

ISSUE SHEET 4



Photo: Jasminka Pashaliska Andonovska

SMALL GRANTS FOR LOCAL ENVIRONMENTALLY FRIENDLY INITIATIVES

When the Nature Conservation Programme (NCP) began in 2012, it was uncertain how people in the Bregalnica area would react to the idea of proclaiming parts of the landscape as Protected Areas. Wide-ranging stakeholder consultation was organised, including a public survey; this showed that opportunities for direct involvement in conservation-related field activities should be encouraged. The project therefore initiated a small competitive grants scheme, seeking and funding initiatives related to nature conservation, sustainable natural resource management and energy efficiency. The grants were intended not only to encourage the practical engagement of municipalities and civil society organisations on these topics, but also to test which interventions had potential for wider application. Over phase 1 of NCP (2012 – 2016), 36 such initiatives were awarded; five of them received funding for upscaling in phase 2 (2017 – 2020).

“Small grants are a perfect approach to support the initiation of local innovation. People realise that change lies in their own hands” Zora Urech, former Adviser to NCP, Helvetas

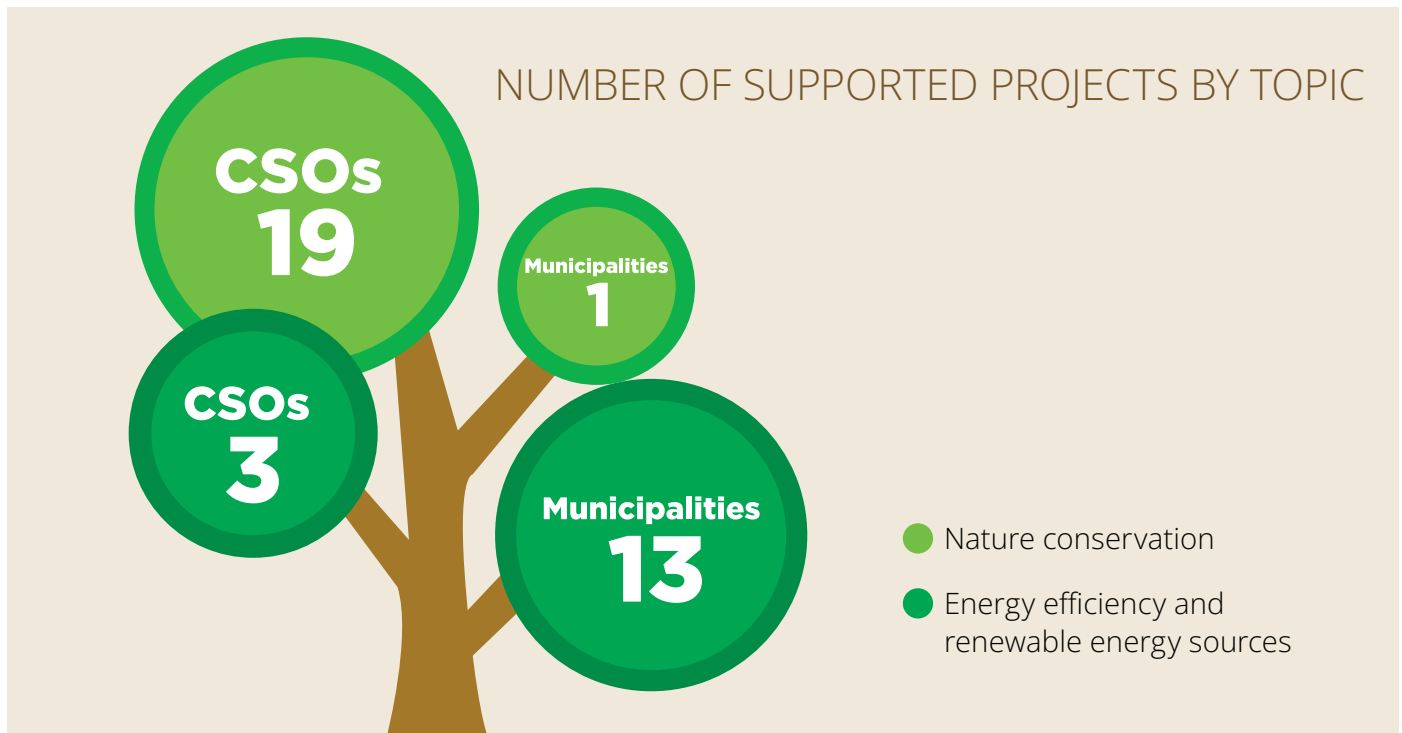
KEY LESSONS LEARNED

- Stakeholder feedback showed that the small grants scheme was an important mechanism for raising public interest in and understanding about nature conservation and sustainable natural resource management. The scheme also strongly enhanced the visibility of the project.
- The small grants scheme provided an opportunity for “hands on” learning that was generally said by grantees to be far more useful than any form of theoretical learning.
- Regular monitoring provided by a locally based project officer was highly appreciated.
- The scheme served to enhance cooperation between CSO, municipalities and other local institutions through the shared engagement in activities.
- An own contribution from municipalities promoted a sense of ownership (but was not required of civil society organisations).
- Ensuring the maintenance of infrastructure established through the small grants scheme is a continuing challenge; maintenance mechanisms need to be carefully considered from the outset.
- Keeping track of 36 different initiatives was highly demanding of staff time.
- Personnel changes amongst grant recipients (due to out-migration) resulted in a loss of knowledge and increased the need for project support.

WHAT WAS FUNDED?

The NCP originally made a call for proposals related either to “nature conservation and sustainable nature resources management” or “the use of renewable energies, environmentally friendly practices and energy saving techniques”. The activities to be funded were confined to the Bregalnica region and were directed to civil society organizations (CSOs) and municipalities. This amounts to 15 municipalities – the 11 of the Eastern Region, plus 4 further ones falling within the catchment area of the Bregalnica river. Five additional activities with municipalities were supported under separate budget lines: four on the development of sustainable tourism, in partnership with the Centre for Development of the East Planning Region (CDEPR), and one focused on enhancing the capacity of municipal administrative staff in nature conservation and sustainable natural resource management in the Malesh Pijanec region.

