

Report of the Study Visit

(23rd-28th April 2007)



Edited by:
Anita Mészáros
May 2007

Supervised by:
Paul Kosterink
Milieukontakt Oost-Europa

1. Introduction

Based on the participants' feedback, this report shows their opinion, the knowledge and experience they have gained during the study visit. It was planned for Romanian, Bulgarian and Croatian representatives of NGOs by Milieukontakt Oost-Europa. It lasted from the 23rd - 28th April and it was organized in two parts. The first part was visiting the EU institutions in Brussels, understanding how they work, and lobby on specific topics in order to improve the knowledge and the capacity of the Bulgarian and Romanian participants in the project about the EU structure and work.

The visits were informative and the participants presented some issues of concern for each of the countries. These included various problems: from "hot topics" as NATURA 2000 in Bulgaria to the future of the small and self-subsistence farms in Romania. The stress was put on the regional development and the forthcoming use of EU funds by the two new Member States. Additionally, the Operational Programs were discussed intensively during the meetings with the DG representatives as at the time of the visit they were going through an inter-service consultation.

In Brussels the visit also consisted of meetings with Permanent Representatives, big environmental groups and organizations such as WWF, EEB and FoEE.

The second part of the visit was planned to Noord Brabant, the Netherlands. There the participants got acquainted with various projects which were executed in the area. The projects exemplified different use of EU funds to develop local development strategies, public private partnership, to facilitate innovation, to develop networking and cooperation and multi-sectoral actions. During the project presentations the participants got to know the different stakeholders' views, as well as the way the Leader approach was used for the successful implementation of the projects, the efforts to protect the environment with respect for the agricultural producers and the approaches to problem resolution of the different stakeholders participating in a given project.

2. Three days in Brussels (23rd-25th April)

2.1. The first day (23rd April)

2.1.1. EEB

For this day there were two meetings planned for the group except for the Bulgarians, who were going to have an appointment with their own permanent representatives. Unfortunately the visit at Birdlife International was cancelled, but the meeting with EEB was successful. It turned out that it was a useful visit for those who are not familiar with the activities of this organization, such as Croatia and Bulgaria but Romania has already been a member of the EEB, for which reason, their priority areas of activities were quite well known. For the Bulgarian and Croatian participants it was interesting to hear that EEB represents in Brussels more than 140 organisations from all over Europe on eco-labelling, supporting strong EU policies, etc. and also on non-environmental policies that it has impact on the environment such as the agricultural policy and the structural funds. EEB lobbies with MEPs, Commission and other European institutions to simplify the procedures and makes it easier for good projects to receive financing with less abuse. It works with experts from its member organisations so that environment and biodiversity receive more funding also on national level. The NGOs in the member states are supposed to provide the missing information on national problems to the EU and EEB helps in organizing the meetings.

About the soil policy it was told that it was not moving anywhere since the opinions of the environmental NGOs and the farmers are contradictory. Although the amount of the money is small, the demand is huge. The EEB is trying to make them spend it in the right way seeing the case of Portugal, where only few farmers got the major part of the money.

The budget was also mentioned for 2007-2013, which is going to be revised in 2008-2009, and at the same time the preparations need to start for the elaboration of the financial plan for the next period.

The EEB also has projects on capacity building in the EU enlargement. It means that EEB works on horizontal level to help NGOs before their countries become member states of the EU. They are taught how to advice ministers, how to become active. The NGOs can decide on what type of training they need for their country.

2.1.2. Permanent Representation of Bulgaria

The meeting was initially scheduled with Ms. Zhekova, the environmental officer in the PRB but due to lack of information on the web site of the PRB about change of address, the meeting was rescheduled and the Bulgarian representatives were accepted by Anton Antonov - a representative of the Ministry of the Regional Development who also helps until Bulgaria sends a representative of the municipalities. Mr. Antonov provided information about the structural funds and that major comments were to be issued on 2nd May. He added that it was not expected that Bulgaria would have problems with the programme. There will be additional annexes in the next 2-3 months (before the vacation period) when everything shall be ready between the sections of the programme.

