

**The Varbitsa River Watershed Council (Bulgaria):
Outcomes of NGO involvement at the local level in an ethnically
mixed, environmentally degrading and impoverished mountain region in
Bulgaria**

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Centre for Social Practices – Sofia

Associate Professor Evgenii Dainov – Chairman

Maria Pancheva – Executive Director

The Centre for Social Practices (CSP) was set up by civil society activists in 1994 with the express intention of working towards citizen empowerment in a post-totalitarian situation. One of the more durable lines of work since then has proven the problematic of community involvement in the decision-making regarding rivers (their defence against degrading interference, resolution of conflicts arising out of access to water issues, river enhancement and development in the framework of sustainable development).

Since 1998 the CSP, in partnership with local non-government organisations (NGOs), local authorities and regional media, has been involved in setting up and supporting Bulgaria's first Watershed Council along the Varbitsa river (tributary to the Arda in the south of the country bordering Greece and Turkey). Since 2001 the CSP, together with staff from the Ministry of Environment, has been building on the experience in order to structure the most citizen-friendly and efficient decision-making mechanisms and statutes for Bulgaria's coming national network of Watershed Councils under the Water Law (2000) and the EU Water Directive 2000/60.

The Varbitsa river is situated in the heart of the Kardjali region of Bulgaria – one of the country's most interesting and challenging regions, of which once was expected to blow up inter-ethnic strife and destabilization.

The area of Kardjali (Eastern Rhodopes between, roughly, Madan and Svilengrad) was added to Bulgaria in 1913 as the result of war. It was, until the massive waves of emigration starting with 1989, overwhelmingly Turkish in ethnic composition. As a designated "border area" it was, during communism, cordoned off the rest of the country until 1990.

The Kardjali economy is dependent on several major industrial plant which, privatised, have been recovering production and market place, on new (post-1997) businesses (mostly in meat production) and on the most heavily depressed industry in Bulgaria: tobacco. Tobacco growing was introduced as a compulsory mono-culture industry for the rural areas of the region in the 1960s, under Comecon "division of labour". Through the 1990s, with the loss of the undemanding Soviet and other Warsaw Pact markets, the tobacco industry has been going to the wall, leading to higher-than-average levels of poverty and hardship.

Agricultural land is very scarce in the mountains, which compose the region, and recent attempts at new agricultural crops have met with variable results. Ill-regulated forestry industries have sprung up, resulting in some employment and much environmental damage in a very fragile environment.

The region of Kardjali enjoys nation-wide fame (in the past – nation-wide notoriety) for being the country's most ethnically and culturally mixed region, with Orthodox ethnic Bulgarians in a distinct minority. The region is populated by: ethnic Bulgarian Christians; ethnic Bulgarian Muslims; ethnic Turkish Muslims (two varieties, loosely identifiable with the Shi'ite and Sunnite schools of Islam); ethnic Roma Christians and ethnic Roma Muslims. Ethnic identity issues have been predominant for much of the 1980s and 1990s, thereby emphasising differentiation and separateness, rather than common ground and cooperation.

Following the collapse of an earlier attempt at the Yantra river in the North of Bulgaria, the Varbitsa River Watershed Council is Bulgaria's first such body. Its seat is in Kirkovo, a municipal centre exactly half-way down the river, between Zlatograd and Kardjali.

The Varbitsa river, a tributary to the Arda, the main river of the Rhodope Mountains, runs through 8 municipalities, 6 of them – within the region of Kardjali and 2, in the region of Smolyan. It is the lifeline of this area, with industrial, drinking and irrigation water coming out, and refuse, sewage (untreated) and industrial waste going in. The fact that the Varbitsa starts below an officially "safe" tailings reservoir above Zlatograd has also been of concern, as has been the fact that Zlatograd's own rubbish dump is next to the river, and begins to enter into its waters as it expands.

The Varbitsa is Bulgaria's most temperamental river, with up to 5,000 times difference in water volume between spring highs and autumn lows, with frequent massive flooding and erosion as a result. Flooding and erosion are also stimulated by forestry and gravel industries, many of them – un-licensed and therefore beyond control because of corruption.

