

NON-GOVERNMENTAL INITIATIVES FOR COASTAL PARTICIPATION AND COMMUNICATION DEVELOPMENT

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The concept of sustainable development involves the necessity to engage various stakeholders into planning and decision making processes. While legislative framework provides several tools and opportunities for public participation, there are several bottlenecks that can prevent NGOs from using these opportunities efficiently enough and thus communication links and practices are of crucial importance and need to be considered carefully. Moreover in many cases public pressure through various NGO initiatives in the field of environmental communication, public awareness raising campaigns and direct actions is a key driving force that facilitates changes.

Considering the interconnections of broader socio-economic trends, national regulative framework and local development in coastal areas similarly NGO initiatives are focused both on local and national levels. The necessity to balance preservation of valuable habitats in coastal protected strip with increased tourism stresses the crucial role of bottom-up approach through direct local level actions and equally highlights the need to facilitate changes in the overall situation of policy framework in respective area.

The author reviews a case study on coastal patrols describing various angles of public participation and factors influencing efficiency of participation and assesses the communication practices used to ensure sustainability of results achieved. Based on lessons learned the author draws key conclusions at the end of the paper.

INTRODUCTION

Coastal strip in the length of almost 500 km is of high environmental value and also cultural importance in Latvia. The diversity of natural habitats is valuable asset of the Baltic Sea region and Europe. The cultural heritage of coastal communities has been recognized as highly valuable also by UNESCO. Since regaining of Latvia's independence both nature and culture uniqueness of the coast has been continuously endangered due to the insufficient state control over implementation of environmental legislation (Safeguarding Coastal Culture, 2005). Even if enforced, legislative acts didn't always provide sufficient guarantee for protection of natural habitats and prevent crimes against the nature. On the other hand low environmental awareness of the public can be considered as a serious threat to the sustainability of coastal areas. The rising tourism adds other threats. Tourism infrastructure as hotels, camping sites, holiday villages and

marinas are being built. Leisure activities are increasing quickly, many of them threatening sensitive habitats and species if carried out in the 'wrong' places.

We can often observe that local decision makers lack vision of the ways how to balance economic development interests with the need to protect nature. Through public participation NGOs have important role to play to facilitate integration of environmental interests in various decisions and strategies.

1. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION ON LOCAL LEVEL AND SUSTAINABILITY OF RESULTS

There is a perception that activities on ground or local level can be more efficient as they are aimed to ensure local relevance of decisions and policies. The chain of causes and impacts is rather short and possible solutions are clearly identifiable. NGOs can use local knowledge, their experience and provide useful contribution in achieving changes and solving environmental problems, designing of certain projects or local level development plans (Ewing, 2003). However a single case that came to attention of environmental NGO working on local level can turn out to be the outcome of some cross-cutting issues i.e. consequences of bad designed national policy or broad socio-economic trends. Even a single case can involve many diverse angles of certain environmental problem. The case can be a good tool for highlighting deficiencies in implementation of sector policies, environmental legislation or contradictory nature of particular legal act.

In a democratic society formal and non-formal public participation on various levels facilitates necessary changes. Public participation can be characterized as:

- reactive;
- proactive.

While from theoretical perspective proactive approach is considered to be more effective and far reaching, author underlines that reactive approach prevails when NGOs in Latvia try to respond to certain cases and deal with environmental issues. While problematic cases create ground for ad-hoc initiatives of NGOs, one should distinguish between reactive responses on local and national levels as they differ in terms of target groups, methods used etc. If an issue of local importance creates strong frustration among local individuals or public in broader sense, it serves as ground for civil initiatives of

affected individuals or those who share concerns about the issue. However local issues can also reflect national or even international problems.

One of essential ways to make changes happen and prevent similar problematic cases from happening in the future is explore proactive approach through ensuring participatory decision making process. Public involvement should be ensured in all four stages of decision making process applying both to projects, as well as spatial plans and land-use plans (Building Capacity..., 1996):

- planning;
- implementation;
- sharing of benefits;
- evaluation.

