



STRATEGIES FOR
SUCCESSFUL COMMUNICATION
OF SUSTAINABILITY IN EUROPE

HANDOUT FOR VOLUNTARY WORK

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Conditions and support for voluntary work

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The summary should help initiatives and organizations from the partner countries to strengthen voluntary engagement (especially in the area of sustainable development). Starting from the urgent necessity of voluntary engagement for sustainable development, this summary first of all explains how engagement can be created in times of change, who engages him or herself voluntary and which circumstances and what problems can be identified, based on the experiences of the organizations involved in creating this handout. Afterwards, the possibilities and limits of strengthening voluntary engagement, and which external factors appear to be necessary for strengthening voluntary engagement, should be clarified and reviewed at different levels.

0. Voluntary Engagement and Sustainable Development

Sustainable development is a social process of learning, communicating and structuralizing society, which can only function if many actors engage in it by contributing their thoughts and ideas (Rieckmann 2006). Already in the environmental world summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 local engagement in the sense of a "Local Agenda 21" was identified as a decisive success factor for a sustainable development of our societies, which needs to be developed and strengthened. A strongly engaged civil society is both motor for sustainable development coming from the basis of society and implementer of global and national sustainability strategies. Europe has adopted sustainability strategies at all levels. To implement this, not only all levels of administration are needed, but also citizens and entrepreneurs. The participation of the citizens plays an important

role. The lack of social cohesion and the decline of welfare among the EU countries however represent a special challenge. Against this background, sustainability strategies and the subject of sustainability in general encounter, especially in economic weaker countries, social disinterest or social rejection. For the implementation of sustainability strategies, participation of citizens at European, national and local level, is indispensable.

It is important to communicate that the implementation of sustainability strategies are first and above all for them. The citizens are the main actors who will benefit from a sustainable development. If the stress is upon citizen's welfare, even citizens in economic weaker situations can more easily be motivated to volunteer. Sustainable development can only be successful if a strong civil society including many voluntarily engaged participants exists. In this context, different forms of voluntary engagement are possible: from voluntary work in an organization to voluntary participation in concrete projects and actions, up to the participation in political decision-making processes.

1. Starting point

a) Engagement in transformation times

The culture of voluntary engagement in Central Eastern Europe is directly connected to the history of the different countries after the end of World War II.

After the end of World War II, Hungary and Poland were occupied by the Soviet Union. These two countries, that had always followed the European-democratic tradition, suddenly belonged to the Soviet block. This statement goes even further relating the Baltic countries, which belonged directly to the Soviet Union. The treaties of Jalta and Potsdam sealed this membership. The whole state structure of these satellite countries was oriented to the Soviet-Stalinist dictatorship. The situation in Czechoslovakia was different, which while belonging to the same block had majority votes for the communist party, but not the Stalinist system. (Cf. Thunecke 2006).

The economic structure of Poland and Hungary was agrarian, but they were subjected to forced industrialization by the Stalinist system. This led to a complete destruction of their economy and, especially in Poland, to massive provision crises. Hungary tried to implement reforms starting in 1953. But the reforms fell victim to the internal fights for power and were cancelled in 1955. Along with the provision crisis came an elite crisis. After Stalin's death, power struggles within the Russian communist party and within the satellite countries began. With the secret speech on the

20th party convention in 1956, Chrushev made Stalin's crimes known. With the "Chrushev Thaw" the intellectuals regained courage and began to organize themselves. Debate rounds like for instance the Petöfi-club in Hungary emerged. (Cf. *ibid*). At the same time small groups of dissidents tried to establish forms of social self-determination in the CSSR, a numerically bigger and socially stronger opposition was established in Poland, which was especially supported by resources of the traditionally strong Roman Catholic church (cf Behrends in 2006). In the CSSR, the reform movements of the 1960's, that found their summit during the Prague Spring, were strongly influenced by internal party reforms and not, like in other countries, by the intellectual opposition.

