



Strengthening capacities in Western Balkans countries to address environmental problems through remediation of high priority hot spots

COUNTRY COMPONENT SERBIA

Remediation of the Grand Backa Canal

Public Awareness Monitoring
Programme – Report of Baseline
Findings of Focus Group Research
in Vrbas

Belgrade, June 2008

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Executive Summary

The Report on the Baseline Findings of Focus Group Research in Vrbas is a part of the Serbian component of the Programme "Strengthening capacities in the Western Balkan countries to address environmental problems through remediation of high priority hot spots - Remediation of the Grand Backa Canal which includes construction work on the completion of the missing part of a waste water collector in the new waste water network Phase IV.1 Ch. km 5+999 - 8+057 , Phase IV.2 Ch. km 8 + 057 - 9 + 600 in the municipality of Vrbas and Phase V Ch. Km 9+ 600 - 12+000 in the municipality of Kula.

This report presents the findings of focus group research performed on June 12, 2008 in Vrbas as part of the project public awareness monitoring programme, the objectives of which are to assess baseline project impact and to determine the level of public awareness on the overall project. Two focus groups were set up; one representing a combination of representatives from the polluting industries and municipal authorities, and the other- including representatives from civil associations, NGOs and other relevant stakeholders.

Two separate sessions were conducted, using the same methodology, and moderated by the project consultant. The participants responded to a series of questions prepared in advance, such as their knowledge of the UNDP and the overall project and their opinions on the effectiveness impact, relevance, sustainability and efficiency of the project.

The key results of the baseline findings are: the First focus group which included representatives of the government and stakeholders was much better informed about project implementation and expected results, they expressed positive views and satisfaction with the project. The representatives of civil society and citizens, who were included in the Second focus group, were less well informed and more critical about the overall positive results of the project. Most of the Second focus group participants expressed concern that polluted sediments remediation is a high risk task. Overall, the participants expressed their satisfaction with the UNDP project component and concluded that these activities significantly contribute to the overall relevance of the, sustainability and efficiency of whole project.

In both groups were agreed that a wider project would help in achieving a cleaner and more healthy environment in Vrbas, Kula and the surrounding area. The baseline focus group discussion results underlined that synergy between various institutions such as the UNDP the Dutch government, the Ministry of Environment and Spatial Planning (in June 2008), AR Vojvodina and the municipal authorities, but also citizens and the civil associations, contributes greatly to achieving the goals on this key environmental issue.

The final findings of the public awareness monitoring programme will be obtained after project completion, and compared with the initial-baseline findings.

1. Introduction

This report presents the findings of focus group research, conducted on June 12, 2008 in Vrbas as part of the project public awareness monitoring programme, the objectives of are to assess baseline project impact and to find out public awareness on the overall project. The focus group methodology applied in this research serves to provide quick assessments of awareness of a selected focus group of participants on a particular subject. All steps of Focus Groups Methodology (section 3) were applied. Two focus groups were designed, one to represent a combination of representatives of polluting industries (Carnex-Meat Processing, Vrbas, Eterna Kula, etc.), municipal authorities (mayor of the Vrbas and Kula municipality, local community government officials, public utility companies etc.) and another to include civil associations, NGOs and other relevant stakeholders' representatives. A selection of participants for two focus groups was supported by the project technical coordinator in Vrbas. The Municipality of Vrbas provided the main meeting room for both sessions as the in kind contribution of the Municipality.

By providing a dynamic, conversational setting among a small group of participants, the results of focus group discussions provided useful background information for further development of the UNDP project. Two separate sessions were conducted, using the same methodology, and were moderated by the project consultant. The participants responded to a series of questions prepared in advance, such as their experiences and knowledge of the UNDP and the overall project and their opinions on the effectiveness and impact, relevance, sustainability and efficiency of the project.

2. Background and Purpose of the Public Awareness Monitoring Programme

The UNDP Country Offices in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia FRY, Montenegro, Serbia and the UN Administered Province of Kosovo developed a regional demonstration programme around demand driven projects in nine locations in the Western Balkans suffering from the legacy of polluting industries and requiring industrial renewal, environmental cleanup and new economic development. Within the regional context, a national Serbian component of the Programme "Strengthening capacities in the Western Balkan countries to address environmental problems through remediation of high priority hot spots - Remediation of the Grand Backa Canal" includes construction works on the entire completion of the missing part of a waste water collector on the new waste water network in Vrbas municipality and in Kula municipality. The programme is to achieve improvement of the environmental situation and quality of life for citizens living in and around polluted areas through the least costly measures, improved local and national policy dialogue and supply of domestic professional services in the environmental management sector. The project will be implemented over a period of 30 months. It is important to mention that although the main focus is on the physical work needed to mitigate the environmental problems, institutional strengthening and capacity building are also foreseen in the programme.

The present document is the report on the baseline findings of the public awareness monitoring programme, the objectives of which are to assess project impact by comparison of the baseline and final focus group research results and to ascertain the level of public awareness of the overall project. This report highlights the focus group findings conducted to measure experiences and knowledge of the UNDP and the overall project and solicit opinions on the effectiveness and impact, relevance, sustainability and efficiency of the project.