2.2. *The second day (24th April)*

2.2.1. *WWF and FoEE/CEE*

The first meeting on Tuesday was with the representatives of WWF, Stephanie Lang, who has three roles: lobbyist, who works on legal formulations; works with NGOs, and with EU institutions (commission, parliament, council); trains WWF partners to deal with structural funds, and Martin Konecny from FoEE. During the meeting questions were discussed linked to the ways of approaching the officials of the EU institutions. Stephanie Lang mentioned that the EU funds can be used in good and harmful way for the environment. Such as building dams or for wetland restoration. She mentioned that unfortunately from these funds the NGOs can benefit only in a very reduced scale. There were also questions discussed on the harmful investments and the ways how to lead these projects to be sustainable.

Mr. Konecny works on the cohesion funds, with member groups – Bulgaria - Za Zemiata, Romania - Terra, Croatia –Zelena Akcia. The areas of attention in relation to his work for the FoEE in Brussels were:

1. Programming
 - Involvement in the working group for preparation of programs and commenting on national level, trying to influence the process via Brussels because EU Commission gives the final approval. Translation the comments from the NGOs to the Commission
 - Organization of lobby trips- bringing national NGOs to meet the DGs and Permanent Representations
 - There is risk is time pressure to finish the OPs. Many of the negotiations will go for the whole year.
 - Conduction of comparative analysis of financial allocations, focus on energy and transport financing (greenhouse gas emission and climate change)
2. Contraversional Major Project (which is to be financed)
 - FoEE also prepare a map of all controversial projects in Europe.(22 potential projects for 6 billion Euro). For each of the project FoEE offers an alternative.
 - According to Mr. Konecny the NGOs can work to minimize potential damage with most important work done on national and regional level. If such a strategy does not work the problem can be transferred to EU level and FoEE inform the commission to avoid the potential damage
3. Partnership (of NGOs and advisory bodies)

The coalitions are important otherwise the lobbying is not effective. moreover the effective representation for the new period is essential and finally the steering committees decide on the selection of the projects.

2.2.2. *DG Environment*

The visit to DG Environment was an interesting and very useful meeting. The group was welcomed by an impressive team, coordinated by the head of unit, Mr. George Kremlis.

On this occasion the Romanian team had a pleasant surprise meeting the desk officer for Romania, a former civil servant in Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development, Mrs. Cristina Brailescu. Each teams had the opportunity to raise a series of issues and concerns related to environmental procedures and programming process in their countries.

Each of the officials attending the meeting provided fresh information on the table, on each issue. As a start-up, Mr. Kremlis assured all the visitors of the support of European Commission and particularly of DG Environment, proving high openness to NGO inputs and appraising NGO work as a very important one for the Commission, being “the eyes and the ears of the European institutions in the territory”.

Romanians have addressed five distinct topics, as follows: EC opinion on Romanian strategic document: Operational Program Environment, SEA process, NGO participation both as beneficiaries and in the Monitoring Committees, and linkages with other economic priorities, such as transports and rural development.

The Bulgarians also presented some issues, such as the case of Natura2000 problem as the result of a negative lobbying campaign from mayors and government; problems with the GONGOs. Solid waste management – Bulgaria is foreseeing to build a central plant. The problem was mentioned that the Regional Waste Management Plans are very bad copies of the National Program. Mr. Kremlis commented on the presentation that the situation is specific in Bulgaria since there are National and Municipal plans and the Commission checks only the National Programmes. If a Municipal Programme foresees a project which is not in the National the Commission does not approve it.

The answers were broadly formulated, attention being drawn constantly to the timely contribution of NGOs to the strategic documents, which are now under evaluation. In order to include NGO observations in the final texts of the OPs, the officials of the Commission requested for a written list of additional considerations and recommendations to be submitted as soon as possible, given the overloaded schedule of the DG Environment for all OP documents, that need to be evaluated to check the compliance with the horizontal integration of the environmental aspects.

2.2.3. Permanent Representation of Romania

The visit at this institution was great with the words of the Romanian participants: “We were able to present our work on sustainable regional development, our concerns related to environmental decision making in Romania and wish to have a much more consistent contribution in the policy making in Romania. Initially, we were welcomed by technical staff, which proved a great interest in our work; later on, Mrs. Dragu came in and strengthened the idea of facilitating us to reach key persons in the environmental central authority, given her last experience was in this particular field. Mrs. Dragu appreciated that the NGO work is complementing the work of public administration, and on this basis, continuously connection must be maintained. In this sense, she entrusted us constantly of all her support, to get our voice being heard, our standing points being read by national authorities, in the case we encounter difficulties on the way. Specific mentions have been made on strategic documents that are now on the table of European Commission and also, notices have been drawn up to our attention regarding the reliability of different messages that are passing out in the media in Romania, in terms of checking up always with the Management Authorities about the real meaning of these messages - for example, the news about the rejection of OP Regional by the European Commission has no real ground in the opinion of our Permanent Representative office, since it is an on-going process of evaluation and negotiation and no final decision has yet been taken.”