A significant water reservoir at Benkovski in the south was for decades a bone of contention between communities of Muslim Turks and Muslim Bulgarians. With the Muslim Bulgarians usually in control (i.e. depending on results of municipal elections) of the reservoir, they would first turn on the pipe to irrigate the lands of their own community, leaving Turkish agricultural communities for last; when election results place Turks in control, the opposite would take place.

The Mayors of the 8 Varbitsa communities had for many years tried to find, separately, government funding to resolve the various problems along their part of the river, such as funding for sewage depots and safe rubbish dumps. Funding failed to materialise but, while involved with the Varbitsa issues, mayors and communities realised that to address the issues along eight different sections of the river makes little sense (eg. placing a sewage plant down-river at Momchilgrad would not provide the Momchilgrad inhabitants with clean water if there is no treatment for the sewage of Kirkovo, which is up-river from them).

Also, communities began to doubt official statistics – particularly those claiming that the Zlatograd tailings reservoir, where the Varbitsa begins, is “clean”.

Into this situation came a German Marshall Fund project, implemented by the CSP and the NGO Centre-Kardjali, for best practice transfer from the USA in terms of river development. With the hypothesis in mind that the previous northern attempt at a Council along the Yantra failed because of the too-large scope of the Yantra (137 km in length and crossing more than 20 municipalities and 3 Regions), it was decided to choose a smaller river. The Varbitsa was the obvious choice not only because of its size, ideal for a pilot project, but also because of the ethnic diversity and tensions along its path.

The further hypothesis being that there is nothing like a river, which runs along its course irrespective of ethnic and other divisions, to unite all communities along its banks in the common effort to have access to clear water.

Finally, there was also the consideration that, with the EU's Water Directive in the making, sooner rather than later Bulgaria would have to begin falling in line with EU practices and will be faced with the task of setting up the kinds of Watershed Councils that are most appropriate to the local situation. Therefore, prior pilot hands-on experience in setting up such a Council would be an invaluable help for both legislators and the communities on the ground.

Initially, the CSP and Kardjali activists toured the length of the river, meeting with all Municipal Councils and most of the Mayors to set out the practical value to the communities of a Watershed Council. After some initial difficulties in understanding a concept that promised to address major issues outside the chain of command associated with central government, the idea took hold in seven out of the 8 municipalities (the eighth was to join once the Council held its first General Meeting and began addressing the issues along the river).

Ultimately, on the principle of the snowball – i.e. starting with a small group of NGO enthusiasts, and then bringing others in as the work progressed – the Varbitsa River Council was set up in mid-2000, and its first policy and planning session held. The Council is an entirely voluntary body and is registered as an NGO. Membership of the General Meeting includes NGOs (environmental and community-development), representatives of all 8 municipalities (including the Mayors of Kirkovo, Kardjali, Momchilgrad and Zlatograd), the major industrial polluters, the regional environment inspectorates, forestry officials, irrigation associations, two representatives of the Ministry of Environment and Waters, local media executives, business associations, environmental scientists and experts, and the Kardjali Regional Governor. The office of the Council is at Kirkovo in premises provided by the Kirkovo Municipality. There is one full-time co-ordinator (Executive Director), whose salary is raised from the budgets of the participating municipalities.

The Council produced a Development and Hot Spots Action Plan, and has attained quantifiable results:

- The entire length of the Varbitsa was mapped out and scientifically tested by independent scientists, with a full picture of problems and issues emerging.

Current status: The Varbitsa remains Bulgaria's only river to be mapped out and scientifically tested along its entire length, with results (including maps etc.) available to all municipalities, the office of the Regional Governor and the Ministry of Environment.

- With the inclusion of regional-level Forestry officials the Council began addressing issues of re-forestation, which it had initially not included into its work.

Current status: After fierce debate in the NGO-Ministry of Environment work group on Watershed Councils, it was agreed to include re-forestation issues in the new national Watershed Council network constructed under the legal provisions of the Water Law.