In particular, the report explores the role and significance of the UNDP component and obtains insights into how citizens understand the specific tasks of this component. Baseline public awareness monitoring was carried out by use of focus group methodology as a typically qualitative tool in which a small group of participants in a dynamic conversational setting provide in-depth information.

The focus group survey with discussion topics and comments made by the participants included in two sessions have been recorded on a CD Sound Recording and presented in the Annexes of the report (Annex D.) Finally, research findings will be included in the design of the public awareness campaign which would be implemented through the institutional strengthening and capacity building programme.

3. Methodology and Focus Group Results

*Focus Groups Qualitative Answers in a Conversational Setting*¹ gathers in-depth, qualitative information on a topic, product or idea. By providing a dynamic, conversational setting among a small group of participants, it provides in-depth information that is not always possible to collect within the structure of a quantitative study.

Focus Groups typically precede a quantitative research initiative, but they may also be used post-survey to provide interpretations of study findings. Alternatively, they may also be used as a stand-alone research method in a case where qualitative findings are sufficient for the issue under investigation.

Participants interviewed may include consumers, business executives, physicians and other healthcare professionals.

Guidelines provide start-to-finish focus group services, including:

- Project design
- Participant recruitment (Sections 3.1. and 3.2.)
- Development of discussion materials (Annex A.)
- Management of facility logistics
- Moderating
- Transcription of discussion (Section 3.3.)
- Analysis (Section 3.4.)
- Report and presentation of findings

Digital Recording of Focus Groups allows important moments to be digitally highlighted instantly (Annex D).

¹ <http://www.guideline.com/capabilities/market-research/focusgroups.html>, June 2008.

3.1. Details of the Sessions

Two sessions of focus groups using the same approach were conducted in Vrbas, moderated by the project consultant. The focus groups included: the representatives of polluting industries, municipal authorities, local community government officials and representatives of public utility companies, representatives of civil associations, and other relevant stakeholders (Annex C.) The twenty-three participants were provided with comments and suggestions according to the discussion topics prepared by the project team (Annex A.). The representatives were divided into two groups as follows:

The first focus group included 11 participants, which represented polluting companies (Carnex-Meat Processing, Vrbas, Eterna Kula, etc.) and also included municipal representatives (mayor of the Vrbas and Kula municipality, local community government officials, community waste management company, etc.), a business sector representative and other stakeholders representatives.

The second focus group included 12 participants among which were civil society representatives (non-governmental organization representatives, mainly those dealing with environmental issues, civil association and society representatives), health practitioners, media people representatives, sport club representatives and some community members living in the vicinity of the polluted area.

3.2. Participant Characteristics

The number of participants by gender, age and education structure is shown in Table 1, Table 2. and Table 3.

Table 1: Gender Structure

Gender	No of participants
Male	16
Female	7
Total	23

Table 2: Age Structure

Age (years)	No of participants
18-35	4
35-55	13
Over 55	6
Total	23

Table 3: Educational Structure

Type of education	No of participants
Primary school	0
Vocational school	2
Secondary school	3
University	18
Total	23

As can be seen from the tables, the twenty-three participants included seven women and sixteen men, mainly between the ages of 35 and 55, with university degrees (18 of 23). The survey questions served as a base for a conversational setting and dynamic discussion which provided useful background information for further development of the UNDP project. The focus group participants were generally quite responsive when answering questions set in the Focus Group

Discussion Guidelines (Annex A.) Overall, in both groups the discussion was lively, serious and with reasonable clear ideas and suggestions.



3.3. Focus Groups' Discussion Results (Transcription of discussion)

The participants responded to a series of questions related to how they were informed and what they knew about the UNDP project, the effectiveness and impact of the action, project relevance and expected sustainability as well as project efficiency, according to the Focus Group Discussion Guidelines prepared in advance (Annex A.). In particular we were interested in the UNDP project and its contribution to the overall relevance of the action. The following sections will explore each element in more detail:

(A.) Information and knowledge on the UNDP project component

One of the first goals of the focus group research was to estimate the level to which the citizens of Vrbas and Kula are informed about the project as a whole and about the UNDP project component (construction works in progress (Annex A)). According to the statements of participants included in the discussion in the First focus group they are well informed that this complex project is divided into three phases. The first of these is construction of a new waste water network which will connect Kula and Vrbas and enable collection of all the communal and industrial pre-treated waste water. The second phase of the project consists of construction of a central waste water treatment plant in Vrbas. The third phase is the most complex part of the project – cleaning the polluted sediments. When talking about specific parts of the project, it was concluded that all of the components are equally important and necessary for completing the final goal. It was also stressed that the UNDP project which will facilitate completion of the remaining phases and enable revitalization of the Grand Backa Canal is of great importance to the people of both Vrbas and Kula. Some participants of the First focus group expressed comments as follows:

"Taking into consideration that the overall project objective is to improve the environmental situation and the quality of life of citizens living in this region, all activities are important for the goal we are trying to achieve. Construction of a new waste water network for collecting communal and pre-treated industrial waste waters is an important phase that is underway and we hope this UNDP project, supported by the Dutch government, will bring us to the next phase that is targeting the construction of a central waste water treatment plant in Vrbas"