Similarly split of various types of decisions should be made here. Some of the decisions are purely of local nature and taken by local governments, while others such as legislation acts or policy planning documents affecting development on local level are elaborated and approved by national authorities. The interactions between these levels need to be considered as local governments may provide useful assistance to national and international agencies to understand the local point of view and vice versa. Moreover the local issues may also involve international scope through international commitments made by national governments.

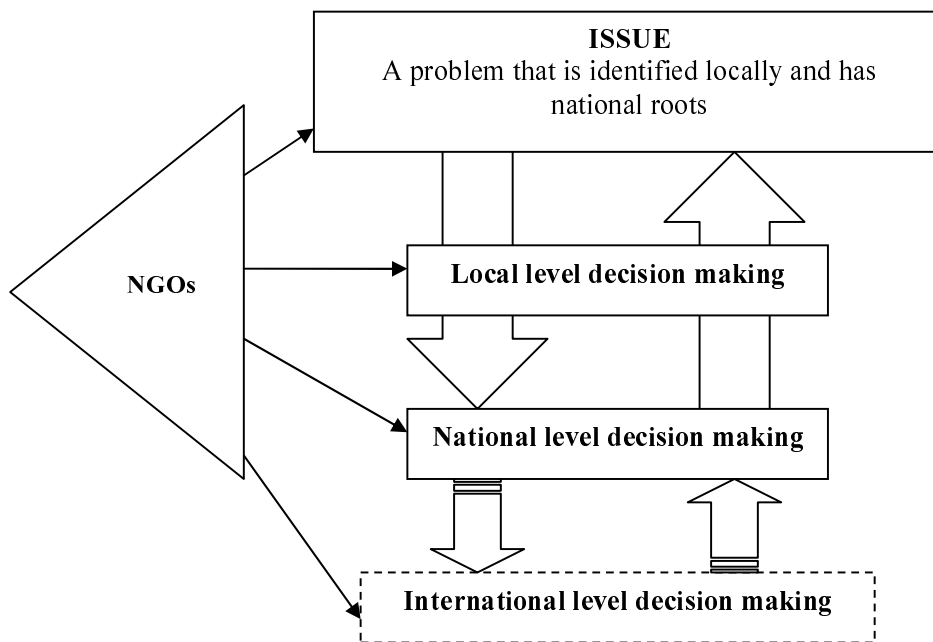


Fig. 1. Schematic chain of analysis of impacts and causes and finding solutions

In practice the cases that are of local importance often are brought to public attention through voluntary citizen action groups or so called single issue NGOs that are established to deal just with this issue. After the issue is solved and the case is closed, usually the NGO or initiative group of citizens dissolves if there is no other urgent local issue of similar nature to be solved. Even if the NGO continues its activities, they are focused mostly on other local issues and there is no follow-up activities done to prevent similar cases to happen in other places. This situation underlines the role of umbrella NGOs and NGOs working on national level in general as their role should be to use these single cases to advocate for the need of changes in the national policies or legislation. It also highlights the need to ensure tight cooperation and communication between local groups and NGOs dealing with policy issues.

In this paper author reviews two approaches:

- **Solving the issue through direct actions and pressure.** This approach has deep local roots when the issue becomes visible in the form of environmental problem. Public participation often comprises non-formal participation tools and can even include the use of semi legal tools. Activities often start spontaneously and can be performed both by local NGOs or informal citizen groups who feel personally

engaged in the case and by NGOs working on national level. Since this approach is based on the fight with consequences of bad policy or inefficient implementation of legal acts, it can transform into work on the policy level. This approach can be classified as reactive participation.

- **Applying precautionary principle and preventing negative impacts and issues from appearing.** This approach is in guiding principles of environmental impact assessments of certain projects and strategic environmental impact assessment of the certain planning documents. Both of these procedures envisage public participation when consulting with affected public, NGOs and other stakeholders on possible adverse impacts that may arise during implementation of project or planning document and providing feedback on how public opinion has been taken into account (Public Participation in Environmental Impact Assessment, 2006). Further this approach is also used by NGOs when advocating for the need to change certain national policies or legislation acts. This approach can be classified as proactive participation.

