

**Statement by Ivan Zavadsky,
UNDP/GEF Danube/Black Sea Regional Programme Director,
at the Danube-Black Sea Ministerial Meeting
on 23 February 2007 in Bucharest**

Excellencies, dear ladies and gentlemen,

I appreciate very much the opportunity to present the UNDP/GEF results and achievements after 15 years of presence in the Danube River Basin (DRB) and Black Sea (BS) region -- not for self-praise but to demonstrate a successful model of a regional programme and to show its perspectives for the wider BS basin.

I would also like to emphasize the importance of this high level meeting for future cooperation in the DRB and BS region toward environmental improvements and strengthening regional cooperation.

The ‘GEF Partnership’ and its roots

The 15 year history of UNDP/GEF interventions in the region started in 1992 by supporting the basic principles of transboundary cooperation. Through the development of more advanced tools for regional cooperation in the technical field, it led to the design of the ‘GEF Danube/Black Sea Strategic Partnership’ in 2000, in order to fully utilise the synergy between capacity building and the demonstration of nutrient reduction through pilot investment projects. The Partnership is targeted at assistance in the Danube and Black Sea countries to address transboundary concerns from nutrient pollution and to permit Black Sea ecosystems to recover to similar conditions as those observed in the 1960s.

The GEF Strategic Partnership includes three components. The first is the ‘Danube Regional Project (DRP)’. The second is the ‘Black Sea Ecosystem Recovery Regional Project’ for the six Black Sea littoral countries. The third is the ‘Investment Fund for Nutrient Reduction’ implemented by the World Bank, geared to supporting single-country, single-sector investment sub-projects for nutrient reduction as well as wetland and floodplain restoration.

The process of political cooperation went on in parallel resulting in entry into force of two regional conventions and in expansion of the EU from six new members in the region.

The recent close cooperation and joint management of both UNDP/GEF regional projects actually boosted the coordination of two UNDP projects as well as the cooperation of both regional Commissions in implementing their joint MoU on meeting their strategic goals.

In order to strengthen the institutions, working structures and technical and scientific base of the Black Sea Commission (BSC) at the national level, UNDP/GEF provided focused assistance and development programmes aimed at achieving the full sustainability and operability of the BSC institutional framework. Emphasis was given to activities strengthening public involvement in environmental decision-making, access to information and raising awareness of the BS’s environmental problems and solutions among stakeholders and citizens.

Danube interventions

The interventions of UNDP/GEF continued to be critical in helping to drive the EU accession process and in fulfilling Danube country obligations, from enhancing the Integrated River Basin Management (IRBM) capacities of institutions to advising on national legislative reform to testing best agricultural practices and supporting public participation at all levels.

Reducing nutrient pollution was especially important for the DRP given the expanded interest of GEF in downstream eutrophication problems in the Black Sea. Furthermore, nutrient reduction activities would benefit all Danube managers including UNDP/GEF, EC, ICPDR and the Danube countries given the fact that nutrient pollution was one of four key issues that Danube countries risked in not being able to meet the EU Water Framework Directive (WFD) requirements.

Other key DRP targets included introducing best agricultural practices, conserving wetlands, improving the financial operations of water and wastewater utilities, reducing phosphate use in laundry detergents, improving public awareness and strengthening public participation and NGOs.

Raising awareness about Danube issues and solutions through information dissemination and strategic communications, and encouraging public participation in environmental decision-making, have been key features of building IRBM in the basin. For example, the DRP Small Grants Programme was the DRP's main vehicle for engaging local stakeholders. 120 National Grants and 10 Regional Grants were distributed to NGOs in 11 countries.

In 2004, the DRP initiated a component to build the capacities of government authorities to provide water-related information to the public. Demonstration projects at selected local pollution hot spots are 'road testing' reinforced community involvement in solving water pollution issues. The project also aims to strengthen the capacities of the ICPDR to provide public information.