Some participants of the focus groups stressed the importance of the cooperation of different actors while handling the project. Cooperation between foreign and domestic representatives was emphasized as a specific positive experience. It was pointed out that different participants have cooperated on this complex undertaking: the UNDP, the Ministry of Environmental Protection, the province (Vojvodina) authorities in Novi Sad and the municipal authorities of Vrbas and Kula. Senior representatives of both municipalities who were active members of the First focus group said that synergy is an important strength. One of them emphasizes:

"There is a great level of agreement, between the Ministry of Environmental Protection, the province authorities in Novi Sad, foreign donors and the municipal authorities in Vrbas and Kula, that the most important works of remediation of the Grand Backa Canal should be

finished by the end of 2010. All of the citizens of our two municipalities can't wait for the time when the Canal will be clean and navigable."

There was a discussion in which the participants spoke emotionally about the pollution of the Grand Backa Canal and its influence on their lives. They also mentioned their expectations about the project in general, and improving their living environment. We have a couple of examples of those kinds of comments:

"The canal is a huge problem, and we cannot live any more in Kula" or

"The fact that the Canal might be clean one day is so nice, that it seems a dream. All the people of good will in our region welcome the efforts for the construction of a waste water network and remediation of Canal. We are really ready and committed to finish the remediation of Canal so it will be the pride of all of us that live right next to it."

It can be concluded that the representatives of the polluting companies such as representatives of the meat processor "Carnex" from Vrbas, the sugar refinery "Backa" from Vrbas, or the leather factory Eterna from Kula didn't say much. On the other side participants from the local municipal authorities had much more to say, but they all agreed on their readiness to complete building of infrastructure and cleaning the Grand Backa Canal. Some of the company representatives underlined that during the process of privatization, local authorities should pay more attention to the taxes that future owners should pay. There was more emphases on the environmental standards that need to be achieved in the future. For example, one of the representatives of polluting industries from Kula says:

"At the moment of privatization there should be much more attention aimed at charges for ecological damage that future owners of the industries would have to pay."



After this discussion all other polluting industry representatives agreed that the process of economic reconstruction of the polluting companies must bear in mind that future owners have to take care of environmental standards. From some of the discussions it can be concluded that future owners of the companies are trying to find ways to avoid strict environmental standards. Taking all the facts into consideration it was decided that the local municipal authorities, in the period of economic reconstruction of the polluting companies must consider strict environmental standards that future owners would have to follow.

This focus group research also pointed out that the participants at the Second focus group are not well informed about the complex project for the Grand Backa Canal and the specific role of the UNDP component. To improve awareness of project issues among citizens living in this area it seems that the project activities should be accompanied by an awareness strengthening campaign amongst the general public to improve understanding of the broader project components. The participants recommend media campaigns, involvement of experts, workshops, seminars and public debates could be included in future advocacy efforts involved in the UNDP project (Annex D).

(B.) Effectiveness

In the next segment it is concluded that construction of a new waste water network provided through UNDP support which would enable collection of all the communal and industrial pre-treated waste water is an important part for achieving the broader goal – improving the environment in Vrbas and Kula. It is estimated that construction works on the missing waste water network that needs to gather all the communal waste and pre-treated industrial waste is one of the key phases necessary for achieving the cleaning of the Grand Backa Canal and achieving a clean environment in Vrbas and the surrounding area. Statements the participants of the first focus group made include:

"Our goal is to transform Vrbas from the most polluted environment to a clean place so we can produce ecologically clean food."

A few participants expressed concern that the participants included in the Second focus group were more upset. They suggested that living in the vicinity of the Canal could be dangerous. The most vivid impression about the level of pollution in the Canal and about life near the Canal, was given by a local fisherman, a member of the Second focus group:

"I live 50 meters from the Canal and it is becoming unbearable, especially when it is this kind of weather, before rain. Living next to the Canal is horrible. It is a dead Canal that stinks a lot, and it is impossible to live next to it. At one moment we were ready to bury the whole Canal so those working and living upstream could see what they let into the water. Why should they poison our children?"

Most facts about pollution in the Canal were given by the other participants of the Second focus group who are very concerned about living conditions in this area. For example, a second group participant, a medical doctor presented us the results of research that she had conducted. Her presentation deals with the

correlation between pollution from the Canal and the number of cancer victims in the area:

"Since I was a young medical doctor in the Health Center in Vrbas, I have noticed that people suffer from various serious diseases. Even then, the citizens of Vrbas told me that people living close to the Canal are suffer most from cancer. Research about the correlation of lung cancer and life close to the Canal that was conducted by my colleague suggests that there is much more lung cancer in this area. We didn't have the financial resources to scientifically prove these results and promote our research, but the number of victims is really high. People contract cancer much more than in other areas and sometimes our results about citizens suffering from cancer begin to look like a conspiracy theory."