Each approach covers various methods of participation. However from the activity point of view, no strict borders can be drawn between these three approaches and there are often tight linkages between both. When considering the efficiency of public participation, one can think of complex interaction schemes consisting of affected individuals, NGOs, driving forces of participation, available tools and available capacity to use them, the attitude of authorities and interrelation of this issue with other socio-economic processes in respective area or region. Therefore NGOs need to consider key drivers and stakeholder interests influencing decision making process and ensure direct feedback to and from affected groups (Jendroska, Jerzmanski, 1995). Environmental NGOs should also consider themselves as being just one of the stakeholders. Other stakeholders may have different or even opposite interests and the best solution for local development and environment needs to be found in a democratic way.

There are several groups of crucial aspects that influence the efficiency of public participation and these factors will be considered in this paper. Within case studies author highlights following aspects:

- **NGO capacity.** It includes various resources i.e. membership, experience, public image, technical means and financial resources, etc. Author shortly reviews the resources owned by NGOs or a single NGO that can be utilized during public participation process. The capacity needs to be considered when analyzing actual ability to use various participation tools provided through legislation or by authorities themselves.
- **Drivers of participation.** Motivation behind the participation is important as it also gives rough impression of how much of activities a NGO would do, especially if these are voluntary activities. Author also considers that possibility for receiving regular feedback from the affected people or groups and communication with other stakeholders can make significant changes to efficiency of participation. However national NGOs usually care more about general policies affecting environment and they act as advocates of national values and do not have direct links with local people and therefore often face the question “Whom do you represent?”. Different drivers of participation can also lead to the situation when national interests diverge from local ones.
- **Length of cause-impact chain.** This reflects the complexity of certain issue. If the situation can be turned from bad to satisfactory or good by one activity or by taking one decision on local level, then it is more probable that participation can be efficient and lead to desired changes. The longer the chain and more stakeholders are involved, the more efforts are required by NGOs or initiative groups to be efficient and achieve desirable outcome.

2. CASE STUDY: COASTAL PATROLS IN NORTH-KURZEME REGION

The case study reviews activities implemented by local environmental NGO, which organized inspection visits to coastal protected strip in order to prevent violations of environmental restrictions in the coastal dune belt by visitors during tourism season. It also involves many follow-up activities and efforts to influence national legislation as well as facilitate cooperation among various stakeholders on national and local level. The

case highlights the practical use and efficiency of formal and non-formal participation methods.

2.1. Background and driving forces

State authorities face difficulties to control and prevent illegal construction activities along the coast and even within coastal protected strip. In addition to that local municipalities and environmental NGOs observe uncontrolled flow of visitors during summer period to the coastal dune area and lack of environmental infrastructure that could help avoiding negative impact of tourists in these areas. There is also a lack of informative signs and billboards along the main roads of Latvian coast that would provide sufficient information to visitors, especially foreign tourists.

The process of increasing visitors' flow to the coast was observed already in early 90s of last century, and it indicates that anthropogenic pressure on coastal areas is increasing. This is worrying as the coastal areas are rich with the habitats both of national and EU importance and without implementation of proper restrictions and control measures, the pressure may cause irreversible damage to these habitats. While there is a Law on Environmental Protection and a Law on Protected Belts, environmental NGOs had often stated that weak enforcement of these legal acts failed to provide sufficient protection of nature within the protected strip in the coastal dunes. The pressures have seasonal character and the impacts are most disturbing during summer period. Thus there are several levels involved in this case – local, national and international.

- **Local level:**

Vulnerable coastal ecosystems, especially the dunes, are often damaged or even destroyed as a result of visitors that violate the prohibition to use motorized means of transport within the coastal dune zone or make fireplaces in the places that are not equipped accordingly. These visitors also often leave rubbish in the nature and therefore not only bring benefit to the local community, but even cause losses and expenditures to clean up the coastal dune zone.

