



RURAL COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT:

Identifying positive practices to empower communities affected by environmental degradation to develop sustainable livelihood opportunities and protect themselves from harmful developments

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INTRODUCTION

This model of empowering communities documents the approach used, best practices and lessons learned from the project Rural Community Engagement: A Voice for Tropoja implemented from February 2018 until January 2019 by five civil society organizations from Slovakia, Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary – the Visegrad region – and Albania.

The project aimed at supporting the rapid evolution of sustainable livelihoods in rural communities being affected by environmental degradation due to poor decision making and lack of public participation, through empowerment and enhanced capacity for participation in environmental decision-making.

Partner organizations:

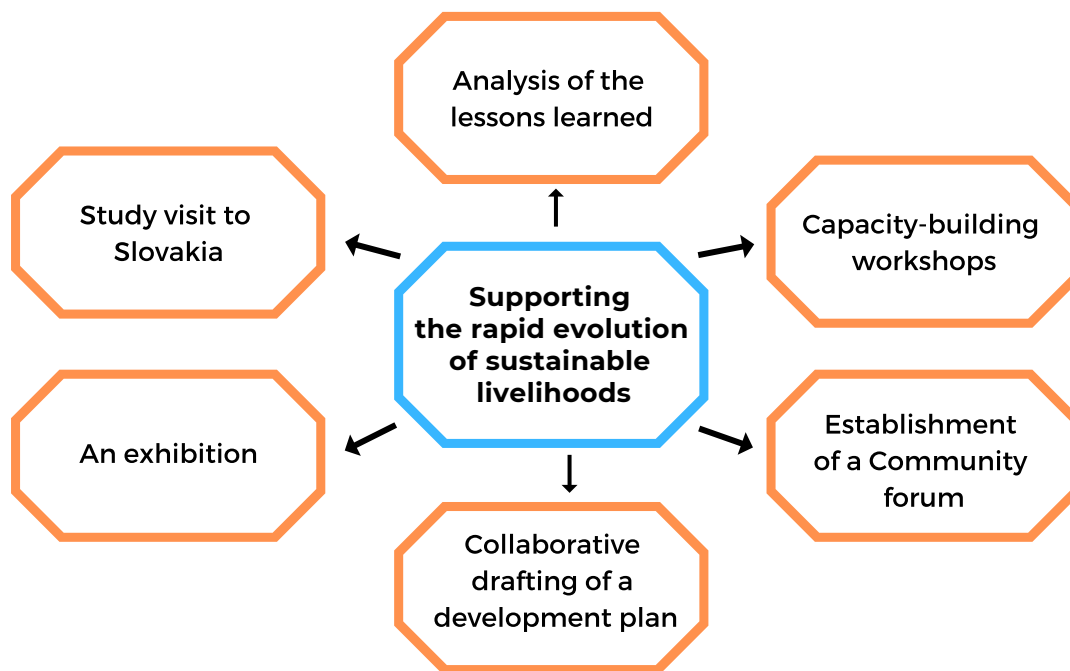
- People in Need Slovakia
- CEE Bankwatch Network Czech Republic
- Polish Green Network
- Towards Sustainability Association Hungary
- TOKA: The Organization to Conserve the Albanian Alps

TROPOJA REGION

Tropoja in north-east Albania is one of the poorest regions, held back by unemployment (79%), historic isolation, poor level of education, lack of access to information and a history of government corruption which have led to widespread apathy and youth flight. Nature-based tourism and agriculture are considered to be the economic hope for the region.

However with isolation being reduced through rapidly improving (road) infrastructure, habitat destruction due to unsustainable mining and hydropower developments threaten to degrade the very nature which is the area's greatest asset for economic development while the local population was either unaware of the long-term potential to develop their livelihoods or unable to do anything to address their very real fears.