2.3. The Third Day (25th April)

2.3.1. DG Regional Policy

Visit to DG Regio enable all teams to have an insight vision of the works on regional development and priority actions in this field.

The Romanian delegation raised the next 5 questions/problems for discussion with the representatives of the DG Regio: EC opinion on Romanian strategic document: Operational Regional Program, Public participation process in the debate of the operational documents, implementation of the WFD and the possibilities to finance the provisions of the WFD by OP Regio, the possibilities for NGOs to participate as beneficiaries in ROP, and the participation of NGOs in the Monitoring Committees. The representatives of DG Regio clarified that at this moment the ROP Romania it is in analyses at the DG. They show openness toward to cooperation with NGOs and encouraged the NGOs to send comments in due time concerning the ROP. According to the representatives of the DG Regio there are no problems concerning the NGOs as final beneficiaries of the ROP. It's true that in Romania there are no special provisions concerning the financial support of the NGOs from these funds, but any NGO can submit proposals. The representatives of the DG Regio encouraged the present NGOs to be more active in relation with the Regional Development Agencies, to be included in different monitoring committees and influence the use of the EU funds in sustainable way.

The Bulgarian group presented the cases of the NGOs in the cross-border area of Bulgaria and Romania, the artificial bureaucratic obstacles for use of financing. A question was asked how the situation can be solved. Mr Oel said that the commission has scared many administrations that they have to do everything by the book. He added that there has to be certain speed to use the money.

Other cases were presented -the transparency issues in the procedure for choosing EU consultants, the attempt to restrict public information the impractical projects supported by the EU funds, the conflict of interests in the public procurement.

2.3.2. DG Agricultural and Rural Development

It was an interesting meeting, where participated the responsible persons for Romania and Bulgaria, for a short time we had the responsible person also for SAPARD. Here Croatian could ask their questions in connection with IPA, ISPA. For the the IPA is going to be as the SAPARD was for Romania and Bulgaria, but the final vesion is not ready, yet. The legal proceedings -SAPARD – there is a structure to prevent future problems and the programs are well-designed. The implementation and control are a responsibility of the Member States. The size of the maximum funding is decreased form 500,000 Euro to 250,000 Euro. The beneficiaries can be only farmers licensed as organic producers.

Our questions from Romania were as follows:

1. What is the future of the small farms in Romania from EU perspective?
2. How will be linked the landscape conservation with the agriculture in the special conditions in Romania?
3. How will be supported the local, traditional products and production structures in the rural areas in Romania?
4. What's the vision concerning the complex exploitation (agri-production, rural tourism) of the rural space in Romania?

The answers were adequate and useful. The representatives of DG Agriculture explained that the NSP has to be sent by 3rd of July. The subsidies can be paid before the NSP is approved, but just for responsibility of the member states. Regarding to the NSP the semi-subsistence farms will be helped to get in the commercial sector, the subsistence farms can apply just for diversification.

He said that the intention of Romanian authorities was to make the small scale farms disappear, but after the pressure of DG they have changed their mind.

The pillar 1 will offer the additional support for farmers (agri-environmental schemes, subsidies for prevent avoiding the land)

The pillar 2 will support traditional producers, mainly producer groups, and quality schemes.

About the LEADER+ he explained that there is no deadline for applying, Romania has a 3 years transition period. For the question about the agri-environmental subsidies (who will get it-the owner or the user?), he said that generally the user will get it, who has to respects the conditions in the contract.

Questions raised by the Bulgarians were the problems with the GONGOs - in case of the Leader implementation such organization managed the funding in Bulgaria. The timber business in Bulgaria. The agricultural policy usually deals only with agriculture but in Bulgaria the timber industry goes under the same Ministry. The institutions do not apply the law. In such cases the NGOs have to inform the Commission if there are any doubts about law violations. The future of the small farms is a big question as it is in Romania.

3. Three Days in Brabant (26th-28th April)

3.1. The First Day (26th April)

3.1.1. Residential area Haverleij, Den Bosch

The presentation was given by Rob Brinkhof, representing the Municipality of 's Hertogenbosch. He explained the idea behind this residential area, which was trying to bring the rural and urban area closer to each other and also combining the innovative, modern housing with keeping the traditional landscape. In the financial stage the EU funds played an important role.