- On the basis of this picture municipalities down-river dropped their separate claims for funding in favour of municipalities up-river and developed a multi-year plan for sewage works to come down, town by town, from up-river to down-river.

Current Status: The Zlatograd and Kirkovo sewage works projects have been included into the government's budgetary plans and await financing.

- Produced a project to remove the Zlatograd rubbish dump from the Varbitsa to a safer area.

Current status: In the spring of 2002 the Mayors of Zlatograd and Kirkovo, cooperating within the framework of the Council, have raised the budget and finalised plans to move the Zlatograd dump – constructed under modern guidelines – to a new place in the municipal land of Kirkovo municipality.

- Tackled the issue of the Zlatograd tailings reservoir. That reservoir proved, on inspection by the Council, to be far from "safe". Immediate pressure was put and within six months a second reservoir wall was completed, and the reservoir stopped leaking.

Current status: The reservoir wall holds, but there is mounting concern that, with the mines privatised and back into operation, new tailings-related issues will be appearing.

- The Council protested and put pressure on the Ministry of Environment and the Ministry of Construction to reduce uncontrolled gravel extraction and re-direct gravellers outside the riverbed. This issue remains the hottest for the Council because of the tens of thousands of tons of gravel that would be needed in coming years for the construction of the government's ambitious "Gorna Arda" system of artificial reservoirs (four gorge walls with height between 92 and 103 metres). The Council acts as protector of the Varbitsa, from where all the gravel was initially expected to come, and which would mean the end of the river (as the Djerman river, near Dupnitsa, 300 km distant, was in effect killed by similar gravelling).

Current status: The Ministry of Environment licensed the locally-operating gravelling companies under much stricter parameters. Enforcement however is weak and the Council continues to petition the government about gravelling companies' failure to keep to the limitations of their license.

- The Council monitors and evaluates waste produced by the major industries of the region and partners enterprises in resolving their waste problem.

- The Council has raised awareness of clean water issues – eg. it was discovered by Council inspections that, in Momchilgrad, the sewage was pumped into the river up-stream from the point from which the town extracts its drinking water – i.e. Momchilgrad has been drinking its own refuse for years but before the Council there was no awareness or interest in this. The Council also systematised health figures for Zlatograd, and the resultant picture proved beyond doubt that its inhabitants had been seriously threatened for a long time by the leaking tailings reservoir.

Current status: The Momchilgrad sewage works project has been approved by the government for financing.

- Given that from the beginning staff from the Ministry of Environment was involved in the Varbitsa Council's work, the experience has played a pivotal role in the current (2002) work on structuring the legal and official documentation to initiate Bulgaria's network of Watershed Councils under the provisions of the Water Law (passed after the establishment of the Varbitsa Council).

Current status: The Ministry has had several months of difficult negotiations with NGOs and scientists on the exact structure of the Watershed Councils as arising out of the Water Law. The Varbitsa experience was instrumental in overcoming initial Ministry opposition to Watershed Councils seen as "too small" – and a whole new category, called "Watershed Commissions" was introduced into the legal framework. Thus, under the four "big" Watershed Councils of Bulgaria under the Water Law now there are legal (and some financial) provisions, as well as decision-making provisions, for the existence – should local communities want to set them up – of these smaller bodies. The Varbitsa experience came to convince all participants in the legislative process that this is the way to harness civic and community energies, as well as educate the public at large to be more sensitive to environment and health issues.

This is a more or less complete policy and development exercise in miniature, providing hands-on examples of the value of development work centred around an active NGO nucleus. It is taken, in the area, as a blueprint for the future construction of a Council along the entire length of the Arda river, covering two Regions (Smolyan and Kardjali), with a centre at Kardjali.

Issues of effectiveness and sustainability remain, given the vast (by both NGO and small municipality standards) sums needed for the solution of Varbitsa's hot spots.

Counterbalancing this is the demonstrable fact that setting up a high-profile, NGO-official-business, multi-municipal, and multi-ethnic body brings pressure in itself: the second reservoir wall at the tailings reservoir was provoked entirely by the public profile and perceived "trouble-making" capacity of communities of eight municipalities acting together in a focussed and determined way.