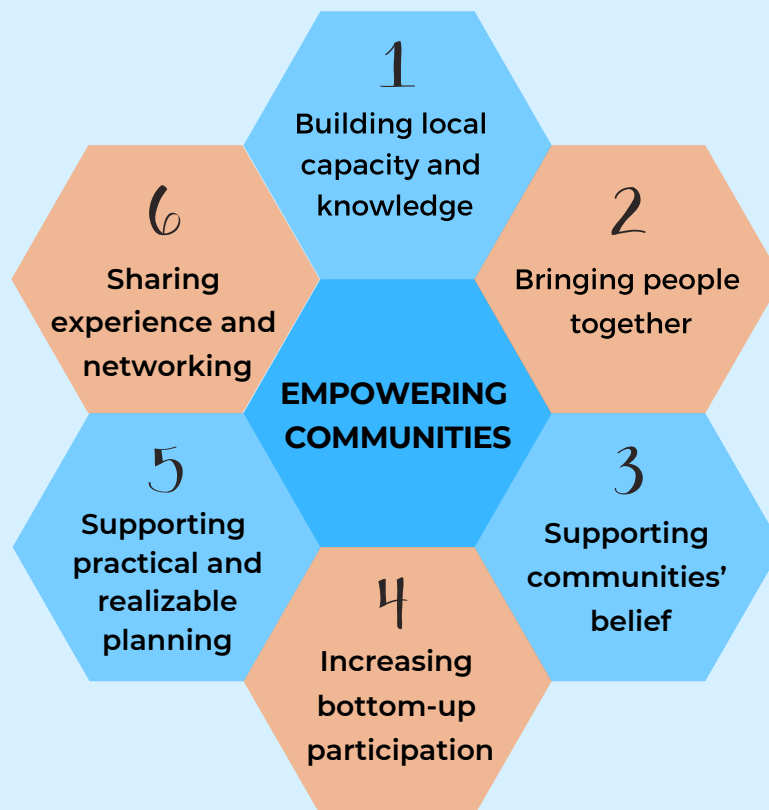


The project consisted of following activities:

- ⇒ **Capacity-building workshops** on development planning, delivering a strong message using photography and participatory tactics in decision-making, facilitated by both Visegrad region as well as local experts from different disciplines, including lawyers, campaign strategists, and development specialists
- ⇒ **An exhibition** with photos illustrating the local people's self perception and aspirations for their region open for the wider public;
- ⇒ **Study visit to Slovakia for** community activists to exchange experience with communities similarly endangered by environmental degradation and
- ⇒ **The establishment of a Community forum** to create an ongoing opportunity for community members to regularly meet and discuss ideas and aspirations and coordinate actions to address issues;
- ⇒ **Analysis of the lessons learned** by the project partners and selected beneficiaries to reflect on the achievements and lessons learned.
- ⇒ **Collaborative drafting of a development plan** identifying the needs and concerns of the local communities and putting forward their model of sustainable livelihoods;

MODEL OF EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES

WE USED THE FOLLOWING APPROACH TO EMPOWER THE COMMUNITIES:



1. BUILDING LOCAL CAPACITY AND KNOWLEDGE

Communities equipped with skills and knowledge will have the capacity to address their needs, overcome potential obstacles and participate in decision-making. Experts can help create a framework which ensures communities' development concepts will be sustainable (economically, socially and environmentally), reinforcing the mutuality of environment and populace.

"Was there anything NEW for us?"

No one has EVER asked people here what they want before!"

Participant of a workshop

2. BRINGING PEOPLE TOGETHER – CREATING A MUTUALLY SUPPORTIVE AND ENGAGED COMMUNITY

Having a united voice is key to realizing the change people want to see. Obviously, local contexts can vary significantly and it may be more or less difficult depending on the rule of law or quality of democracy processes applied in the respective region or country. Nevertheless, it is the very basic precondition to achieve objectives. Creating a collective action is not possible without meetings, brainstorming and talking about the desired outcomes.

3. SUPPORTING COMMUNITIES' BELIEF IN THEIR OWN ASPIRATIONS

People must create their own change, tapping their skills, abilities and motivation. Therefore, it is important to support local people in identifying their own long-term goals, help them to articulate their needs and to create a unanimous vision of development.

"What's your dream? What do you want from the future?"

"I want that my children can find it possible to live here. That they can be healthy and find work. That they don't have to leave. That they have a choice."