The buildings are only 10% of the whole demonstrated area of 100 ha land and 60 ha of forests. 4000 flats were constructed, with half of them sold and the other half rented. The sale price varies between 200,000 and 900,000 Euro. The monthly rent for a flat is 1000 Euro on average. The area is inhabited mostly of young families with children. It is located far from the center, there is no public transport or communal services and shops. The area is financed by the sale of the flats and environmental projects financed by the EU. It is managed by the municipality which owns the lands.

The participants had different comments and reactions on this idea. Some of them thought that this experiment is controversial as the buildings were too artificial and did not contribute to the nature look of the area. There was lack of services to provide social life and activities. The good idea behind it was that the local government, the businesses and the society had found a way to work together and to incorporate the environmental protection in their decisions. Still, such projects are not applicable in the Bulgarian and Romanian reality and the execution of the project was not done in the most successful way. The positive things mentioned were that the idea to keep open space in order to secure the habitats and that both the municipality and the owners participate in the maintenance of the area. Another positive thing is that the

agricultural land was transformed into ecological land.

3.1.2. Lunch at Organic farmer Oomen, Hoeve Bosrand

The family Oomen runs a livestock farm. They breed cows of the French species Blonde d'Aquitaine for organic meat production (controlled by Skall). The meat is sold on the farm, in another special farm shop and via a deliverance service. There are 160 cows grazing on 1000 ha. Owner of the land is the NGO Natuurmonumenten – the biggest NGO in the Netherlands. The farmers do not receive tax concession for organic production.

The participants' opinion about this farm was first of all that it is very motivating that Mr. Oomen has decided to convert to organic farming even though his profits did not increase by this. He contributes to environmental balance and his farming and meat production are combined by alternative sources of incomes, such as bed and breakfast, horse breeding and horse riding. On the other side there were remarks that organic farming does not have priority in Romania and Bulgaria. The farm is too big, which is not applicable for Romania and Bulgaria since most people do not have so much land and the work seemed to be too much for the family which can end in lack of capacity.

3.1.3. Visits to Nature sites in/near Kampina, Frans Kapteijns, Natuurmonumenten

All of the visited areas were part of the Meierij; an ancient, characteristic scenic landscape formed through the ages by nature and agriculture. Recently the Government has designated most part of the Meierij and some surrounding areas as a national landscape. There's a variety of projects going on in this region.

People in the region are only in favour of conservation and enhancement if these areas are not turned into open air museums. Economic development should not be forbidden and constrained but guided by the regional identity of the landscape. The initiation of Dutch National Landscapes is in line with the growing attention for the quality of landscapes elsewhere in Europe and in European policy development.

Het Groene Woud represents an attractive type of small scale farming landscape, interspersed by brooks, woodlands and heather. After a long process of deliberating, debating, vision building with a variety of stakeholders the Banisveld-area was put out of agricultural use, the garbage dump was closed and the area is now being transformed into nature, connecting two other nature areas to one joined robust territory with possibilities for nature development with large animals like deer. At the moment special species of cows (Aberdeen Angers) graze the area to keep it from forestry.

At the same time the nature conservation board started a joint venture with local farmers to raise a livestock of these cows for naturally grown beef, as a speciality from the region. The demonstrated project again provided examples how nature and economy cooperate for sustainable development.

Exhaustive explanation of all details was given by the guide, Frans Kapteijn, who was very knowledgeable on his work and answered questions in great details. It was the most useful example of a strong NGO which manages to achieve its goals by being business oriented, supportive to the regional development, and by increasing farmers' environmental protection awareness. It was very good example of how a NGO can serve as a mediator between the various stakeholders. It shall not be forgotten that they exist for just over 100 years and are supported by the government, and they especially work with water management institutions, etc. Finally there was a discussion between the participants how much money a NGO can

receive annually in each country.

3.1.4. Open Air Nature Theatre, Oisterwijk, Cees Marsé

In spite the hot weather during the visit the usual season for the nature theatre had not started yet. It was obvious that the theatre was not clean and most of the participants thought that it was not in a good condition hence this project did not give them a good impression and they thought it was a negative example for them. There was a remark that if it had been a nature theatre the seats should not have been made of unnatural material. Other comment was that Mr. Marsé manages the place as he thinks it is proper, he does not seem to care whether it is clean or not. This does not seem to bother him.