For the small grants, a funding cap of MKD 500,000 (approx. USD 10,000 at the time) was set for CSOs and of MKD 700,000 (then approx. USD 14,000) for municipalities. The municipalities had to make an obligatory own contribution of at least 10%; the CSOs were exempt from this requirement. A variety of applications were received and assessed by an independent evaluation panel, leading to the selection of 14 projects implemented by municipalities (see below for the CSOs). Only one municipality received no funding, due to the unwillingness of the administration to provide any own contribution.



The municipalities focused their proposals on energy saving activities such as improved heating and better insulation of municipal buildings, and conversion to renewable energy such as solar panels and wood pellets. Only one nature conservation activity was proposed, by the municipality of Pehchevo: this was the restoration of the Ezerce pond ecosystem in the municipal suburb. The focus on energy saving is perhaps not surprising, given the need of municipalities to manage tight budgets. However, the lack of proposals about nature conservation may also be explained by limited awareness and knowledge of the topic. Attitudes amongst administrative and elected municipal staff towards conservation have changed considerably over the project period, with far greater understanding and enthusiasm now being apparent. This is in part due to NCP-organized study tours, trainings and workshops, but also in part through the environmental activities eventually implemented by the CSOs.

Although 34 applications were submitted by CSOs in response to the first call, and their interest in nature conservation was evident (for some CSOs it is their sole aim), most failed to meet the quality requirements. This was explained by a lack of familiarity with application procedures. It was therefore necessary for project staff (notably the local coordinator) to invest considerable time in supporting the development of well written and properly budgeted proposals. Following a second call specifically targeted at CSOs for nature conservation activities, a total of 22 grants were awarded.

For both municipalities and CSOs, funding was released in three tranches: on commencement, on achieving an agreed milestone, and on verified completion (taken as the submission of invoices; CSOs generally waited for the final tranche to be released before completing financial transactions). This served as a means of quality control and verifying commitment.

WHAT WORKED WELL?



Photo: Blagoj Danev

"Small projects are a big carrot for making a change in small rural communities, especially in times like now when many people are depressed and there is a lot of out-migration. For young people, it's particularly important. Give them the money to do things with their own hands - and see the results!" Blagoj Danev, Local Economy Development Officer, Zrnovci Municipality and President of the Management Board, Association for Rural Development Javor - Zrnovci



Photo: Zeklina Golcova

HANDS-ON, LOCAL SUPPORT FROM PROJECT STAFF

Although municipalities and CSOs differed in terms of their familiarity with submitting proposals for funding, both highly appreciated local support. The NCP staff member based in Pehchevo spent many hours coaching CSOs on how to prepare a good application, and then how to implement, monitor and report on activities in a satisfactory manner. This not only empowered such organizations to apply for and successfully implement projects; it also gave them the skills to apply for other grants. Equally, the NCP staff member was available to respond to questions from municipalities, and often did so, saving the need for more time-consuming interactions with the main project office in Skopje.