- **National level:**

Coastal dunes have been granted a special protection status under the Act on Protected belts. Nearly half (45 %) of the sea coast has some kind of nature protection status. Protection of natural dunes and careful planning could become an important resource for future development, also within the branches of tourism and recreation. Embarrassing that protection of the coastal zone is under supervision of several ministries.

- **International level:**

Along the Latvian coast with a length of 496 km, 23 habitats that require protection according to the EU Habitats Directive occur and comprise about 90% of the coastal strip. Non-compliance with the requirements of this EU directive could potentially lead to the court case on EU level. Similarly to safeguard coastal ecosystems in the Baltic Sea the HELCOM Working group on nature conservation has elaborated a recommendation on the 'protection of the coastal strip'. It was passed in 1994 and demands to ensure protection of a coastal strip of at least 100 to 300 m width (from the mean water line). Construction of new buildings, including camping grounds, should not be allowed except when proved overwhelmingly in the public interest and when it is proved that no less sensitive site can be found. In a 'Coastal planning zone' (at least 3 km land-wards from the mean water line) major building development and other major permanent changes in nature and landscape shall be preceded by an appropriate land use plan, incl. environmental impact assessment, approved at least on regional level (Checking coastal conservation, 2004).

The idea about the need of more active involvement of NGOs and environmental activists was caused by the situation when neither state environmental authorities, nor municipalities were capable to ensure proper control of the visitors' flow to the protected coastal strip area, where driving and parking of vehicles were strictly prohibited. The reasons why official bodies could not ensure proper control were various, but among them the lack of technical means, lack of petrol, lack of human resources and restrictions to work during weekends were mostly mentioned. Comparing to these limiting factors environmental NGOs had volunteers that were committed to prevent destruction of valuable natural habitats in the coastal area and could mobilize other activists.

2.2. Characteristics of NGO

The initiative to organize coastal patrols was developed by Talsi Environmental Protection Club (EPC) – a local NGO active in Talsi and in the region of Ziemeļkurzeme. Local NGO that acted mainly on voluntary basis and had several tens of active members used several approaches to highlight the issue and get attention of government and other public institutions. The other direction of activities was rising of environmental awareness of general public (also foreign tourists) through distribution of information, organizing clean-ups and summer camps. The NGO organized discussion meetings with representatives from municipalities and state environmental institutions, proposed several changes to legislation and finally came to the idea about organizing of inspection visits and direct non-violent actions against those who have violated restrictions set by national legislation.

The driving force to undertake activities was strong commitment from Talsu EPC to achieve improvements and contribute to preservation of coastal habitats. In order to succeed the NGO had fundraised to cover basic costs of inspection visits. One of the main supporters was Coalition Clean Baltic (CCB) – an international umbrella organization involving environmental NGOs within Baltic Sea region. Later on CCB produced several reports analyzing the situation of coastal management along the Baltic Sea. Among other supporters following can be listed: Latvian Environmental Protection Fund, Foundation “Ecologia”, private sponsors and own contribution through the voluntary work, technical equipment (a car) and fuel.

2.3. Activities

Talsu EPC started the initiative to carry out voluntary monitoring and on-site controlling activities aimed to ensure *real* implementation of environmental legislation in relation to the protection of coastal dunes. NGO activities of organizing the inspection visits to the places where most of violations took place covered the area where efforts of public administration had not been sufficient. The capacity and financial allocation for the state environmental bodies were insufficient while NGOs through voluntary activities made strong commitment for changing the situation.

In relation to the development of environmental legislation in the mid-90s and later on, more and more tasks emerged for environmental authorities thus preventing

them to put sufficient efforts in monitoring whether requirements about protection of coastal strip were actually implemented in practice. On the other hand access to information and opportunities for public participation gradually increased thus providing good opportunities also for increasing of expertise and capacity of environmental NGOs.