3.1.5. Social project for youth, dinner at “The Belvertshoeve”, Oisterwijk

The "Belvertshoeve" is a restaurant and conference centre, but not an ordinary one. It offers its guests all facilities you might expect, but it is run by (young) people with social difficulties; people who do not (yet) have opportunities to work in normal jobs but need guidance. At the Belvertshoeve they learn to (re-)socialize and prepare for normal jobs and participation in society.

The young people who work there are sent by the state institution for Minor care. They also recommend different activities for each particular person. There are no such places in Bulgaria and Romania. The project started 3 years ago and at the moment there are 20 people working there. Some stay there for few weeks, some others for years. Each minor has a personal assistant.

The place seems to be very popular and the food was very good. Everything was served with fantasy. This is a nice project with a fine idea behind it and it was one of the few places where the information was provided by the target group, not by the owner.

3.1.6. Regional Branding Het Groene Woud, Frans van Beerendonk

During dinner, guest speaker Mr. Frans van Beerendonk, chairman of Regional Branding in Het Groene Woud and vice-chairman of the Leader+ LAG ‘Innovationplatform Sustainable Meierij’, was talking about regional branding. It started in 2005 and its aims are to stimulate the regional economy in a sustainable way, by making use of the identity and characteristics of the region. Actually, it is a transition process for agriculture, for demand-driven instead of supply-driven production, for reconnection the urban to the rural area, and finally, building new chains and networks of business, local and regional authorities and NGOs.

This was a really interesting presentation but it should not have been the last point of a long day since most people were really tired.

3.2. The Second Day (27th April)

3.2.1. Orchard Wielewaal

Mr. and Mrs. Faes have a fruit farm, where they grow apples, plums and pears. They are also innovators in regional branding, by participating in the project Short Supply Chains. Recently they have got a licence to build a pancake restaurant at their fruit farm, part of reconnecting the city of Eindhoven to the countryside.

General impression was that this project successfully combined environmentally friendly farming practices, even though these are not particularly organic. Everybody shared a strong positive impression about the long term planning and patience that the owners have in growing their apples, the enthusiasm the young couple invested in this activity. Also, the Bulgarians appreciated very much the real opportunity the owner of the orchard has had in buying part of the farm from his boss, and developing it into a successful business by combining the farming with marketing procedures (opening a facility for drinking tea and serving apple-pie). Their hospitality and creativity in developing alternative activities to the farming itself will only serve for a sustainable business. The pragmatism of the owners to lead their business was appreciated. They tried to be organic but they realized that in the conditions of using intensive species this is not possible. So they are practicing a healthy way of agriculture, they are using chemicals only if it is really necessary. They reduced quantity in favor of quality. They obtained the label: “product from the region” and they are selling their products on local markets.

3.2.2. Spelt Project

The visit was really interesting from the very beginning, since nobody from the entire group understood what plant species the farmers were talking about. In this indefinite image, most of the Croatians and Bulgarians thought of something as a rather exotic species, but the field visit clarified the confusion. The Spelt was an important wheat species in parts of Europe from the Bronze Age to medieval times. It now survives as a relict crop in Central Europe, but has found a new market as a health food since it contains much gluten.

Generally, the project enjoyed a great interest, especially when a description of the landscape and geographical conditions had been presented.

Another highly appreciated aspect was the calculation of price by the Bulgarian team. Afterwards, the demonstration of the traditional oven generated insight in the baking of the bread from the spelt. The time and efforts the local people are investing in the restoration of the stable or promoting traditional products had a high impact on the entire group.

Croatians believed that it was a nice idea to make an exhibition in one person’s own place, showing also how the bread was being prepared, proving the dedication of these people in preserving cultural and traditional practices. It was an interesting example concerning the combination of different aspects: landscape preservation, short way distribution of the agricultural products, agriculture. It was also an interesting example to see the good use of the LEADER funds.

3.2.3. Ecoduct Het Groene Woud

The idea of the ecoduct was created by Brabants Landschap, a regional organization (NGO) for management of large landscape areas. In 2005 the first ecoduct was opened in Brabant, which connects two nature areas – each with a small river valley – and creates an important link for animals like deer, badgers, martens, small mammals, etc. to move from one nature area to the other. There are sand strips to help the ecologist track the migration of animals via the ecoduct.

