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# Learning from a Participatory Forestry Experience in Bulgaria

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## Introduction

This paper focuses on the lessons learned from an experience in participatory planning for forest management in the Central Rhodope mountains of Bulgaria. Outside institutions interacting with local village communities included Bulgarian conservation NGOs and the Forest Department as well as an international nature conservation agency, the World Wide Fund For Nature (WWF-International). The relative ‘successes’ and ‘failures’ of this community planning process are critically reviewed here, along with the constraints which explain why some of the initial expectations have not yet been met.

## The Context

The conservation work of WWF-International in Bulgaria primarily focuses on the Rhodope mountains, which cover 23% of the country’s mountain area. The international and national conservation values of the Rhodope mountains include a very rich flora and fauna (some 30% of the 732 rare and endangered plant species listed in the Bulgarian Red Data Book are found in the area), and an ancient cultural heritage, long centred around pastoralism. The major forest tree species is the spruce *Picea excelsa*, although the fir *Abies alba* also covers extensive areas. The forests represent a natural habitat for endangered animal species such as the brown bear and the wolf, and the area has Bulgaria’s densest population of birds of prey (including the vulture, *Aegypius monachus*; falcons, *Falco cherrug* and *F. peregrinus*; and the eagle *Aquila chrysaetos*).

To help conserve this area rich in biological and cultural diversity, WWF has supported Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) to develop a concept for a National Park and a conservation strategy for the region. WWF was also asked by

the Bulgarian Society for the Conservation of the Rhodope Mountains (BSCRM) to support local initiatives for conservation and sustainable development in forested areas around Chepalare in the Central Rhodopes.

BSCRM's and WWF's planned activities in the Chepalare area included agroforestry, natural forest management, extractive reserves, ecological agriculture, the development of ecotourism and a conservation education programme. However, while the project documents contained extensive analysis of secondary information and opinions from national and international experts, there was no information on the opinions of the village communities – the stakeholders most directly concerned by the proposals. It was therefore agreed that there was a need to determine the local communities' priorities for development and conservation, and more particularly their views on the linkages between natural resource management and local livelihoods.

A Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) workshop was organised for this purpose in the village of Ostritza, in the central Rhodopes of Bulgaria in June 1993. The ten- day workshop was the first of its kind in Eastern Europe. The primary objectives were to:

- ! Introduce the PRA approach to staff members of the BSCRM and other related NGOs and the government Forest Department in the Central Rhodopes, and train them in basic PRA concepts, principles and methods.
- ! Engage in interactive dialogues, assess local needs and opportunities with the villagers and initiate a participatory village planning process for integrated conservation and development in and around Ostritza.
- ! Extend the community-based planning process to 12 other villages in the Chepalare district in a second phase of the project jointly supported by WWF-International and BSCRM.

This participatory planning for forest management was initiated at a time when the central government had announced its intention to return forest and farm land to the owners who had lost their rights during the collectivisation period (IUCN, 1994). This, combined with the fact that there are few examples of participatory forestry in Europe, presented many new challenges for all the stakeholders: the local communities, the Forest Department and national and international conservation NGOs.

The initial interactive dialogues with the communities during the field work and the village meetings were highly successful in revealing knowledge and issues of importance for the future of Ostritza village and its surrounding environment. This provided initial optimism for extending the PRA process initiated in Ostritza to the 12 other villages in the Chepalare area to facilitate the formulation of natural resource management plans with and by the rural communities – a total human population of 8,000 (including the 5,000 inhabitants of Chepalare). The idea was to build and sustain a community-based network of PRA facilitators and to reproduce, to some extent at least, the kind of participatory and joint forest management currently witnessed in parts of South and South East Asia (Campbell, 1994; Shah and Shah, 1994).

However, these plans did not materialise in the two years following the initial PRA workshop. Only one village community (Ostritza) was ultimately involved in the participatory planning process. Details on the social structure and natural resource endowments of Ostritza, and the linkages between local livelihoods and natural resources may be found in BSCRM and WWF (1995). This article focuses on the reasons for the ‘failure’ in implementing participatory planning and management, in order to enhance the chances of success of similar approaches in the future.

## **Lessons Learned**

The main reasons for the initial PRA and local adaptive planning not being followed up are located at three different levels: outside professionals and organisations, the donor, and government policy.

### **The legacy of top-down planning among Bulgarian professionals and organisations**

#### ***The organisational profile of Bulgarian NGOs***

The three conservation NGOs involved comprised part-time professionals living in distant urban centres. Their profile and type of membership indicate that they are not NGOs experienced in the implementation of eco-development programmes at the village or community level. Their prime focus is raising awareness through environmental education, and they largely believe that all conservation is good for the community. Bulgarian NGOs do not have the grassroots rapport which is considered to exist, for example, in South Asian countries, where several NGOs

have full-time working professionals who have (in some cases) established working relationships with village institutions and village communities (Shah and Shah, 1994). The initial PRA training also revealed many organisational problems and weaknesses, notably a lack of basic managerial skills and of flexibility in the face of change and in handling crises. The NGO staff present clearly had no previous experience of working with local people. Most workshops that they had previously held were usually 2-3 day events without the requisite field-work rigour.

This 'organisational appraisal' highlighted the need for considerable investments in capacity building by WWF-International – the main donor and partner of the Bulgarian conservation NGOs in the Rhodopes – in order to proceed as planned.

### ***Knowledge and cultural factors***

The professionals in the Bulgarian NGOs and Forest Department involved have a strong faith and pride in their scientific knowledge. They genuinely feel that external professionals know best about environmental issues and priorities for conservation and development. As a result, most forestry plans and strategies reflect a strong technical emphasis. This is reinforced by the present high rate of unemployment, which breeds a culture of conformity to discipline rather than innovation.