First ad-hoc inspection visits were organized already in the early 90s when volunteers from Talsu EPC checked the protected strip of coastal dunes. Volunteers warned people who were caught with their cars in the restricted area about restrictions in that area. Volunteers also checked whether visitors of the dunes followed the fire safety restrictions and organized their camps in the places where it was allowed. The visits were organized on ad-hoc basis this way reacting to the information about situation in coastal areas that was received from local activists. However during mid-90s these inspection visits were organized using systematic approach and methodology was thought over. Systematic inspection visits were organized from 1996 up to 2003. Coastal patrols were aimed to influence the behaviour of target groups in the medium term at the same time promoting the sustainable solutions in the longer term.

While being busy with organizing of inspection visits, Talsu EPC considered the campaign of coastal patrols just as a part of the set of activities that should lead to sustainable coastal zone management and preservation of valuable habitats. This is why Talsu EPC organized clean-up actions along the coast and involved other NGOs and pupils from the schools all around Talsi district. During clean-ups participants collected the garbage found within the protected coastal strip and also discussed the harmful impact on the nature caused by violating restrictions. This ensured that participants got certain knowledge about coastal habitats, the reasons why coastal dunes had to be protected and acquired motivation not to litter there and in other places. Both the coastal patrols and clean-up actions were largely supported also by local people living in the coastal areas, while the cooperation with local municipalities was not well developed, though gradual improvements could be observed. NGO also developed close cooperation with state environmental authorities asking to allocate money from state budget for erection of billboard along the main coastal road thus providing sufficient information to the visitors about restrictions that apply to the protected strip on the coast.

Key target groups and actors in relation to the initiative of coastal patrols can be divided as follows:

- *environmental NGOs* and their supporters (volunteers) who initiated the idea of coastal patrols;
- *municipalities* whose administrative areas the coastal patrols were organized;
- *visitors* to these areas and potential visitors;
- *media* who reported about the coastal patrols and about broader issues related to sustainable coastal development.

2.4. Participation tools used

Talsu EPC used various tools and different approaches to increase the efficiency of coastal patrols.

2.4.1. Legal tools

When the Law on Environmental Protection was amended and the public environmental inspectors introduced, several volunteers from Talsu EPC passed the exams in order to get the status of public environmental inspectors. This status allowed fixing and documenting the fact of violation and preparing draft statement that was later sent for evaluation to the Regional Environmental Board. Most of the inspection visits were done during weekends paying special attention to the place where most of the violations had been registered beforehand, i.e. in Talsu district these areas where Upesgriva, Mersrags and Valgalciems. In Roja the municipal police also controlled the coastal areas frequently thus decreasing the workload of NGOs. While other self-governments in Ziemeļkurzeme region, i.e. Mersrags and Kolka denied the need to devote more resources in order to preserve the protected strip in coastal dunes and didn't recognize the need for environmental education activities. These activities provided significant contribution to enforcement of environmental legislation.

Talsu EPC used also other legal procedures for influencing national legislation setting frame and conditions for restriction of human activities and protection of nature habitats in the coastal dune zone. This contribution was done through providing comments to draft legislation, initiating and bringing forward discussion about necessary improvements.

2.4.2. Communication

Within coastal patrol campaigns and during inspections the NGO mostly used various communication tools aiming to prevent people to violate restrictions, however also direct action was applied sometimes. Volunteers taking part in the inspections always approached people who had violated restrictions and informed about restrictions referring to legislation and pointing to the fact that they should leave. In several cases NGO volunteers even dug the forest road over preventing violators to leave before they had talked with the public inspectors. The NGO developed good cooperation with local and later on also with national media. During the season several articles about the activities and results of coastal patrols were published in the local newspaper of Talsu district “Talsu Vestis”. Knowing that most of the visitors in Upesgriva, Mersrags and Valgalciems were from Talsi town and its neighbourhoods, this approach turned out to prevent other people from becoming violators. In some cases also the list of plate numbers of the violators’ cars were published in the newspaper, but it appeared to be inefficient approach for achieving of the medium term objective. As a result of systematic inspection visits and cooperation with media, Talsu EPC gained visibility and credibility of their activities within the district.