Participant of a workshop

4. INCREASING BOTTOM-UP PARTICIPATION IN DECISION-MAKING

Top down structures of power cannot comprehend the reality of local communities and so fail to comprehend all the important aspects of a country's development. When these structures do not focus on local communities and their needs or ideas, the chances of improving the wellbeing of these communities are questionable. Local communities will be able to improve their lives if they can work together with the government, influencing and pressuring government to fulfill its obligations.

5. SUPPORTING PRACTICAL AND REALIZABLE PLANNING ON HOW TO DEVELOP SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS

Livelihood empowerment is an integral part of the community empowerment process. Only communities that are economically and socially secure can engage in improving their communities in a sustainable way. There is a very urgent need to find ways of development that will not harm health and welfare of people and their environment.

6. SHARING EXPERIENCE WITH OTHERS AND NETWORKING

There is no contradiction in focusing on local needs/problems and sharing experience among experts or activists from different countries. Quite the opposite – it can be very helpful to discuss the issues communities are struggling with. New points of view, knowledge of experts in different fields and even experience of active people from other countries can nourish the ideas of a community. It can be helpful and inspiring to talk to people who have similar goals, even if the context is not exactly the same.

"The stories of the experts about fights in Slovakia, in Hungary - this really has meant a lot to us.

I don't think we have had much context for our struggles. Until meeting these people, I don't think we realized that two years isn't actually very long to be fighting. We feel defeated already, but now we are seeing our fight in a different perspective."

Representative of the Albanian partner organization

MAIN ACHIEVEMENTS

Increased skills, capacities and knowledge of 25 local community representatives (especially coming from the local youth)

The concept of formulating of a vision and then creating a practical plan to achieve that vision was introduced. Knowledge and skills on how to access information were increased. Strategies were shared about how to work with media and on methods of campaigning, as well as how to document and promote sustainable livelihood opportunities.

Increased confidence and skills to communicate needs and aspirations

The discussions around the community development plan became a tool for shaping and formulating the future of their communities and livelihoods; people were encouraged and became confident to speak out about their desire for the future and visions of development, as well as against developments that are harmful for their environment and livelihoods.

Created a community

Through the community visits and communal activities, more than 50 people became part of an engaged community, linking together different villages which did not know each other before.



MAIN ACHIEVEMENTS



Increased dialogue between municipality and community

A paradigm shift was initiated from top-down to bottom up - municipal representatives participated for the first time in meetings with local community members and jointly discussed solutions for issues such as waste management and budget planning.

Laid groundwork for improved access to new livelihoods

A welcoming community space for improved economic and social health was created encompassing an information and selling space where community members can sell products and services to tourists as well as a community center where trainings and meetings can occur.

Linked Tropoja to the local and international community

of NGOs, activists and communities that face similar problems or struggles to exchange experience and provide support.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

One year was too short to see to fruition the process of developing a vision, successfully fight an imminent environmental threat and at the same time start putting into practice proposals on improving access to livelihoods – although these processes could be initiated, there is a danger that the process can lose momentum when the support comes to a halt.

There was a need to adapt to the local communities capacities and pace. When working for the first time, in a new way with a community, more time and investment in coaching and mentoring relationships is required.

Working in remote areas with lack of highly qualified staff or modern standards of infrastructure required adaptive management and counting in additional resources and time for capacity building. On the other hand, young people with big potential were identified and challenged to do work they otherwise would not have the opportunity to pursue.

Building a community required creating a space for the community (to exchange ideas, improve skills, economic sustainability).

If continued, there is high potential for advancing the economic empowerment of the communities, especially when the space for selling products of the local communities will start operating.

If successful, the project can contribute to creating an incentive for young people at risk of migrating from the region to stay and become active in its development.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ⇒ **More long-term investment is required for Tropoja** as building capacities and changing attitudes requires time and resources. Follow-up projects should have a strategic focus, continue engaging and investing in youth and continue to combine international expertise with expert support at the national level.
- ⇒ **Other communities similarly affected with hydropower developments in Albania or the region could benefit from replication of the model:** Numerous similar communities exist around Albania and all over the Balkans which would benefit from a similar intervention and exchange of experience. In practice many communities have already begun reaching out to Tropoja, asking for help: “How do we fight the environmental degradation too?”



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Rural Community Engagement: A Voice for Tropoja



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