The project was considered having an impressive role in nature conservation, reconnecting two separated areas, rich in biodiversity both. Some comments were presented regarding the high costs and long time frame this project involved. There were opinions that this project could have been done from the very beginning, in the same time when the highway was planned and implemented, if the EIA procedure would have recommended that aspect, as it is the case of Croatia, where they use this provision as a warning to the population to preserve

the natural values. The Bulgarians were of another opinion, that this type of project - a natural bridge over the highway - can not be suitable to their conditions; more appropriated being a tunnel under the highway (this has already been done in Bulgaria). For the Romanian team it was impressive the effort which has been invested (9 M EURO) for the connection of 6000 ha of natural areas.

The initiative for the construction was of a NGO and the ecoduct was co-financed by the Ministry of Transport, The municipality and the EU funds (EAGGF-Guarantee budget).

3.2.4. Innovation Platform Sustainable Meierij (IDM)

Meeting Mr. Ger van den Oetelaar, chair of IDM, aldermen and deputy mayor of Boxtel. The foundation IDM initiates and stimulates system based innovations. Their ambition for the Meierij is to enhance the synergy between its extraordinary natural values and a dynamic regional economy. IDM supports and develops projects that not only combine the three aspects of sustainability – people, profit, planet – but also focuses on the past, the present and the future of the Meierij.

The principle of the financial mechanism (the regional bank account) was not fully understood from the very beginning – especially the way of functioning of the so-called “money machine”; several persons from the group got the impression that the deputy mayor benefited of great influence due to his position, and it seemed that he made use of it to convince the City Hall and business entrepreneurs to invest large money into that bank account. Also, the double function (both deputy mayor and chair of the board) might have left the impression that he has a great influence in making things to happen in this region, but also, that he is not such an independent person. There is a serious question whether this mechanism can be applied to other regions, for example Eastern European Countries, if not all the favorable conditions as in this case of Boxtel City are being met.

The Bulgarians stated that it was not so clear what type of projects are being sustained through this funding or are going to be financed in the near future. It is an interesting example how different local projects can be financed like: landscape restoration projects, local branding projects, rebuilding a watermill, etc.

3.2.5. Restaurant De Negenmannen

The cook and the restaurant owner is a member of the Regional Branding foundation. He serves several menu of only local grown products.

All teams members had an exquisite experience on this event and got the impression of being served in a very professionally manner, just like in a French bon-ton style. Everybody appreciated the efforts and dedication of the restaurant’s owner in establishing an innovative business, by promoting regional products, the care for aesthetics also, not only for the taste of the food. It was unanimously accepted that the idea of cooperation with local farmers, regional producers and restaurant and regional shops was a very good one, which is helping the development of the regional activities. Another additional comment and probably directly dependent on the decision of promoting regional products, was that the business itself is economically risky, and that in the end this is reflected in a probably high cost of the services, food in the restaurant.

Overall, this project was highly appreciated as well its entrepreneurs, which seem to run a family business, where care and respect for the customer is one of their top standards.

3.3. The Third Day (28th April)

3.3.1. Project Kanaalzone

This project is about giving up the a motorway that divided the town centre from the attractive green area of the local canal. It took eight years of discussion to overcome local resistance, after authorities had agreed upon the original plan.

This site visit was organized along the canal in Oirschot. Mrs. Karen Ammerlaan from the City Government was very well accepted by the group because of her openness and honesty. Having in mind that she comes from the public sector, the group was pleasantly surprised that Mrs. Karen was not hiding anything and shared with us even things that not necessarily show the government in positive light. Few members of group thought that presentation was quite confusing and they did not understand why all these new buildings are needed. It seemed like the government made a pressure on citizens. Money for financing will be sought from Leader+ as well as from the municipality.

3.3.2. Horticultural farm 'Jan Robben Strawberries'

Jan Robben was the first company in the Netherlands which got the Milieukeur certificate for the efforts in the field of environment and surroundings. In the foundation Milieukeur consumers, manufacturers, retail, government and environmental experts participate.

The strawberry farm of Mr. Jan Robben was very well accepted by the entire group. Mr. Robben inspired all of us by his energy, vision and love towards his work and products. His family is devoted to growing strawberries which seems to guarantee success as well. Mr. Robben's attitude towards marketing, openness for breaking the barriers was recognized as important values by the group. It is very important that he develops his marketing strategy by trying to add more value per strawberry and not to increase the size of the production. All of the time off the production season he seeks for marketing opportunities.