A multitude of uprisings and revolutionary attempts were suppressed by the Soviet Union in different countries, some of them causing a lot of bloodshed. Nevertheless people from almost all countries who longed for change participated. After falling into resignation after the "Prague spring" in 1968, a civil rights movement emerged in the Czech Republic in 1977 with the "Charter 77" led by Vaclav Havel, that called for political action and brought about the political change at the end of the 80's. In Poland, the foundation of the labour union Solidarność led by Lech Wałęsa strengthened the opposition movement in the years 1980/81, which was then suppressed by martial law. This movement continued existing underground. It was the precursor of the revolutionary events of 1989, that took hold of all the Soviet block countries. In Lithuania, the independence movement "Sajudis", founded in 1987, and many individuals engaged in peaceful demonstrations of the "singing revolution", not only in Lithuania, but also in Latvia and Estonia. In Romania, many people were mobilized during the uprisings of Timisoara and Bucharest. In Slovenia, the growing discontent with the leadership in Belgrade during the 1980's disembugued in the declaration of independence, whereas the driving force behind it was rather a political elite than a citizen movement. In Bulgaria, the changes were mainly initiated by the US-Embassy, the revolution therefore being organized more from outside than from within the country.

Altogether a notable civil society potential could be mobilized in Central Eastern Europe to change their own society from the basis, even if the type and the dimension of participation differed a lot. However this did not lead to a strong civil society after the political change. This can be explained partly by the fact that in the opposition movements, even if many people were involved, the real responsible persons were to be found among the elite structures. Moreover, the opposition movement was strongly influenced by moral. The aim was to reconstruct an authentic public, which was not deformed by the ruling structures and a citizen's society directed to common welfare (cf. Thaa 2004). There was hope that a new form of democracy would develop which would grow from civil society (cf. *ibid*). The opposing moral civil society under the communist

domination was able to offer an identity as collective antipode, in the real society of post-communist countries this identity was however lost (cf. *ibid*). In this context, the missing common opponent as a decisive integration factor represented a huge problem. Contested by many intellectuals a political differentiation process began after the political change in which the umbrella organizations of the opposition broke up or lost their original character (cf. Thaa 2004). In addition, a strong civil society appears less and less functional to establish economy reforms or for the construction of a pluralistic party system.

In place of the rather ethical notion of a civil society, activities of the non-government organizations that are pragmatically oriented has appeared (cf. Behrends 2006). Today, the engagement of citizens is rather low. In place of the social values propagated by the anticommunist opposition rather nationalistic and fundamentalist positions have been established, which can partly be explained by the toll left by many decades of dictatorship (cf. Behrends 2006). Many people have never learned how to become active on their own behalf and how to defend voluntarily their own interests and the interest of society. Decades of cultivating compulsory engagement in civil society activities constrain it nowadays. In many cases a critical social and economic situation are also impeding factors to engage in civil society organizations, as other and more pressing problems are in the foreground. On the other hand the social pressure of suffering has decreased significantly with the end of dictatorship, often too far to make social engagement seem necessary and worthwhile.

b) Who engages him/herself voluntarily in Central and Eastern Europe and under which circumstances?

Who engages voluntarily in Central and Eastern European countries and under which circumstances varies quite a bit. Nevertheless some trends can be made out taking into account the experiences of the project partners. For example the engagement on municipal level is stronger (e.g. Lithuania, Estonia) if there is a relation to the personal life situation or the person engaged, the engagement in NGOs on the other hand is comparatively lower. The engagement in political associations seems to be especially difficult since the experiences from the communist times lead to a weak will to get engaged politically. However, for example in the Czech Republic the activities of the “Local Agenda 21” are seen as not especially political, therefore finding more encouragement and more voluntary engagement among the population (also in Slovenia), whereas in Poland the engagement in ecological or “LA 21” subjects is rather seen with scepticism. If we look at the age groups that engage, there are two large groups of actors. One is

composed by children and students, the other by senior citizens. For the young ones environmental protection aspects are often not in the foreground for their voluntary engagement, but rather other factors such as to make something happen in the place they live, to have fun engaging in common activities or to get engaged as a type of qualification (studying). Among the senior citizens there are many who want to contribute to society with their newly won free time for different personal reasons, on the other hand there are also frequently failed politicians in this age group, who want to gain influence with their social engagement (e. g. Lithuania and Romania). In some countries (e. g. Bulgaria) foreign volunteers are strongly involved, because the costs for them are covered by European and international support programmes. The absence of at least a small economic compensation constitutes a hurdle for many people. Altogether civil society culture of voluntary engagement in Central and Eastern Europe is not strongly developed. On the other side, in Central and Eastern Europe, a large part of the NGO-work cannot function without voluntarily workers.