Representatives of non-government organizations were also included in the Second focus group. One such representative from *Pokret Gorana Kule*, emphasized that problems of pollution in the Canal have to be solved with projects like this one. Focus group participant comments included:

"It has been years since this Canal was navigable. There have been speculations about increasing pollution, but it is most important for the Canal to be cleaned. It is also necessary to punish the polluting industries."

Some participants in the discussion said that it is important to speed up completion of the whole project, so the citizens get a clean environment soon. Representatives of civil society organizations and citizens participating on the Second focus group often asked the representatives of municipal authorities:

„When will we have a clean environment around the Canal? " or

„When will I be able to open up the window and breath freely in my home next to the Canal?"

The meetings also served as a good opportunity for citizens to get better information about project components and a broad range of different issues about project implementation and the project completion deadline. For example, the highest representatives of local authorities of Kula and Vrbas, who were members of the First focus group, announced that the project of remediation of the Grand Backa Canal would be completed by the end of 2010. It was a good opportunity for citizens to overcome a lack of information about the overall project and the UNDP role in the whole action.

Much of the debate was devoted to discussions about different actors involved in the project, such as the UNDP, the Dutch Government, the Ministry of Environmental Protection, the Fund for Capital Investments, Vojvodina Province and the local authorities. The general impression is that all important actors involved in the Grand Backa Canal project are collaborating appropriately. However, it was underlined by some participants that citizens and their organizations should be more involved in decision-making processes. A lack of information was underlined by the representative of the non-governmental organization dealing with environmental issues in Vrbas.

(C.) Impact of the project

In general, focus group participants underlined the positive effects of the project for remediation of the Grand Backa Canal. Taking all the facts into consideration, the great majority of the municipal representatives included in the First focus group expressed satisfaction with the project and underlined that this is the most important project in the recent history of the area. For example, a representative of Vrbas municipality says:

„There hasn't been a more important task in this municipality than this one is."

Another issue raised by the participants from the polluting industries also participating at the First focus group was connected with possible negative effects of this project on new environmental norms and standards which could affect polluting companies. For example a representative from the sugar refinery said:

„Polluting companies pay high taxes for preserving the environment, but that money doesn't come back to this area."

During the discussion there it was said that the whole concept of waste waters isn't completely reliable, that cleaning devices aren't fully functional, so that building a centralized system is an important component in improving the environment. One participant in the First focus group pointed out an incident that took place recently:

„Faecal water from Vrbas comes to Kula, and the sewage isn't cleansed as it should have been. That is why the process of building a centralized system should be completed soon, as quickly as possible".

At one moment it seemed like the representatives of Kula and Vrbas were blaming each other of the pollution. For example, representatives of Vrbas pointed out some of the major polluting industries in Kula – the leather factory „Eterna" and „Sloboda" industry. The problem is that both of these companies are in the process of transition of ownership structure (from public to private), so it isn't quite clear who is responsible for the pollution coming from these companies, especially from the leather factory.

It was also concluded that some regulations dealing with environmental taxes are not simulative. The focus group participants pointed out that municipal authorities and Vojvodina province authorities should cooperate more on finding good amendments in the area of environmental taxes and their distribution.

It seems that the most complex activity will be pollution sediment excavation, disposal and treatment of hazardous waste excavated from the Canal. There were no common insights into final remediation of the Grand Backa Canal component exposed by two focus group participants. Some of the focus group participants, especially those from the Second group expressed their concern that polluted sediment remediation is a risky task, which could produce negative effects for the people living next to the Canal. For example, statements they made included:

„Looking back on cleaning of the Canal, there were cases of people suffering from serious illness after they breathed gasses that come from the polluted sediments. These findings indicate that we would not like to see that in the future. We want research that will tell us what is the sludge made of and we want to be asked about that project component in every detail“.

Very few participants from both focus groups hesitated or chose not to discuss this topic. The most common discussions were related to their fears on the process of project implementation at the phase of remediation of the Grand Backa Canal. Transparency of results has been underlined as one of the main demands from the citizens who are afraid that cleaning the Canal can have negative implications for the health of the people living nearby.

There were some really impulsive responses exposed by the participants of the Second focus group, such as this one:

„There shouldn't be any cleaning of Canal before we find out what the polluted sediments are made of! We will insist on knowing about this component and we will not allow the project to continue before we know everything about the nature of the sludge that it is intended to move.“

Representatives of non-government organizations were not satisfied with their involvement in the decision making process during project implementation. One of the representatives of these organizations included in the Second focus group said:

„I am pretty well informed about everything that is happening around the project of remediation of the Grand Backa Canal, but I am not fully included in the decision making process. Citizens have to be more involved in these actions“

And the medical doctor showed that she was afraid what might be in that polluted sediment saying:

„I'd be really careful with the third phase of the project, because we don't know what may happen. We have to be sure to know what is in the Canal“

Considering that discussion about remediation of the Canal took up most of the discussion, experts in the field that are involved with the UNDP project gave necessary explanations about the activities that are planned during this third phase of the project:

„Analysis of the polluted sediment quality in Grand Backa Canal needs to be done. It is the next phase that should be prepared really well and it will start this year. First research will be targeted on analyzing the influence of all components of the polluted sediments on the environment. All of these results will be available to the public. We will organize public discussions in which all the official institutions will be involved, as well as the citizens and their organizations. Three public debates will take place, discussing this problem, after which the final decision about the remediation of the Canal will be declared.“

After this part of the discussion it was concluded that the whole process should be transparent and that there is no institution that would consider doing anything to harm the environment and citizens that live nearby. It is also underlined that it is too early to speak about polluted sediments because a clear picture is not available at the moment. Most of the participants agreed that remediation of the Grand Backa Canal can be done only in accordance with the relevant data that will come from the research which would be conducted. This assumes that any negative implications of the polluted sediments should be considered after complex research.