Based on the results and observations made by Talsu EPC during coastal patrols, CCB published a report on coastal zone management highlighting threats and negative experiences from each of the country around the Baltic Sea. This report was distributed widely across the countries of Baltic Sea region, including international and national authorities and local governments. Though the report reflected NGO concerns, it was broadly discussed and cause difficult questions to national and local decision-makers.

2.5. Results

Coastal patrols brought different results. Within environmental sector following results can be highlighted:

- Increase of environmental awareness of the violators, local inhabitants and people living within Talsi district;
- Decrease of harmful impact on coastal habitats caused by driving with motorized vehicles;

- Decrease of landscape degradation caused by garbage in the beach and within the protected coastal strip.

In the social sector following results are important:

- Development of civil society;
- Increase of the role of NGOs and development of capacity to contribute to sustainable coastal zone management;
- Possible resistance of local level authorities to the activities of local NGO;
- Increase of awareness among different stakeholders about the complex nature of coastal zone management and interactions among different stakeholders.

Coastal patrols also brought indirect positive impacts on development of local economy. The benefits are difficult to measure, but according to observation communication within campaign among key stakeholders promoted implementation of some solutions, i.e. creating the infrastructure for parking places. With the decrease of number of violations, less garbage was littered within coastal strip and thus municipality can decrease the expenditures from the municipal budget that were used for clean-ups and spend money for other environmental initiatives instead. However the visitors that had been caught when they violated restrictions are motivated now to look for places where the infrastructure for parking of cars is developed.

Significant outcome of the coastal patrols is also change of perception and better understanding of the issue among stakeholders – NGOs, municipalities, environmental authorities and visitors. Obviously there are many other factors that contributed to the increase of environmental awareness of public about nature values in the coastal areas, nevertheless the NGO dared to start practical activities and communicate about problems with other stakeholders. There are no easy single solutions that would guarantee win-win scenario in the long-term. Restrictions without proper communication and environmental education do not work in efficient way. Coastal patrols – a control – along with punishments turn to be efficient in combination with communication with visitors and between stakeholders.

The case also underlines that development of proper infrastructure for visitors is essential and the work needs to have a complex approach involving as many stakeholders and decision making levels as possible. Positive experience from past coastal patrol

campaign brought to the situation when there are plans to resume these activities starting from spring of 2007 where again one of the basic elements of coastal patrols would be the use of various communication tools towards visitors of coastal areas.

3. SUMMARY CONCLUSIONS

In this part the author summarizes the linkages, similarities and differences that have impact on the efficiency of participation in both approaches based on the cases reviewed above. The author recognizes following factors as crucial ones for success:

- **Strong commitment to achieve changes.** NGOs or civil society groups need to use all available tools for achieving changes and decreasing of unfavourable impacts. There is a space for creation of public pressure. When dealing with a problem or issue, there are no clear rules set and there is much space for spontaneous activities, direct pressure activities and lobbying and the responsibility of seeking out possibilities for efficient ways of involvement lays with NGOs themselves.
- **Using of communication tools.** Communication proved to be essential element to make the case successful. NGOs need to communicate their concerns, positions and worries to other stakeholders. It includes also communication and cooperation with other environmental NGOs and civil society groups and seeking advises from various experts in the fields of environment and nature protection, cultural heritage, art and history. Permanent cooperation with state environmental authorities thus promoting their active involvement in the process should be also considered as key precondition for success. This experience is now transferred to other national campaigns.
- **Capacity and resources of NGOs.** It covers both credibility to the activities that NGO or civil society group is doing and ability to react quickly to the changes in external circumstances and provide opinion. Number of members, involvement of human and technical resources play crucial role in getting NGO arguments heard.
- **Flexibility in using various participation approaches.** Environmental and sustainability issues involve complex set of stakeholders and their interests. Public participation through various tools enables citizens to gain better understanding and knowledge about the environmental risks and impacts to which they and their communities are exposed. NGOs or civil society groups need to be flexible in using various approaches and swapping between two to ensure long lasting impacts of their

activities. Dealing with one case can involve also policy work on national or even international levels and NGOs need to take these opportunities if necessary.

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