As important factors for voluntary engagement we can point out that people get involved if they have a strong personal relation with the activities, if their engagement helps them to engage in new social relations and if one can present practical activities and clear tasks to them , so that a corresponding sense of achievement is attained.

c) What problems are identified by the partners?

The project partners identified the close historic relation between voluntary activity and the communist culture before the political turn in 1990 in the Central and Eastern European states as the biggest obstacle for voluntary engagement. Many people that were raised during socialist times transfer their experience with the forced voluntariness to the contemporary situation and rather feel societal pressure than individual drive to become active. During the time of transformation from socialism to capitalism, individualisation was often in the foreground and people retreated into the private sphere as a response to the experiences of collectivization. Their main aim is oriented towards personal advancement which is measured by economic efficiency norms. That is why there is not much space left for social engagement. Political engagement has an even worse standing, as it is not seen as a means to form society, but rather as a business dealing mostly with power instead of content.

A further obstacle to voluntary activities in Central and Eastern Europe is the economic situation of the people. The same holds true for Western Europe, where voluntary work is often closely related to another occupation that serves to cover living expenses. In Eastern Europe, this factor plays a

much bigger role, because of the comparatively difficult economic situation. Only those persons that possess a minimum of maintenance security can engage in voluntary activities while all others need to get some kind of allowance in return. The problem is that many organisations cannot pay such an allowance. Linked to this a special challenge is to integrate people in economic weaker situation in sustainable development and to communicate that sustainability can be implemented in everyday life even without major material resources.

Another very important factor is time. Usually people who work 8-10 hours a day rather go home and rest (weekends as well) then go to an activity to help out. Without proper motivation, these citizens will never be volunteers.

Moreover, many organisations face the challenge of integrating volunteers into the daily work of the organisation and to motivate them on a long-term basis. As elsewhere, in Central and Eastern Europe, short-term, project-bound activities are preferred among the volunteers to long-term memberships and engagement. In addition, low qualifications and professional capabilities complicate the integration of single organisations beyond the local area. Another problem is the self-image of the volunteers. Even persons that have a lot of responsibility see their role and activities often as very non-binding.

2. The potentials and limits of promoting voluntary activities on different levels

Voluntary activities can be promoted on different levels, as for example in towns, cities, businesses and NGOs. The following chapter identifies the starting points as well as existing limits of voluntary engagement for these four examples (with a special view on sustainable development).

a) Small towns/villages

Small towns, i.e. villages are an excellent point of reference for civil engagement and activity, as they represent a direct reference level to their inhabitants. The quality of life in lively villages is usually higher, due to jointly organised cultural activities or a jointly created infrastructure. Small initiatives as well as the programme “Local Agenda 21” enable people in rural areas to get active and participate in the design of their environment. The precondition for such activities is, of course, the structural possibility of such approaches. Unfortunately, there are many old villages,

where the dominance of old established structures and hierarchies slows down the activity of the villages. Thus the fear and the danger of social exclusion following the presentation of new ideas are much bigger than in cities. Nevertheless, these familiar structures, typical for rural areas, can be at the same time a motor for activity and engagement. A good example is the movement of Estonian villages that has grown in the last years.

In small villages once you get under people's skin, is easier to motivate them because they think in a different way. Once somebody volunteers and the action turns out to have some echo in the mass media, the others will be willing to join next time either because they want to be parts of the action or just ashamed that the others helped and he/she did not.