(D.) Project relevance

Taking all the facts into consideration, the focus group participants agreed that the UNDP project is extremely important, not only for Vrbas and Kula, but for the whole region of Backa and the Province of Vojvodina. It was concluded that remediation of the Canal and everything around that project is necessary for the region. The UNDP project has a wider perspective taking into consideration that the pollution has a chain reaction on the environmental situation in the whole region. This is why it is expected that cleaning the Canal in Vrbas and Kula will have a positive effect on the whole of Backa, since there is a lot of pollution that is now transferred and it can be felt over the whole region.

The focus group participants had a number of positive comments on the healthy environment that is expected after project completion and this could be a significant strength for the development of agriculture in the area. For example, a representative of Vrbas municipality included in the First focus group points out:

"A healthy environment is significant for the agriculture of the region. Ecologically clean and healthy food has a growing price on the markets. It will be even more significant as Serbia gets closer to joining the European Union."

(E.) Project sustainability

Another issue raised by the Focus Group Discussion Guide (Annex A.) was project sustainability. Considering the discussions on this issue we can conclude that most important stakeholders in Vrbas and Kula strongly believe in UNDP project sustainability. The UNDP project which will facilitate completion of the remaining phases of the whole project will be sustainable they concluded. After finishing the project of remediation of the Grand Backa Canal, the overall process won't stop, according to statements of the group discussion participants. On the contrary, the care for the environmental situation around the Canal will be continued. The National Investment Plan, the Province of Vojvodina budget and other donors promise their support for the finalization of the overall project. In addition, strict environmental standards, which must be followed as part of the EU harmonization process, are important for the sustainability of environmental protection. Each group of participants included in the First focus group believe that the municipal authorities and citizens will continue to take care of the Canal after the project is completed. In particular, one of the municipality of Kula representatives said:

"I am 50 years old. I can remember a time when we could bathe in the Canal, make love next to the Canal, which now looks like a septic tank."

Only 10 km upstream from the polluted area one can see a gem of nature. If we clean the Canal, and we make it as it once was, we will know to appreciate it and save it from becoming polluted again."

On the other side, representatives of non-government organizations included in the Second focus group think that project sustainability will depend upon their involvement. The general impression is that specific programmes of information and education for the general public about keeping the Canal clean will be most important for project sustainability.

(F.) Project efficiency

All of the participants included at the First focus group agreed that the amount of investment planned for the project was sufficient to achieve the expected results. Citizens of Vrbas and Kula have developed an environmental awareness and that's why they know that big investments by the donors, the Dutch government and the UNDP, are important for taking care of the environment. Considering the time and the way the project is conducted, some suggested that the project is too complex and too expensive, that it is taking too long and that it isn't quite clear why certain phases take so much time to be finished.



There were some discussions about the challenges that some of the main polluting industries have to overcome. One of the main difficulties is connected with the high standards which polluting industries have to meet. Several participants pointed out that these enterprises have to pay a high price for strict environmental standards and norms.

Some of the participants said that the efficiency of the project depends upon the donors that finance the whole project. One participant of the First focus group said:

„I strongly believe that the project is efficient, since the foreign investors are giving money. They follow where their money is going to and how it's spent. If it was our donors, I wouldn't have the same amount of trust in completing the project.“

Taken as a whole it is believed that the project is highly relevant for the citizens of Vrbas, Kula and the surrounding area and that they have great expectations about the intervention which is underway. The participants generally said that it is highly effective project. An environmental organization representative included in the Second focus group expressed concern that the industries in the region need to take care of their sewage systems first. According to the key findings on this component of focus group discussion results, the costs of intervention are justified by the expected final results which would be significant for restoring a clean and healthy environment.

3.4. Analysis

In relation to the particular components of the project it is estimated that all components are equally important and necessary for the completion of the project and the final goal of a clean environment. It is also generally believed by focus group participants that various stakeholders like the UNDP, the Ministry of Environmental Protection of the Republic of Serbia, the Province authorities of Vojvodina in Novi Sad, and local municipal authorities in Vrbas and Kula are successfully cooperating on the project;

Considering effectiveness of the project it is concluded that all of the construction works for waste water infrastructure are significant for achievement of goals. Most of the arguments on the present level of pollution in the Canal are given by the authorities and representatives of citizens associations, representatives of active non-governmental organizations, but also - fishermen, medical doctors, biologists and people living directly by the Canal;

Project discussions were also an opportunity for the people living in these communities to better inform themselves about the project components and the plans for the achievement and finalization of particular phases. Taking all facts into consideration, the senior representatives of the Kula and Vrbas local government have announced that the whole project of the remediation of Grand Backa Canal will be completed by the end of 2010.