3.3.3. Spoordonkse Watermill

This mill was built in ancient times, it was part of the castle Ten Bergh. The mill was made of wood, but in 1868 a stone wall was placed around it. From then on the family Van Esch leased it. In 1900 the family bought the mill. In the years 1970 it almost collapsed because the lack of maintenance. The present family Van Esch bought the watermill from their relatives in 1982 and restored it. Very recently reception rooms with hospitality services has been built.

Watermill project was a very nice example of cultivating heritage and history of the region. Combination of history, production of flour in an «old-fashioned way» and tourist spot is a very nice example of usage of Leader funds. In connection with Leader Mr Emile van Esch pointed out that the most difficult thing was to estimate the costs of the restoration at the beginning and then the tender could be written, but it can happen that by the end, the costs double and the subsidies got from EU will not be enough.

3.3.4. Village Development Plans

Brabant has a lot of small villages. Because of earlier urbanization processes the population is ageing and amenities in the villages are decreasing. Lots of citizens want to live in these small scaled, non-criminal and peaceful places. But until recent years most municipalities were not allowed to build enough new houses. That is why housing caused the decrease of social life quality. Meanwhile, to find solutions in many villages “Village Development Plans” were prepared. It is an instrument to initiate and stimulate social development, especially with public participation. Mr. Ed Kooger is very experienced in these processes.

Although the topic was very interesting in theory and implementation in practice, the institute PON unfortunately was not very impressive to the group. Some members think that idea was good, and it represents a good example of Leader projects. Unclear remained if PON is a true NGO or «GONGO». CCI works very similarly in communities on community development and found the presentation useful for comparison.

4. Conclusions

According to the participants they were mostly interested in Brussels in understanding the functions of the DGs, getting into contact with responsible people for their own countries, learning more about the EU institutions and the way they influence the decision making process.

Understanding the functioning of the European Commission and the Regional policy finally was quite appropriate if we take it as one. Both Romanians and Bulgarians feel that they could express their most important issues towards Brussels. Thinking about the DGs separately concerning the DG Environment the meeting was very useful. Mr. Kremlis showed a lot of interest in the specific regional and environmental problems and was supportive to the ideas which both Romania and Bulgaria presented to him. Although visiting DG Agriculture seemed to be efficient, the logistical restraints and time pressure prevented the discussions to cover more specific or country-based issues. Surprisingly there was a desk officer for Croatia who was open for dialogue, helpful, provided her e-mail address and immediately after the visit she informed the Croatian Ministry for Education about it. Among the three DGs the DG Regional Policy had the least popular since there were long and diplomatic talks without mentioning any specific information, only general remarks were presented. However all the issues of NGOs were presented, but it can not be judged whether they were supportive or not. Unfortunately the Bulgarian group had less chance for discussion as the person in charge had left earlier without warning them about it beforehand.

The visit at EEB was not completely satisfactory as the presentation was not really clear and the whole meeting was not well structured. Not more than general issues were discussed, there were not special topics related to agricultural policy and linkages with other policies. They looked weaker than the WWF and FoEE and they missed to give the participants some advice how to present themselves in front of the EU Commission. It turned out that the Romanian group has already been familiar with its working methods subsequently this meeting was not exciting for them. On the other hand for the Croatians it was a good experience as they did not know this organization before. Hearing of efficient methods of linking organizations from different levels such as local and national, European and international sound interesting for them as well as the useful advices on how to make the Commission listen to the NGOs' voice.

One of the most favourable meetings were the one with WWF and FoEE (together in 1 meeting). Both of them were helpful, their well-prepared presentations and messages were clear for everyone. Stephanie's presentation was useful in order to understand tools in lobbying and tactics of lobbying in Brussels. This meeting was helpful preparation for the following appointments – DGs. Hearing and seeing that there is a good co-operation between the two organizations was nice.

Around the appointments with the permanent representations there were some misunderstandings. The Bulgarian representation has not updated their contact details which caused delay and meeting another person who was not fully prepared. He did not give much of information of what is happening with the Regional OP but draw some expected deadlines which were later confirmed during other meetings. On the contrary the Romanians met well-

prepared permanent representatives, who have shown openness for the future co-operation and willingness to support NGO initiatives or to facilitate contacts with national authorities.

During the other part of the study visit – in the Netherlands, Meierij – people were mostly interested in seeing good examples for using EU funds in sustainable way and the Croatians especially were eager to learn about practice and implementation of the Leader programme.