“A very good approach of the project was to establish a local office in the region, staffed by a local person – Jasminka – who is familiar with the context. In many other projects the contact is only with Skopje, which is much more difficult given the distance.” Toni Stoimenovski, Local Economy Development Officer, Delchevo Municipality

SUPPORT FOR CITIZEN ACTION

At the beginning of NCP Phase 2, representatives of NCP, CDEPR and SDC conducted a joint monitoring of the activities implemented through the small grants scheme. This was partly to determine which interventions had potential for scaling up, and partly to evaluate overall success – including maintenance aspects. The broad findings were as follows.

- Whilst the energy saving initiatives had been largely successful, they were in the hands on the municipalities and required no further project support.
- Pedestrian, bicycle, and educational paths established to encourage eco-tourism and youth engagement in nature also had limited potential for up-scaling, although they were generally successfully established, with maintenance in municipal hands.
- Lessons learned from one small grant intervention, on environmentally acceptable techniques for reducing extreme in areas of burnt-over forest, were pertinent for broader forest planning and were integrated into the Regional Forest Development Plan for Maleshevo.
- The topics with greatest potential for up-scaling were identified as the conservation of old-growth trees (see text box), citizen activism against stubble burning, the sustainable management of natural resources in the Malesh-Pijanec region, and the adaptation of a tourist information centre at Ponikva.
- Support for the establishment of an eco-ethno park at the European village of storks Cheshinovo-Obleshevo (that had not previously been funded) was agreed.



As a broad generalisation, the small grants activities that met with greatest success were those that galvanised citizens to become involved and act. Clearly, this was the original intention – but there is a big difference between an intervention being organized on behalf of a group of people (such as local residents, youth, women) and that same group of people demanding and organizing an intervention themselves. One example in this respect is the **campaign against stubble burning** organized by Agro Vinka, a local non-government organization, NGO, based in the small town of Vinica that works towards the education, rights and economic empowerment of rural women. The women members were able to catalyse grassroots support for their campaign through a series of public meetings held in surrounding villages, at the same time as bringing together the wide range of government agencies involved. Probably money alone would have been insufficient to do this; project contacts and networking also helped, together creating a “win – win” situation. As a result of the project, a national subsidy budget line supporting the purchase of special equipment for farmers was established; in 2021, 25 farmers signed a contract for such equipment.

Another of the activities selected for scaling up in phase 2 was the mapping and preserving of old-growth trees, as outlined in the text box.

MAPPING AND PRESERVING OLD-GROWTH TREES BY THE BALKAN FOUNDATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: AN ACTIVITY SCALED UP IN NCP PHASE 2



Photo: Tomislav Georgiev

This intervention was conceived by Professor Nikolcho Velkovski, who in addition to his work at the Hans Em Faculty of Forest Sciences in Skopje is a resident of Bregalnica and a member of the NGO Balkan Foundation for Sustainable Development. On a study tour to Switzerland, Professor Velkovski saw how ancient, old growth trees are protected and valued. He resolved to start something similar in the Bregalnica region, engaging the students in his class, colleagues, and local forestry professionals including those working for the Public Enterprise National Forest. Together, they generated broad enthusiasm for identifying suitable trees - locating over 100 specimens. The details of the species, size, estimated age and GPS coordinates of each tree were recorded and captured in QR codes to produce a mobile application and a digital and printed map. On site, each tree has been marked with a panel giving the same information.

According to Prof. Velkovski, "The point of marking these ancient trees is for visitors to take greater note of the trees around them and appreciate the sheer energy of the forest. But there is also a second important point, which is to persuade the Public Enterprise National Forest not to fell such trees. They have such intrinsic value for their age, genetic make-up, and the biodiversity that they support – yet in the past, the oldest trees have always been prioritised for felling. The NCP provided training to the PE foresters and now they have started to take pride in ancient trees. They even call me when they find one and agree informally to preserve it."

CREATING SYNERGIES BETWEEN INTERVENTIONS



NCP experience suggests that the greatest chance of a small grant initiative becoming locally embedded and sustained without project funding is when it is linked with other interventions. The synergies thus created give a better chance of all the activities being continued. One example of this is the children's education nature trail, Petko's trail, established by the NGO Association OXO. The trail begins at the Educational Centre for Nature Conservation at Negrevo, which was funded by the NCP through the municipality of Pehchevo. Clearly the trail and the centre serve the same audience of school children, with one complementing the other. In addition, the trail follows part of a hiking route promoted through the municipality and is marked on a map of hiking and biking trails for use by tourists. This gives an additional incentive to the municipality for continuing trail maintenance, including the upkeep of the markers and information boards.