Most participants felt that all the efforts regarding remediation of the Grand Backa Canal would have positive effects on environmental protection. Some suggested that the project is the most significant intervention to be seen for some time. It can be said that project components are accepted by the representatives of various institutions such as polluting industries representatives, local government stakeholders and also citizens and the civil associations;

An important finding of this report is the disagreement on the information about the remediation of the polluted sediments. Most of the focus group participants expressed concern about the negative effects of the polluted sediments for the people living in the vicinity of the Canal. It was concluded that future investigation of the polluted sediments which would come before the remediation of the Canal has to be transparent and the data should be made available to the wider public in the region;

In relation to the relevance of the project, the focus group participants agreed that the UNDP project referring to the construction of a waste water system which will gather communal and pre-treated industrial waste waters is exceptionally significant not only for Vrbas and Kula, but also for the whole Backa and Vojvodina regions. It was concluded that the complex project has a wider significance considering the pollution that is happening has a chain effect and interdependent influence on the environment in the wider region;

Based on the discussion we could conclude that the most important stakeholders in Vrbas and Kula municipalities strongly believe in project sustainability. By the end of the project the care for environmental improvement and the protection of the Canal will continue. The participants believe that the municipality communal institutions as well as the citizens and the civil associations will continue to take care and keep up Canal maintenance;

All of the participants agreed that the investment in the project was sufficient to achieve the expected results. Citizens of Vrbas and Kula have a high degree of environmental awareness and that is why they know that the investments of the donors, especially the Dutch government and the UNDP, are fundamental for finalizing the goals of cleaning the environment. It is underlined by discussion that the project could be finished sooner and that it shouldn't wait for completion with the other phases.

The final findings of public awareness monitoring programme will be obtained after project completion and compared with initial-baseline findings.

4. Conclusions

The focus group research report was prepared as one segment of the UNDP project conducted in Vrbas municipality. The key conclusions are:

- Focus group participants said that the completion of the missing part of the main waste water collector within the new waste water network will be essential for resolving the biggest environmental problem in Vojvodina. They mostly agreed that the waste water network will connect Kula and Vrbas and enable collection of all the communal and industrial pre-treated waste waters which is a very significant component of future efforts to revitalize the Grand Backa Canal.
- Participants also recognized that all of the project components, construction of a new waste water network, a central waste water treatment plant and remediation of the Grand Backa Canal are equally important for the people living in the polluted area. Through the focus group discussion participants underlined that the UNDP project will facilitate completion of the remaining phases and enable the results of the broader action. The focus group participants had a number of positive comments about close cooperation between foreign and domestic donors. They emphasized that synergy developed through the project would be significant for overall project achievement and expected results;

The focus group discussion organized in Vrbas was a unique opportunity for citizens to get better information about project components and project finalization results and deadlines. The meetings served as an opportunity for more explanation about the UNDP project aims and expected results. It was also opportunity for other project actions to be explained. For example, the highest representatives of municipal authorities of Kula and Vrbas announced that the project of remediation of the Grand Backa Canal would reach the overall objectives by the end of 2010. More specific information obtained by the focus groups research is that:

- There were no common insights into final remediation of Grand Backa Canal component – polluted sediments remediation, disposal and treatment of hazardous waste excavated from the Canal. The First focus group which included representatives of the government and stakeholders was much better informed about project implementation and expected results. The participants included in this group expressed more positive statements and satisfaction with the project. From the other side, representatives of civil society and citizens included in the Second focus group were less well informed and more critical about the overall positive results of the project. Most of the Second focus group participants expressed concern that polluted sediments remediation is a high risk task, which could further impact the environment and it has been concluded that awareness raised amongst the general public and policy makers should be an integral part of the UNDP component;
- The most important stakeholders in Vrbas and Kula municipality included in the research strongly believe in project sustainability. Focus group research suggests the high probability of continued long-term benefit of the overall project as well as the UNDP project component. It seems that after finishing the project, the public concern will grow and strict environmental standards will be applied especially due to the fact that Serbia will be harmonized with EU environmental standards and norms in the future. Both focus group members believed in project effectiveness, but it could be concluded that the

First focus group participants are more convinced that construction of a new waste water network provided through UNDP support would be an important part of the overall project. They made more highly positive comments on the effectiveness of the project than the Second group participants.

5. References

- 1.** Đurić Sanja, (2007) Fokus-grupni intervju, Službeni glasnik, Beograd
- 2.** Loking Back-Moving Forward, Sida Evaluation Manual, 2004
- 3.** Sharken, Simon, J., The Wilder Nonprofit Field Guide to Conducting Successful Focus Groups unpublished paper of the Amherst Wilder Foundation
- 4.** <http://www.guideline.com/capabilities/market-research/focusgroups.html>, June 2008.

