the situation in their country. It seemed that plans for extensive building of small hydro power plants are also in place in Romania, Bulgaria and Macedonia. Austria has already an extensive hydro power plants network built but pushing for more of the powerplants would be difficult due to a high public awareness. In Macedonia, NGOs have not sufficient influence to influence the decision-making at a national level and in addition to this, the country is not yet in the EU and therefore Natura 2000 has not yet been enforced. As far as the implementation of WFD is concerned, Hungary experiences delays in the circumstances when half of its water bodies under significant pressure are HMWB. Bulgaria experiences similar obstacles as Poland, in that people are afraid and suspicious of non-traditional hard engineering RBMP. This adds to the shortage of experts with some degree of sustainable approach and to a very low rate of absorption of EU funds. In Romania, excessive extraction of water is posing a great threat to fish species. Nevertheless, some positive aspects include the creation of several wetlands in accordance to the Ramsar Convention, although their visibility is very low. Overall, the participants agreed that projects related to riverbank clearing and construction of hydro powerplants are currently among the greatest threats to the environment and to the correct implementation of WFD and Natura 2000.

Outcomes of Day 1

The final part of the first day of the Academy was reserved to an open discussion between participants on how can CEEweb and its Members contribute to an improvement of the current situation of WFD and Natura 2000 implementation in CEE countries. Below are the main suggestions brought forward:

- CEEweb and its Members should initiate official, well-informed and scientifically-backed complaints to the relevant national authorities and in case of a no-action scenario to the European Commission;
- Through CEEweb, the Members should comment on the upcoming European legislation, so that to clarify confusing terms and push for more concise targets, activity plans and binding measures. This should also be applied to upcoming amendments or new legal Acts that are proposed from the national governments;
- Members should take on the opportunity to get actively involved in the implementation process of WFD and Natura 2000 as experts, due to a shortage of staff in the responsible public institutions. Also, Members should get involved in the biogeographical process;
- CEEweb and its Members should push for more transparency and request data sharing from public institutions as lack of access and availability of such data is a major issues in CEE at the moment;
- No-go areas for small hydro powerplants should be developed further and the network should work together with WWF in this perspective;
- Floodplain restoration should move away from the traditional approach and be instead seen as a means for ecosystem service delivery. CEEweb and its Members should effectively pass this message to the general public and to the responsible public institutions. In this sense, awareness campaigns are an instrumental tool;
- Synergies between Nature Directives and the WFD should be sought – in this perspective, WWF has a rich experience in the management of the Tisza river;
- Participants agreed that sharing information and improving the information flow within the network is essential;

6th of November, Tuesday

The second and last day of the Academy was reserved for talks on Green Infrastructure (GI), habitat restoration, the No Net Loss Initiative, mapping of ecosystem services and the European Biodiversity Targets. A number of guests carried out presentations and this was followed by workshops in small groups on partnership and future civil cooperation between major NGO players to achieve Target 2 and other targets of the EU Biodiversity Strategy in and beyond the CEE region. Finally, a plenary discussion was held, in which CEEweb Members agreed that several concluding proposals should be further developed in the coming year.

- The first presenter of the day was Sarolta Tripolszky from the European Environmental Bureau, introducing the main aspects of the EU's Green Infrastructure Strategy. The need to clearly define several concepts within the GI Strategy was among the main points she made during her presentation. Also, it was stressed that at the moment there is little incentive from the MSs to take on further environmental legislation both because of the economic crisis and due to the sensitive subject of spatial planning. As it now stands, a GI Directive is not expected within the next couple of years and it will most probably be controversial. The upcoming Green Paper will reflect the EU Commission's view on GI but it will only mark the beginning of a debate on the actual implementation. The Commission is also open to public debate although this will imply postponement. It is expected that funding for GI will derive from the Cohesion's Policy, LIFE fund, Fisheries fund and the Common Agriculture Policy (CAP). As far as NGOs are concerned, they should get involved in the national planning process and implement GI related projects.
- Strahil Christov from the European Commission's DG Environment offered an insight into the EU Policy Context on Biodiversity Proofing and No Net Loss initiatives. He confirmed that at the moment many of the concepts related to GI are vague and need further clarification. He informed that from 2014 countries need to account for their nature and monitor changes from year to year and that 2015 Biodiversity targets will not be achieved. The fact that a large amount of EU financed projects can sometimes be damaging to biodiversity was also recognised and it was highlighted that the purpose of biodiversity proofing is to minimise these negative impacts. The discrepancy that sometime occurs between the real situation and the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) as well as the subsequent negative effects on biodiversity was also discussed.
- Alberto Arroyo from WWF Europe was the next of the Academy's presenters. He talked about key aspects in ecosystem accounting in relation to the Biodiversity Strategy. His presentation updated the participants with new concepts and initiatives from the US, where the term 'nature benefits' is replacing 'ecosystem services' in order to make the general public understand better the concept. He mentioned that apart from UK, where a report is done for the finance authorities, in the rest of the MSs there is little information when it comes to accounting for ecosystem services. Also, an Environmental Regulation from 2011 under Eurostat indicated the general position of the EU against ecosystem accountancy. Meanwhile, there is a need for reconsidering consumption trends in Europe, where 40% of the food goes to waste, but farmers are still encouraged to produce more for fears of food shortage. Taking into account the long-term benefits and not only short-term revenues and enhancing multifunctionality of sites for long-term self-sustenance were the main recommendations drawn from the presentation.
- Ján Černecký from the State Nature Conservancy of the Slovak Republic had yet another interesting presentation from Slovakia in which he described the Ecological Network in the country. The Network was formed in 1992 as part of the Pan-European Ecological Network and it was based on a landscape conservation approach, which in Europe is only