During Thursday the less popular project was the Open Air Theatre as it was not in a good condition subsequently did not serve as a good example, but at any rate it was an interesting idea for nature conservation awareness. The other less favoured project was the Residential Area Haverleij, which was rather a social than environmental experiment, hardly applicable to the East-European countries. The buildings were too artificial and it has a lack of services made it rather more contradictory.

The participants at the family Oomen was welcomed, everybody was wondering about how those loads of work can be done by the family themselves on the one hand, and on the other hand they thought it to be a good example of co-operation between farmer and an NGO. Visiting the 4 nature sites in or near Kampina led by Franz Kapteijns was by far the best one. Exhaustive explanation of all details was given, each question was answered adequately. The social project for youth impressed everybody and all wondered for themselves that how it would be possible to work this concept out in their own regions. The last presentation about regional branding given by Frans van Beerendonk sounded interesting and people were enquired about this topic.

On Friday the Orchard Wielewaal was a good starting point, as it was a good combination of environmental friendly farming and marketing strategies. Moreover all of the side activities were harmonized with the general concept of the farm.

The Spelt project was a complex one as there were several people and links involved in this chain project. For example the grower, the bakery, the brewery and the preparing and serving of the lunch at a traditional house where food and beer made of spelt was offered. The field of spelt did not impress the group so much, but the process and products made of it was impressive.

Ecoduct is the case of correcting earlier committed sins. Although opinions about the ecoduct were mostly positive, the price did not correspond to the environmental value it had - according to the group's opinion.

The presentation of the “head” of Boxtel about the “money machine” seemed quite interesting but was not presented very clearly. Impressive idea and collective action, but it will not work unless there are big numbers involved and without an influential person to convince business sectors to invest. Furthermore, the image was not so clear about the finality of the total fund and the type of projects that would be targeted on.

The day was closed in a perfect restaurant with a friendly cook, who was the owner. The concept of integration of regional brands in high quality food was a wonderful example of cooperation between business and producers. It was a nice “treat”.

The biking tour took place on Saturday, on a pleasant sunny day. The first destination was the Kanaalzone Project, guided by Karen Ammerlaan. The group enjoyed her presentation as it was valuable that Ms. Ammerlaan was not omitting the problems and the disagreements that happen with the execution of the project, but was addressing them with understanding and without losing focus on the goals. Nice colourful hand-outs helped in comprehension.

Jan Robben's strawberry farm was a pretty good example of how to add value to the products. It is a good project, adapted to local conditions, cooperating with other regional producers and finding out innovative strategies for marketing.

The Spoordonks Watermill was a Leader+ project, a good idea for linking private and community interests. Finally the idea of the "Village Development Plans" presented by Ed Kooger was interesting and directly applicable in the Croatian participants work. Unfortunately Mr. Kooger could not keep the attention for a long time, maybe it was due to his English, but it was nice of him trying to tell it by himself rather than using interpreter.

Eventually the study visit has provided useful and applicable information, practices, hopefully, and all the participants enjoyed the time spent within the "international" group.

Resource Documents

1. Reports from the Participants
 - Bulgaria (18 pages)
 - Croatia (1 page)
 - Romania (5 pages)
2. Background Information About the Study Visit in Brussels (17 pages)
3. Visit in the Brabant Area (19 pages)
4. whole programme (4 pages)

(They are available upon request from Milieukontakt and from the Bulgarian, Croatian and Romanian participants)

List of the Participants:

Bulgaria:

Lora Sarkisyan - Open Society Club, Russe

lora@oscrousse.org

Iliyan Iliiev - PESCD- Public Environmental Center for Sustainable Development

pecsd@net-bg.net

Georgy Milkov - National Coalition for Monitoring of EU Funds

gmilkoff@yahoo.com

Donka Kalcheva - Bluelink Foundation

doni@bluelink.net

Croatia :

Mirela Despotovic - Centre for Civil Initiatives

cci@zg.t-com.hr

Visnja Jelic Muck – ODRAZ

visnja@odraz.hr

Romania:

Laszlo Ambrus - Green Agora

laca@green-agera.ro

Zoltan Haidu - Focus Eco Center

zhajdu@focuseco.ro

Claudia Jianu - Terra Mileniul III

Claudia.jianu@terraiii.ngo.ro

The Netherlands :

Paul Kosterink – Milieukontakt Oost-Europa

p.kosterink@milieukontakt.nl

Marien Sonneveld

mgsonneveld@hetnet.nl