Down at the crossroads

In July we closed the Fourth Course for Sustainability, with the final module — Sustainability in Practice — being conducted in Venice. The event was in many ways a crossroads for this educational programme. The four courses and its 20 modules brought together several lecturers and more than 200 participants from a wide range of universities, institutions and governments. Our alumni network now involves individuals from Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Montenegro, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia, and Turkey. Besides experts from ministries of environment, we’ve also had the pleasure of involving ministries and central govern-mental bodies responsible for finance, economy, transport, energy and or water.

Eastern horizons

Having concluded the Fourth Course for Sustainability, we now look forward to developing several new activities within the alumni network, and hope to welcome participants from more countries in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Both the REC and Venice International University are now engaged in the lengthy processes of project development and presentation to donors, and we hope to start with follow-up educational activities in 2008. One of our plans is to develop national-level activities through the joint involvement of alumni and REC Country Offices. And another high priority is to organise our Second Alumni Seminar.

This issue of InGear focuses on the upcoming ministerial conference, Environment for Europe, which takes place October 10-12 in Belgrade. At this conference the REC plans to present some of its education- and sustainable development-related outcomes. We also hope to see some of you at the event.

Sink or swim

With fewer funds and disagreement on the way forward, will this year’s Environment for Europe conference in Belgrade provide a breakthrough or bring an end to an era?

By Nathan Johnson

The Sixth Ministerial Environment for Europe Conference takes place October 10-12 in Belgrade, Serbia. Ad hoc sessions in Geneva at the end of August focused mostly on attempts to agree on precise wording of the ministerial document, to which last-minute textual changes and amendments were proposed and discussed — initially to little avail.

Gordana Kozuharova, head of the Department for European Integration at the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia’s Ministry of Environment and Physical Planning, expressed the vital importance of reflecting in the document the enormous regional-level and political changes that have occurred since 2003.

“A major concern about document preparation is that it shouldn’t contain unnecessary duplication and overlap,” said Kozuharova.

Zaal Lom tadze from Georgia’s Ministry of Environmental Protection and Natural Resources argued that the document is less about length than substance: “The real problem is: What does it mean? The EIE process right now is lacking a larger focus — lack of consensus on big priorities — so we need to focus on the correct way to continue.”

One of the most intriguing aspects of Environment for Europe is that the focus of the process has shifted eastward, even as many countries of Central and Eastern Europe have joined — or are preparing to join — Western Europe’s political and economic alliance, the European Union.

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Sink or swim (Continued from previous page)

“The process got underway in 1991, which means that those countries which joined the EU in 2004 and 2006 have now had 16 years to develop and improve through EfE efforts,” said Oreola Ivanova-Nacheva, deputy director of the Regional Environmental Center for Central and Eastern Europe. “But the war in the former Yugoslavia ended in 1999, which means many of these countries have had only seven years to achieve the same goals. It is therefore unrealistic to expect from them the same level of commitment and environmental performance.”

Shifting focus

But how much impact will EU enlargement have otherwise on consensus-building, cooperation and programme implementation efforts?

“The EfE’s historical perspective has certainly been transformed by EU enlargement, although we have to recognise that the process itself contributed to the enlargement,” commented Massimo Cozzone from the Italian Ministry for the Environment, Land and Sea.

“In particular, the shift of focus to the East has caused new member states to somewhat lose interest in the process,” said Talaibek Makeev, executive of Central Asian REC (CAREC). “On the other hand, the enlargement process is an example of what environmental cooperation can achieve.”

Brendan Gillespie, head of the Environment and Globalisation Division at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), explained that the OECD largely oversees policy and institutional reform, while the EBRD manages environmental investment.

“We try to design activities that are appropriate for all countries, and then adapt them according to national and sub-regional needs,” Gillespie said.

Georgia’s Lomtadze, meanwhile, stressed that “external funding can’t solve everything,” and that national governments themselves need to make the financial commitments necessary to fulfil environmental goals.

John Hontelez, secretary general of the European Environmental Bureau (EEB), has been involved in the EfE process from an NGO perspective since the very beginning, with his first involvement coming as a member of Friends of the Earth International. “Things were exciting in ‘91, and the mood was really hopeful,” said Hontelez. “Following the political and economic changes, we saw the necessity to respond to the possibility for the West to engage the East in discussing environmental issues — and possible support.”