b) Big towns/ cities

The main advantage for the promotion of voluntary activities in cities is that there are many different actors living together in a relatively narrow space. All of them can be integrated in project design and implementation. Active citizens have good possibilities to cooperate, for example with the city council, NGOs, the economic sector, schools, universities and other research institutions. In this way they are able to integrate different perspectives. The advantage of urban areas is that you have a wide variety of people in a concentrated area: institutes, companies, schools, etc. Furthermore, the urban anonymity facilitates to experiment with new forms of participation without fearing any social exclusion. In urban areas it is possible to organise a plurality of individual activities that connect to the different necessities and capabilities of the voluntary worker. The city of Lüneburg, for example, was able to bring together a multitude of different urban actors to one table in a sustainability council, to jointly initiate and implement projects on climate protection, sustainable consumption, etc. A precondition for the success of strategies like this one, which is a perfect example of civic engagement, is a basic openness of all participants to the subject of sustainable development, however this is still missing in many countries in Eastern Europe. Therefore it is important to get in touch with people on a very simple level without confronting them with too complex structures. In addition, alternative possibilities of action that can serve as orientation guides have to be formulated. And of course in urban areas as well you need to offer/show some concrete benefits to people to realize that it is worth getting engaged.

c) NGOs

Most Non-Governmental-Organisations, as for example associations, foundations and free initiatives, are built on the work of many voluntary workers that get active. This is why it is mainly this sector, which depends strongly on the strengthening of voluntary engagement. There are many forms of NGOs working on many different subjects. The pre-conditions in certain countries and the purpose of the organisation determine which role the NGOs play, whether they can cooperate with governmental institutions or whether they are seen as a certain antipode to state actors. On the one hand, a very radical mode of operation, as for example the one of Greenpeace, is an advantage whenever public activities are planned or voluntary workers plan to engage professionally or for longer periods. On the other hand, a cooperative mode of operation is always useful, when many different, not specifically trained volunteers get active in a very broad field of work. Due to their know-how, many NGOs represent initiators and motors of change and offer practical starting points to people that want to become active. However, one has to consider the possible tension that can arise between voluntary and paid activities as well as the usefulness of a volunteer in certain positions of an organisation. Especially for small organisations it often is a big challenge to provide continuous possibilities for volunteers to be involved. A proper management is needed not to lose the volunteers.

d) Economic Sector

A different form of voluntary engagement is voluntary activity in economic enterprises for the sake of society or sustainability. On the one hand, there are enterprises whose purpose is related to sustainability, as for instance operators of wind energy plants or providers of ecological food. On the other hand, there are enterprises that, besides their conventional activity, become active in favour of societal concerns. In this respect, the development and dissemination of the Corporate-Social-Responsibility-Concept are of importance. The concept seeks to strengthen the social responsibility of enterprises and finds more and more supporters also in Central and Eastern Europe. One can refer to the Czech Business Leaders Forum or the Polish Responsible Business Forum as examples, but one has to acknowledge that both projects aim at the social dimension rather than at the sustainable dimension of engagement.

Furthermore, enterprises can serve as potential strategic partners for other civil society actors. This is especially useful in the field of sustainable development, because enterprises in rural areas compared to other actors possess a larger amount of resources and publicity.

3. Preconditions that strengthen voluntary engagement for sustainable development

a) What politics have to do to encourage people to become active?

There are many legal and organisational preconditions that are of high importance to render voluntary engagement possible. This paragraph explains some of them in detail.

Firstly, for engagement and participation in political decision-making processes, as for example in the frame of the “Local Agenda 21” or in other communal areas, transparent participation procedures in politics are necessary. One can often encounter the problem that real participation exists only on paper. Politicians listen to the ideas and concepts of an active citizenry but seldom allow them to enter the real political decision-making process. Yet, to strengthen the participation of citizens, a real form of participation in the decisions is needed. Although integration of citizens in the decision-making process always implies a loss of competencies for the political decision-makers, in the long run it is the only way to motivate people to engage voluntarily.

Secondly, to strengthen voluntary activities in associations and initiatives, adequate political preconditions have to be created not only on a national level but also on European level. A significant improvement would be, for instance, the recognition of voluntary work as own contributions in applications for project funding, as some financiers actually already do (GEF SGP1). In this way, one would upgrade the value of voluntary engagement and disburden applying organisations. In addition, with respect to the financial support of NGOs, there exists the problem of quasi-NGOs. Quasi-NGOs are also called governmental non-governmental organisations, because they are mostly established by political elites, who want to profit from the NGOs rights to public funding without providing for any real work. One has to find mechanisms inhibiting these practices and by this support those NGOs having a real thematic purpose.