6. LIST OF ANNEXES

ANNEX A. FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDELINE

I. INTRODUCTION AND EXPLANATION

1. Good morning and welcome to our discussion. My name is Marija Kolin. On behalf of the UNDP project team and myself, I would like to thank you for attending this discussion about the project "Strengthening capacities in the Western Balkans countries to address environmental problems through remediation of high priority hot spots: Serbia country component - Remediation of the Grand Backa Canal in Vrbas.
2. This discussion is part of a public awareness monitoring program. Taking into consideration that the overall project objective is to achieve improvement of the environmental situation and quality of life for citizens living in and around polluted areas, the monitoring programme will undertake two focus groups in Vrbas. More precisely, it is considered that focus group research would be the best way to find out from community stakeholders and residents their perceptions and statements about the remediation of the Grand Backa Canal multiple activities.
3. During this discussion, I will ask you a series of questions related to the main project components such as the construction of a new waste water network (in progress) and industrial waste water pre-treatments, construction of a central waste water treatment plant (CWWTP) and clean up and remediation of the Grand Backa Canal. As the project also includes an institutional strengthening and capacity building component, we need to hear how people perceive its importance for the achievement of the overall goal - complete remediation of the canal.
4. A report will be prepared as one component of the UNDP intervention in the municipality of Vrbas. The findings and recommendations of the baseline information about the situation before the intervention will be used as input for the project decision-making process. In addition, evaluation through a focus group survey should provide information concerning overall project design and its specific components that would be credible and useful for people in the community.
5. When you answer, please express your thoughts and concerns about each of the questions or any other related issues. Your opinions and ideas are very important to us. Please remember that there are no right or wrong answers to any of these questions. Also, feel free to state your own viewpoints, feelings, and personal experiences.
6. We want and need to hear from everyone here today. The more information we get from you, the more it will help us to develop a better report and conclusions. All comments are welcome — both positive and negative. Please feel free to express yourself if you disagree with someone else's opinion. We want to have many different points of view. Your opinions are very valuable to us. If you should have a question during the discussion, please wait until the end of the discussion and we will be happy to answer any of your questions or to refer you to someone who can help you.
7. A tape recorder will be used during the discussion because I need to pay close attention to what you are saying. Later, I will review the tape and listen carefully to your responses to my questions. I will then take the information I obtain from each group and write a report. Please remember that you will not be identified in any way. This discussion is confidential.
8. Our session will last about 2 hours. We will take a break in one hour.

9. Let's start by introducing ourselves. As I said before, my name is Marija Kolin. I am sociologist researcher and UNDP national consultant responsible for public awareness monitoring of selected focus groups in Vrbas.
10. Please, give your name and the agency, institution or nongovernmental organization you are representing.

II. DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

A. Information and knowledge on the UNDP Project: the extent to which focus group participants are informed about overall UNDP project objectives and their components

- What do you think is the most important activity in order to bring the canal back to life (construction of a new waste water network, construction of central waste water treatment plant, remediation of Grand Backa Canal or capacity building and other relevant issues listed above in the UNDP project)?
- What about components that you think are not so important for revival of critical areas (construction of a new waste water network, construction of a central waste water treatment plant, remediation of the Grand Backa Canal, capacity building or some other relevant issues listed above in the UNDP project)?

B. Effectiveness: The extent to which a UNDP development intervention would achieve its objectives?

- Do you think that the whole action concerning remediation of the Grand Bačka Canal at Vrbas and Kula would be significant for improvement of the environmental situation in the community and the wider region?

C. Impact: The totality of the effects of the Grand Backa Canal Project intervention – positive and negative?

- What would be the overall positive effects of the multiple activities which are relevant to the achievement of the project?
- Do you think that the project could provoke some negative effects? What kind of side effects could occur?

D. Relevance: The extent to which a development intervention confirms the needs and priorities of the people living here?

- Do you think that the Grand Backa Canal Project addresses the needs of these two municipalities?
- Do you think that this environmental action is also significant for the region of Bačka and Vojvodina as a whole? Why is the project important for the region?

E. Sustainability: The continuation of the benefits from a development intervention after the cessation of remediation of Grand Backa Canal.

- What are your expectations after finalization of the project. Do you think that the project could be sustainable? Could you estimate who would take care of environmental issues after finalization of the project? Can you tell me more?

F. Efficiency: The extent to which the costs of a development intervention can be justified by its results?

- Please comment on the extent to which the costs of the intervention provide benefit for a critical area? Could you estimate the costs-benefit relation of the remediation of Grande Backa Canal project?

III CLOSING

These are all the questions we have for you. Before we leave, does anyone have other responses or comments about the information discussed today? Thank you for coming. The information that you have provided is very important. You have been very helpful to us.