More generally, the economic environment and the recent political and economic liberalisation in Bulgaria have made professionals look more to Western and external solutions as the panacea to all the problems in their country. This does not encourage Bulgarian professionals to seek indigenous knowledge and learn from rural communities. This was evident during the PRA workshop when the participants were considering technical approaches to afforestation and conservation rather than the methodology of involving local communities and local institutions in managing natural resources and generating options and priorities jointly with them (WWF and BSCRM, 1995).

### ***Hierarchical organisational culture***

The initial PRA training and formulation of the village resource management plans in Ostritza revealed strong authoritarian tendencies among some NGO staff. Older and more influential men with good degrees in forestry or natural sciences showed the most domineering attitudes and behaviour. Claiming superior knowledge, they often exhorted villagers to do this or that for the forest and its associated biodiversity. Moreover, the general political environment in Bulgaria, although

much more open now, was still ambiguous at the time. People found it difficult to decide what was politically correct. This pervasive hierarchical sensibility was perhaps the biggest constraint to the subsequent scaling-up and expansion of the participatory planning process – even though the initial training workshop brought out talented and very sensitive PRA facilitators (usually younger men and women on the NGO staff).

### **The donor's role**

WWF-International's role in funding and offering technical support for forest conservation in Eastern Europe has significantly expanded over the last eight years (WWF, 1995). The work described here was WWF-International's first attempt to support a community-based planning process for forest management in Eastern Europe using participatory methodologies. Insights gained from the PRA experience in Bulgaria threw up new challenges for WWF-International. These were addressed with different degrees of success by its European Programme and senior management.

The sharing of the PRA experience within WWF-International helped correct mistaken views about the local situation and the impact of WWF's previous conservation investments in the Rhodopes region. For example, the WWF was about to present its work in the Rhodopes as a 'model community-based project in conservation and sustainable living' in its 1993 submission to the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development (UNCSD). The learning from the field helped to dispel this kind of institutional self-deception. The description of the Bulgarian project was deleted from the final submission to the CSD (WWF, 1993).

This honest internal assessment of WWF's work with its Bulgarian partners in the Rhodopes also made it clear that the latter needed more training in basic management skills and PRA, with a special emphasis on behaviour, attitudes and principles. Modest funding was also needed to support the NGO staff now capable of facilitating similar participatory learning and action in neighbouring villages. Ultimately, however, WWF was not able to meet the expectations of Bulgarian stakeholders involved in the participatory planning process for the following reasons.

### ***Sectoral orientation and disciplinary specialisation***

The conservation mandate of WWF-International made it difficult for staff to

internalise and/or fund some of the local priorities that only had an indirect or distant link with forest management *per se*. The disciplinary education and training of staff effectively inhibited the integration of the concept of conservation with that of sustainable local livelihoods. Sectoral orientations and professional biases ultimately defined whose knowledge and reality counted in key decision making (see Pimbert and Pretty, 1995 for a more general discussion).

### ***Lack of commitment to the process and lack of accountability***

There was a strong tendency within WWF-International's European programme to view the PRAs as single, isolated events, sufficient in themselves, rather than as a process leading to change. In addition, the sheer pressure of having to manage many conservation projects in several Eastern European countries, the use of rigid logical planning frameworks, and the need to define how – and by whom – things should be done, all made it very difficult for project supervisors to move towards more open-ended procedures, flexible funding and long-term, 'process' objectives that go beyond 'projects' to promote participatory approaches. Lastly, the absence of a code of professional conduct promoting downward accountability to local communities partly explained WWF-International's relative lack of long-term commitment to a participatory process leading to locally negotiated forest management agreements. The adoption of a policy of reciprocal accountability (governments  $\Leftrightarrow$  donor  $\Leftrightarrow$  local communities) by high level management could potentially open possibilities to do things differently in the future. For example, the concept of downward accountability implies shifting more direct control over decision-making and funds to local communities. Local recipients of the funds could then decide what this money should be spent on and by whom. The donor's legitimate demands for accountability could still be met if accountability was framed in terms of long-term process objectives that seek to reconcile conservation with sustainable local livelihoods.

### **The lack of an enabling national policy for decentralised forest management**

When the participatory planning process was initiated (1992-1993), the State of Bulgaria was undertaking land or land use privatisation as part of the change from centrally planned to market economic structures. These highly publicised moves towards policy reforms took place in a dynamic context of uncertainty, in which land values were unknown against the political agenda of land restitution. Despite this lack of clarity over legal frameworks for future forest management, local

communities, the Chepalare regional headquarters of the Forest Department, the international donor and its national NGO partners all looked forward to new opportunities for the country's land use practices. During the village level interactive dialogues, for example, local community members were confident in openly criticising national forest policies and were actively planning for change.

By the end of 1994, however, this initial climate of hope and optimism was replaced by growing doubt over the government's willingness and ability to undertake these land reforms in the Chepalare district. The uncertainties associated with this shifting national policy context ultimately played an important role in limiting the spread of local level planning for forest management to other villages.

## **Conclusions**

This brief analysis of a Bulgarian experience in participatory forestry may help others working in similar contexts to do better in the future. National forest policy was clearly an important constraint to the implementation of more decentralised, participatory forest management in the Central Rhodopes. For local communities, the granting of secure rights of ownership or usufruct over land and/or forest was, and remains, an important prerequisite to developing joint forest management agreements with external agencies. However, future success will also depend on overcoming the professional and institutional challenges identified in partner NGOs – should the national policy environment become more enabling in Bulgaria.

## **Acronyms**

BSCRM	Bulgarian Society for the Conservation of the Rhodope Mountains
PRA	Participatory Rural Appraisal
WWF	World Wide Fund for Nature

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