shared with the Czech Republic. The ecological system is integrated in local spatial planning and there are a number of maps at local, regional and supraregional levels. From these, the regional maps are the most efficient and updated with Natura 2000 sites and other protected areas. On the other hand, at the local level, updating maps is more difficult due to lack of funds. One of the most relevant issues with the Slovak ecological network is the lack of communication between experts – the network was implemented by joining regions where different experts were responsible and the lack of communication among them sometimes lead to discontinuity. Also, another problem is that the ecological network is largely seen as a mere concept and there are weak or no infringements enforced. It was expected that GI implementation will encounter similar obstacles.

- Ágnes Zolyomi from CEEweb presented the current state of affairs in GI in Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries. Among the main aspects of MSs policy in relation to the GI policy, she highlighted their reluctance to interventions in spatial planning from the Commission or the NGOs. The fact that the CEE is a region where highways are being built at a fast pace, thus increasing fragmentation – the main cause of biodiversity loss – was also mentioned. It was revealed that in the 4 case study countries (Poland, Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Hungary) 25% of habitats and 20% of species are in favourable conservation status, with Slovakia doing the best in terms of fragmentation degree and nature conservation. While in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary ecological networks are in place, in Poland some of the areas are protected by several legal acts and data on land cadastre – though not 100% covered – is available to the general public. Ágnes concluded that a sustainable ecosystem approach is needed if the current challenges are to be overcome. She stressed that integrated databases are essential and that causes and drivers for current challenges should be identified and addressed first and foremost in order to reduce harmful practices.
- Martin Wildenberg from Friends of the Earth (FoE) Austria joined with an interesting presentation on resource use and an innovative concept FoE came with. He began his presentation by placing sustainability in the nowadays' society consumerism trends and stating that we need to see the bigger picture of the interrelated elements of our society's mechanism while considering historical trends in resource use. His main point was that becoming efficient is not enough for Europe but what Europeans need is to reduce resource consumption through changing consumption patterns. In this perspective, he brought the example of one of the innovative sustainability tool FoE implemented in close partnership with retailer REWE – the Pro Nature for sustainability. The concept behind the label is based on 10 sustainability indicators that must be achieved at a predetermined status throughout the supply chain if a product is to be labelled. At the moment, there are 23 products assessed and the number of actors interested in taking on the label is increasing. The label is one of the few accessible sustainability tools that are addressed to the conventional agriculture in Europe.

Outcomes of Day 2

The final part of the Academy was reserved to an open discussion between participants on how can CEEweb and its Members contribute to the implementation of GI, No Net Loss initiative and of a transparent and equitable implementation of the Biodiversity Proofing process in CEE countries. Below are the main suggestions brought forward:

- It was concluded that CEEweb and its Members should monitor EU and National paper releases and provide constructive feedback to the Commission and the public institutions in order to ensure the GI concept is well understood and well targeted;

- Inclusion of the pre-accession funds in biodiversity proofing was suggested, to ensure that no EU funds will be used to destroy European nature in candidate and potential candidate countries;
- Members should work to identify potential places suitable to be included in the GI and supported by CEEweb, make official proposals for their inclusion to the relevant national and EU authorities. Also, Members should think of appropriate management plans for these sites and collaborate with other stakeholders during the process;
- A review of already existing examples of good GI practices elsewhere in the EU is needed;
- Participants agreed that there is a need for Environmental Impact assessments for regional development and at an urban level – the example of the Czech Green EIA was brought into discussion;
- Also connected to Biodiversity Proofing and the No Net Loss initiative, participants had slightly heterogeneous opinions when it came to putting a pricetag on nature, but all of them agreed that it is a sensitive subject that needs to be treated carefully;
- Synergies with CAP, tourism and rural development, energy and transport policies were seen as necessary for the implementation of GI. At the same time it was acknowledge that at present, interests from some policies such as cohesion and regional development are conflicting with interests from policies targeted at protecting nature, including GI, WFD and the Habitats and Birds Directives;
- High corruption rates in the public institutions from CEE countries was seen as an obstacle by many Members. It was agreed that lobbying at the EU level and providing a realistic account of the situation to the relevant European institutions – particularly the Commission – would be the best solution;
- Participants agreed that sharing information and improving the information flow within the network is essential. Also, joint awareness raising campaigns were pointed as effective tools;

Apart from the above mentioned set of recommendations, the final conclusions of the Academy included four main initiatives:

- A labelling concept for CEE based on an initiative carried out in Austria by Global 2000. The process of research and documentation sharing between Global 2000 and CEEweb has already started;
- A trans-boundary project for the Danube ecosystem The Danube ecosystem project is a joint initiative of several CEEweb Members and work on the project concept has started as well;
- A proposal aiming at joint NGO efforts for contributing to the Emerald designation / revision in the West-Balkans based on three selected Key Biodiversity Areas as pilot sites: Ohrid, Dojran Lake and Hutovo blato. This proposal has already been submitted;
- A project proposal to promote environmental education and raise environmental awareness in urban areas using arts. It was agreed that this will be a proposal for the Youth in Action programme with the deadline on February 1st 2013.

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