ANNEX B. INVITATION LETTER TO PARTICIPANTS

UNDP projekat: Zapadni Balkan – Remedijacija zagađene lokacije životne sredine, Komponenta u Srbiji: Remedijacija Velikog bačkog kanala

Poštovani,

Prema planiranoj strukturi rada na projektu i dogovorima koje smo postigli u opštini Vrbas, opredelili smo se da Vas pozovemo na fokus-grupno istraživanje koje će biti održano u **Skupštini opštine Vrbas, u Maloj sali na I spratu, 12.juna 2008 godine u četvrtak u 13 časova.**

Kao što Vam je verovatno poznato složeni projekat "Remedijacija Velikog bačkog kanala" počeo je da se ostvaruje. Projekat se sastoji od 3 komponente: izgradnja kanalizacionog sistema za prikupljanje komunalnih i pred-tretiranih industrijskih otpadnih voda, izgradnja centralnog postrojenja za prečišćavanje otpadnih voda i remedijacija samog Velikog bačkog kanala.

Opština Vrbas je već završila izgradnju gradskog kanalizacionog sistema i 6 km Glavnog kanalizacionog kolektora Vrbas-Kula. Predmet donacije holandske vlade je završetak nedostajućeg dela glavnog kanalizacionog kolektora u dužini od 6 km na potezu Vrbas-Kula koji sprovodi Program za razvoj Ujedinjenih nacija (UNDP) u saradnji sa Ministarstvom za zaštitu životne sredine Republike Srbije.

Kao bitna komponenta projekta predviđa se i institucionalno jačanje kapaciteta u oblasti zaštite životne sredine kao i podsticanje informisanosti građana u vezi sa zaštitom životne sredine i održivim razvojem ovog područja.

Zadatak projekta je da se unapredi stanje životne sredine i kanal vrati u svoju prvobitnu funkciju (plovnost i turizam) u Vrbasu i okolnim gradovima koji su zahvaćeni posledicama preteranog zagađivanja Velikog bačkog kanala. Krajnji rezultat UNDP projekta je da se omogući završetak kompletne mreže za prikupljanje svih otpadnih voda i ona dovede do lokacije budućeg centralnog postrojenja za prečišćavanje otpadnih voda.

U skladu sa savremenim pristupom, pomenuti projekat predviđa monitoring i evaluaciju javne svesti i informisanosti o projektu (na početku i na kraju implementacije) . Metodologijom evaluacije projekta predviđeno je da 25-30 učesnika iz Vrbasa, Kule i okoline koji su pozvani na grupne diskusije, iz različitih aspekata oceni perspektivu, značaj i moguće izazove u vezi sa ostvarivanjem projekta o kojem govorimo.

Ukoliko imate dodatnih pitanja u vezi skupa na koji Vas pozivamo možete se javiti na e-mail (marija.parun.kolin@gmail.com) ili na brojeve telefona koji se navode (011-361-9467 ili 063-861-8251).

Zahvaljujemo unapred na spremnosti da nam pomognete da zajedničkim akcijama unapredimo životnu sredinu u Vrbasu i okolini.

S poštovanjem,

UNDP Projekat Zapadni Balkan - Remedijacija Velikog bačkog kanala

Konsultantkinja Dr Marija Kolin

ANNEX C. LIST OF PARTICIPANTS OF FOCUS GROUP I & II

FOCUS GROUP I

Vrbas, June 12, 2008

Moderator: Marija Kolin

UNDP Consultant

Name and surname	Organization	Position
Željko Lainović	Municipality of Vrbas	Mayor
Igor Bečić	Municipality of Vrbas	President of the Assmebly
Svetozar Bukvić	Municipality of Kula	Mayor
Beata Fridrich	Carnex Vrbas	Collaborator
Natalija Trivkovic	Vital Vrbas	Collaborator
Ratko Svorcan	Šećerana Bačka Vrbas	Collaborator
Mara Tatalović	Eterna Kula	Collaborator
Tomislav Đivuljskij	JP Direkcija za izgradnju Vrbas	Collaborator
Blažo Kostić	Ekološki fond Kula	President
Julijan Dudaš	Vodovod Kula	Collaborator
Siniša Vujović	Vodoprivredno preduzeće Bačka Vrbas	Collaborator
Aeksandra Krtolica	Departemnt for Ecology, Municip. of Vrbas	Collaborator

FOCUS GROUP II

Name and Surname	Organization	Position
Gojko Grujin	Pokret Gorana Vrbas	President
Stevan Balog	Pokret Gorana Vrbas	Member of Association
Jagodina Greber	Pokret Gorana Kula	Member of Association
Miodrag Vladislavljević	USR Zlatni karaš Vrbas	Member of Association
Brkić Slobodan	USR Amur	Member of Association
Petar Golub	LD Fazan Vrbas	President
Dr Jasmina Assi	Dom zdravlja Vrbas	Director
Nada Batrićević	Centar za socijalni rad Vrbas	Social Worker
Dragan Radojčić	OC 4.juli Vrbas	Director
Ksenija Babić	Gimnazija Žarko Zrenjanin Vrbas	Professor
Slobodan Zečević	PU Boško Buha Vrbas	Director
Nebojša Sekulić	OŠ P.P.Njegoš Vrbas	Director
Miljan Vujović	Informativni centar Vrbas	Collaborator
Ratko Đurđevac	Ekološki pokret Vrbas	President

ANNEX D. FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION, June 12, 2008 in Vrbas

(CD Sound Recording and Photos available)