Call for more binding treaties

Victoria Elias, chairperson for the European EcoForum, is based in Russia and works for the World Wildlife Foundation. Elias said that there is no “special selection process” for NGOs wishing to be part of the coalition participating in the EfE process; the only prohibition is being affiliated with a national government. Like Hontelez, Elias would like to see EfE move forward more effectively in terms of achieving legally binding agreements.

“Maybe the process should become issue-driven — maybe something like conservation,” Elias said. “What should be improved first? What sort of economic instruments should be used? It would really be nice to see governments commit to programmes over 10 years or more — to phase out unsustainable energy practices, for example — moving toward sustainable consumption strategies.”

“If the process continues, maybe it should ideally consist of countries who really want to be part of it,” added Hontelez. “But in any case, the countries of the former Soviet Union are the countries that need the process the most; they’re the one’s that will suffer the most if the process disappears.”

Robert Jeske

An alumni of the first Course for Sustainability, Robert is now focused on climate change issues, and has started working at the National Administration of the Emission Trading Scheme (KASHUE). Until his recent appointment, Robert worked as head of the Environmental Health Unit for the Polish Ministry of Health’s Public Health Department.

Steven Graning

Steven Graning will take over for Richard Fílka as project manager of the Course for Sustainability and as editor of the InGear newsletter. Steven is awaiting his Master of Science degree from Central European University’s Department of Environmental Sciences and Policy. He will move to the NGO Support Programme at the REC after working with the Publishing Department for six years.

Imre Keseru

Having won a scholarship from the British Council Hungary, Imre is now studying Transport Planning (MSc) at Oxford Brookes University from September. He is taking a year off from work to focus on his studies.

‘The EfE process right now is lacking a larger focus, so we need to focus on the correct way to continue.’

Zaal Lomtadze, Ministry of Environmental Protection and Natural Resources of Georgia
Education, in addition to being a human right, is a prerequisite for achieving sustainable development and an essential tool for good governance, informed decision-making and the promotion of democracy.

UNECE Strategy for Education for Sustainable Development

In 2005 the United Nations inaugurated its “Decade on Education for Sustainable Development.” This “decade” is an expression of the realisation that, unless citizens are educated to understand the multitude of complex and interrelated issues that face the modern world today, then the chances of arresting the effects of our current unsustainable development (social, economic and environmental) are rather low.

School education has been confined traditionally to specific or narrow subjects and taught through approaches that focus on enabling pupils to pass examinations. The “real world” has come in, however, and helped to equip pupils to become effective workforce components; and this focus has often meant that technical skills reign supreme. As such, the desire to furnish students with the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values to make societal development more sustainable raises challenges for the education community as a whole.

Focused on grades two to six, the materials explore the interactions between environment, society and economic development.

In order to cover the interaction and inter-linking of development — and its impacts — we must see how lessons can represent them meaningfully within the traditional range of subjects. In addition, while students do need to accumulate knowledge and learn technical skills, the process of teaching depends not only on traditional teaching methods, but also on helping students to make use of their knowledge, analyse complex problems, and utilise their skills to develop appropriate and equitable solutions.

Belgrade debut

Building on the success of its educational Green Pack toolkit, the REC will announce at October’s Environment for Europe conference the launch of Green Pack Junior, a new set of environmental education materials for younger school children. Green Pack Junior has been designed to allow complex issues like economic development, environment and society to be taught easily in the classroom. It has also been developed to give teachers original and accessible materials to begin teaching sustainable development issues in an engaging and motivating way — namely by presenting the key issues facing the world today and allowing pupils to think critically about today’s problems and to discuss what might be done about them.

Focused on grades two to six, and on schools with minimal technical equipment or multi-media facilities, the materials are divided into 10 topics that explore the interactions between environment, society and economic development. These topics were chosen to demonstrate how humanity is tied to and affects the environment we live in — and, importantly, to what this might mean to society.

Each topic comprises a structured lesson plan and support materials required to plan and deliver a class on the subject. The lessons stimulate interactive learning through discussions, brainstorming, role playing and outdoor activities. As such, each lesson plan provides the teacher with background on the topic, teaching objectives, the methodology used, the materials are needed, suggested timing and possible teaching locations.

At the end of each lesson plan, teachers will find supporting fact sheets and schemes such as colouring sheets, simple tests and even fairy-tales. Naturally, these materials may be photocopied and distributed as part of the lesson.