PETKO'S TRAIL: AN NGO – MUNICIPAL COLLABORATION



Petko's trail is a 2km path across open pasture and scattered woodland to a small marshy wetland area in which can be found the locally rare *Drosera rotundifolia* – common sundew. Petko is a cartoon dog. At different points along the way, the character of Petko is used to provide the visitor with brief, interesting facts about plants or animals that may be seen. These are written in Macedonian and displayed on colourful boards placed at child height. Active participation in

research and outdoor activities is an excellent way to learn about nature and biodiversity for children and adults alike. In part because it is so well maintained, this is one of the most visited trails in the region - both by school parties and by families.

THE ZRNOVCI ECO-PICTURE: ANOTHER NGO – MUNICIPAL COLLABORATION

Some six years ago, the municipal building of Zrnovci was in a poor state of repair, and municipal officers sought funds for urgent renovation. At the same time, the local conservation NGO Javor sought a meeting place for training members of its Club of Young Researchers in biodiversity. The municipality was able to obtain funds to partially cover renovation costs from one source, whilst the NGO obtained a small grant from NCP. In this way, part of the municipal building could be converted into a well-equipped modern meeting room that is used for training the Young Researchers, but also serves more broadly as a community centre at which a variety of events are held. Maintenance is ensured by the municipality.

CHALLENGES

One of the most challenging issues in ensuring the sustainability of the initiatives funded through the small grants scheme is deliberate damage – as well as ensuring more general maintenance. Vandalism of public sites is unfortunately quite common, reflecting one of the problems that the NCP seeks to address: the lack of opportunities for young people in rural areas. In six cases, information boards, rest facilities or trail signs have been wilfully defaced, and even sometimes re-vandalised after repairs were conducted by the responsible municipality. One means of addressing this is surveillance, as for example implemented by Pehcevo municipality for the Ezerce pond ecosystem, where CCTV (closed-circuit television) cameras have been installed. However, a more long-term solution is to intensify public awareness and support for conservation activities, resulting in a form of “neighbourhood policing”.

CONCLUSIONS

Small grants are a good mechanism for promoting engagement in nature conservation and sustainable natural resource management. This is substantiated by the NCP public awareness survey, which has shown that field activities, media campaigns and educational initiatives are the most effective means of raising awareness about nature conservation. The percentage of population in the Bregalnica region (including socially excluded groups) that is aware of the value of nature and its sustainable use increased from 27% in 2014 to 51% by the end of 2019. Nevertheless, small grants schemes are quite resource-intensive. Grantees themselves stressed the importance of pertinent, regular support and supervision. There will always be a need to balance the staff resources needed for such support against the number of interventions funded; more can end up being less in terms of quality. Practical aspects to be considered are set out in the recommendations below.

PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS

- Employing a well-qualified, committed local person based in the project area to oversee such a scheme is highly recommended. Indeed, this was identified as one of the most crucial success factors in the small grants scheme. The local support not only ensured overall quality in implementation; through the coaching provided, it also enhanced the likelihood of similar projects attracting future funding.
- When implementing such small grants schemes, one staff member should not be required to manage more than 10 - 15 grants at any given time.
- A reasonable budget for a small intervention in North Macedonia is at minimum USD 10,000 – 20,000 for civil society organizations; it may be up to USD 50,000 for municipalities.
- A reasonable time frame for implementing this type of small intervention in nature conservation/ sustainable natural resource management is 1 – 1.5 years, providing maintenance thereafter is ensured.
- Collaboration between civil society organisations and municipalities over maintenance issues should be strongly encouraged and built into grant proposals.
- Mutual reinforcement through linking several initiatives should be encouraged (whilst keeping the financial aspects transparent to avoid any possibility of double funding).
- An own contribution of 20% from municipalities should always be required; this is affordable and ensures some commitment to longer term maintenance.
- The release of funding in three tranches (on commencement, on achieving an agreed milestone, and on verified completion) is recommended as a quality control mechanism.

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The Nature Conservation Programme, NCP in North Macedonia is a project of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, SDC. Implemented in phase 1 by Helvetas in partnership with Farmahem and then in phases 2 and 3 by Farmahem with backstopping support from Helvetas, the total project lifespan is effectively 12 years (2012 - 2023).