Environmental Progress

Having cooperated in numerous joint efforts, the UNDP within the GEF Strategic Partnership, ICPDR, EC and Danube countries can take credit for recent measurable improvements in the Black Sea's northwest shelf. Nowhere on Earth have such demonstrable water quality and ecosystem improvements been observed in a large river and adjacent sea as in the Danube and Black Sea ecosystems over the last decade. As a result, the Black Sea is showing initial evidence of recovery.

Nowhere has such nitrogen and phosphorus pollution reduction been achieved as to reverse the documented dead zone of oxygen depletion in the Black Sea's northwest shelf. Oxygen depletion in the lower levels of the sea observed in the 1970s and 1980s has been virtually eliminated, with oxygen levels now at or near saturation in most areas. Significant progress was made toward achieving and even exceeding (for phosphorus) the objective of stabilising nutrient loads to the Black Sea at 1997 levels. In the Danube Basin, nitrogen emissions have decreased by 20% and phosphorus almost by 50% over the last 15 years.

The frequency of algae blooms has decreased markedly compared to levels in the 1980s, and surface chlorophyll concentrations have also shown measurable decreases. The number of benthic species observed in the early 2000s was 1.5x - 2x higher than levels found in the late 1980s, but still more than 1.5x lower than conditions in the 1960s.

Numerous environmental improvements were made at the local level, especially where demonstration and pilot projects were implemented during various programmes and sub-projects. Concrete local results also came from NGOs that received financial grants.

Donor interventions

The UNDP/GEF intervention was, together with EC assistance, essential as a catalyst for progress. Initial efforts focused on assessing information, building capacities and institutions and supporting the creation of the legally binding Danube River Protection Convention.

The capacity of the Danube countries to continuously meet the EU's accession and legislative challenges were significantly strengthened by all of the decisions, programmes, activities, outputs and achievements resulting from 15 years of building an IRBM framework in the basin. The Danube's 'managers' were highly prepared for, and in a state of 'excellent readiness', to meet EU requirements, perhaps more so than any other river basin in Europe. They continue to be so.

Over the last 15 years, UNDP/GEF and EC programmes made significant interventions to reduce nutrient pollution. It was both necessary and strategically important for GEF programmes to build on the efforts of the EC, given that EU processes became the main driving force for getting DRB countries to improve their environmental performance. In effect, through their respective nutrient pollution reduction efforts, both UNDP/GEF and the EU helped meet each other's goals. Related legal, policy and institutional reforms were facilitated and transboundary nutrient pollution reduction strategies were mainstreamed into national strategies and plans.

Next steps

To achieve sustainable development based on a balanced relationship between social-economic development and the protection of the environment in the Danube and Black Sea region, it is important to broadly disseminate the results of the UNDP/GEF Danube Regional and Black Sea Ecosystem Recovery Projects. Cooperation between all countries should be intensified to maintain the important progress that has been made and to use the UNDP/GEF intervention in the D/BS region as a model for other regions of the world.

An extensive number of lessons have been learned in implementing the DRP in the Danube River Basin. Some are transferable to other river basins worldwide. Some are Danube-specific, the result of political and economic processes occurring within the Danube Basin over the last 15 years (e.g. EU accession).

However, the political will to cooperate with each other and international donor assistance were two key pre-conditions to facilitate a win-win situation for all parties involved. In the DRB these pre-conditions catalysed the development of the building blocks -- a regional legal framework, regional coordinating institution, joint programmes and actions, evidence-based

information, best technologies and practices and public participation and communications -- allowing the full development of such a successful programme.

UNDP/GEF is leaving the DRB with a strong and sustainable regional institutional framework to address all the remaining challenges in WFD implementation, including the further reduction of nutrient and hazardous substances pollution and the coordination of sectoral policies influencing the environmental health of basin waters.

The Strategic Partnership between the two regional UNDP programmes, complementing capacity building activities with investment pilot projects and partnerships among donors, as between GEF and the EU, has showed a practical example of using synergy in practice and of the effective use of scarce financial resources.

I would like to conclude my presentation by welcoming acknowledgement of the role and results of the UNDP/GEF in the DRB in the Ministerial Declaration, which will be adopted at the end of this meeting.

And finally, thanks go to all who participated in, and supported, the UNDP/GEF programmes and projects in the D/BS region.