Perhaps the best thing about Green Pack Junior is that it encourages students to become involved citizens.
Moquito virus bites Europe

Italy’s Ministry of Health has confirmed about 160 cases of chikungunya — a mosquito-borne tropical virus — in north Italy’s Ravenna region. The European Centre for Disease Control recently urged pregnant women and those with chronic illnesses to seek medical advice before visiting the area. Most of cases were reported in the villages of Castiglione di Ravenna and Castiglione di Cervia. Patients being treated for the virus were experiencing high fever and joint pain, as well as headache, muscle pain, rash and — less frequently — gastrointestinal symptoms. One individual, aged 83, died from complications attributed to the virus.

French virologist Antoine Flahault claimed that the Italian outbreak of the virus is the first to be discovered outside the tropics. Writing in the journal *Quotidien du Medecin*, Flahault described the discovery is “worrying” but not necessarily alarming, suggesting that an extremely high density of mosquitoes in and around Ravenna caused the outbreak.

“The mosquito vectors (carriers) of this disease have been in Italy for several years,” said Flahault. “All we know is that increased temperatures and humidity make the climate more tropical and favour the proliferation of mosquitoes.”

The virologist added that the situation has been stabilised and steps have been taken to reduce the number of mosquitoes.

Source: BBC News

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**REC pitches for sustainability in Belgrade**

The Regional Environmental Center is organising several side events at the Environment for Europe ministerial conference in Belgrade, October 10-12

**The Green Pack Junior launch event: Education is the key to sustainability**

Building on the success of its educational toolkit, the Green Pack, the REC is launching Green Pack Junior, a kit targeting younger school children. Developed to give teachers original and accessible materials about sustainable development, Green Pack Junior presents the key issues facing the world today and allows pupils to think critically and discuss possible solutions.

*When:* October 10 from 4:45 p.m.
*Where:* The REC stall

**Civil Society Organisations in Central and Eastern Europe: Trends, challenges and barriers to their sustainability**

The event is co-organised by the REC, the Swedish International Cooperation and Development Agency (Sida) and Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). It will share REC outcomes of CSO assessments in the West Balkans, in addition to MIT’s assessments carried out in CEE. Survey findings will serve as a basis for discussing the state of civil society in the region, and for evaluating trends and challenges. The second strand of the discussion will be on how to support the development of civil society organisations (and, thus, civil society) and on opportunities for intervention from the side of involved stakeholders. Civil servants working with or supporting civil society are recommended to attend the session.

*When:* October 12 from 8:30 a.m.
*Where:* Room 5/1.

**Other side events organised or co-organised by the REC include:**

- Roadmap for Local Sustainability — Local Initiatives in South Eastern Europe Workshop presenting support programmes for local SEE communities;
- The climate change initiative for the SEE region — panel to introduce the climate change initiative for SEE region; and
- Adriatic Sea Partnership panel discussion.


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**MONUMENTAL MEETING:**

The Victor will stand sentinel over the EIE proceedings in Belgrade.
Substandard education plagues region

UNICEF warns that Central and Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States have poor schools

UNICEF has claimed that education systems in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) are weakening, one result of which is that millions in CEE/CIS are entering the workforce despite having received little or no formal education.

Education for Some, More than Others, a report commissioned by the UNICEF Regional Office, concluded that most national educational systems in the region are failing to provide universal education, even though the past decade has witnessed some economic recovery and increased public spending on education.

According to the report, there are an estimated 2.4 million children of primary-school age and nearly 12 million secondary-school children throughout CEE/CIS who are not attending school. The approximately 14 million children that reach adulthood without a school diploma is particularly remarkable for a region that is been widely regarded for access to and quality of education.

“This situation will lead to intergenerational cycles of poverty, and undermine the capacity of governments to develop globally competitive economies based on skilled labour rather than cheap labour,” said Maria Calivis, UNICEF's director for the CEE/CIS region.

The report also found that public expenditure on education in the region has actually reinforced social, ethnic and economic inequalities in terms of access to and completion of basic education. The income level and education level of a child's parents are prime determining factors for enrolment and attendance of children, particularly at the pre-school level.

Those countries with low economic indicators (Armenia, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova and Tajikistan) have the lowest attendance; in some cases less than half of children are attending upper high school and fewer than 30 percent are in pre-school.

Gender and minority issues

The report identified two further issues for UNICEF: the situation of Roma children and gender inequality. In Bulgaria, Hungary and Romania there are huge discrepancies between Roma and non-Roma children receiving higher than primary schooling. Only 10–35 percent of Roma children in these countries attain secondary school, while a paltry 1 percent region-wide attend higher education facilities.

With the exceptions of Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, Turkey and Uzbekistan, girls attending school outnumber boys — in many cases significantly.


Source: UNICEF Geneva