Furthermore, the establishment of volunteers’ agencies, that already exist e.g. in the Czech Republic, is a good possibility to bring together citizens that want to get active and organisations searching for volunteers in order to accomplish certain tasks or realise certain projects.

To encourage more people to follow a voluntary activity, it has to be possible to engage on a voluntary basis while earning one’s living at the same time. Flexible working hours or part-time work as well as a public insurance protection for volunteers can serve to facilitate a combination of work, voluntary activity and family life. In addition, depending on the specific social systems of the regions, one can try to convince people who are temporarily unemployed to engage voluntarily by promising them higher social benefits.

b) What has to be done within the organisation: managing volunteers

¹ Global Environmental Facility – Small Grants Programme

Many things can also be done within the organisation to strengthen voluntary engagement. A crucial aspect is the introduction of a well-thought volunteer management that plans, organises and coordinates all voluntary activities within an organisation. Which person can play what part should be the leading question when integrating voluntary workers into the daily work of the organisation. To find a decent answer, it is important to reach consensus between the necessities of the organisation and the demands of the volunteers. It is not always easy to find a concrete task for someone willing to get actively involved. A clear definition of the volunteer's work position as a position analogous to normal positions, including its scope and its limits, might be very useful for the volunteer him/herself as well as for the organisation. In this way, it is clear to everyone, even for outsiders, what is sought for and which tasks should be done. Some countries have even developed a real culture of volunteerism, where organisations announce jobs for volunteers publicly and invite volunteers for job interviews. In any case, it is indispensable that both parties get to know each other and have the chance to see, whether they get along on a professional and personal basis. Moreover, volunteers usually appreciate having a mentor within the organisation, on whom they can always pose any arising questions. Especially when the organisation has many volunteers, it is important to accompany the volunteers and to find out their main motivation factors, in order to secure their long-term stay with the organisation. A volunteer manager or a central mentor can facilitate this. As voluntary work is not financially rewarded, one has to offer alternative forms of appreciation for the volunteer's work.

To keep conflicts between employees and volunteers as small as possible, one should integrate all employees into the planning and the development of the volunteers' culture and keep the dividing line between the working fields of the two parties very clear. In this context, the organisation also has to tackle the question, whether voluntary work leads to fewer real jobs. Another problem for the organisations is the trend towards short-term, project linked voluntary work away from long-term continuous involvement. Thus, it is necessary to define different tasks very clearly in order to make short-term engagement possible. Volunteers should not have to work under pressure or feel dependent but have the opportunity to quit anytime. As this bears the danger of low continuity, organisations should try to build up a pool of persons that all have their own specific capabilities and can be asked for help in certain moments.

Yet, in total "volunteers management" should not eclipse the organisation's work as regards its actual purpose. Moreover, one has to mention that the term "volunteers management" might also discourage volunteers, due to its economic origin.

- c) finding adequate solutions

If the self-organised opposition at times of socialism is taken as the main point of reference for the contemporary debate on civil society, one has to face the question, how experiences of self-organisation at that time had an impact on the further development of civil society in these countries. It seems reasonable to widen the supporting circle of civil society, include the main supporters of the civil movements in times of socialism, who are often found in the societal elite, promote youth voluntary activities, and mobilise new people.

The role of civil society in a specific country deserves special attention. Voluntary activities, the strengthening of neighbourhood cooperation structures and non-profit projects are a significant social contribution. They create social spaces, where people can play a role in designing their environment and form the society. At the same time, there are voices that use the propaganda of a strong civil society to justify the retreat of the state from its traditional tasks and responsibilities. But civic engagement and state aid should be seen as complementary items, and not as mutually exclusive. While some countries lack a certain level of state aid, the citizens of other countries may wish to regulate more things without state intervention. The relation between state, market and civil society has to be defined and designed always on individual country-specific characteristics.

As the initial conditions in various countries are very different, the recommendations exposed in this paper do not fit all situations but they can serve as a stimulus to rethink political and practical dimensions of strengthening voluntary engagement and as a guide to design own working strategies.