

Preliminary Findings

The terminal evaluation of the project *'Best practice of sub-regional cooperation: Partnership for the Support of the Carpathian Convention and other Mountain Regions'* – contracted by UNEP Nairobi – is currently carried out and should be finalized in November 2014. The evaluation is looking at the performance of the project in delivering services, in short-comings in project implementation, and is identifying lessons of operational relevance for future project formulation and implementation. The findings of the evaluation are based on a desk top review of relevant documents and – to the extent possible under the limited resources available – on interviews with selected key stakeholders. This document provides the first preliminary findings.

Introduction and general aspects

At the request of the Ukraine government and following the momentum of the Bucharest Summit (2001), UNEP promoted and serviced the negotiations aimed at developing the Carpathian Convention. The Framework Convention on the Protection and Sustainable Development of the Carpathians was adopted and signed by seven countries (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovak Republic, Ukraine) in May 2003 in Kyiv, Ukraine. The Parties called for a UNEP serviced interim Secretariat and requested UNEP's Regional Office for Europe (UNEP-ROE) to provide the arrangements. The Carpathian Convention entered into force in January 2006.

The UNEP project supporting the Carpathian Convention process started in October 2003. With the establishment of UNEP Vienna – Interim Secretariat of the Carpathian Convention (ISCC) in 2004 its scope was broadened. UNEP Vienna – ISCC was given the additional mandate to act as the environmental focal point within the Mountain Partnership Secretariat, to promote cooperation in Central and South Eastern Europe and to serve as UNEP's focal point for Austria based international organizations.

The project evaluation covers more than ten years operation of a project, which in the course of its implementation underwent many revisions, due to the decisions of the Conference of Parties (COP) and changes in the mandate of UNEP Vienna – ISCC

Findings and conclusions

Generally speaking, this project cannot be compared with 'normal' projects having a clear goal to be achieved at the project's end. The implementation of the Convention – including its outreach to other mountain regions in the world – is an ongoing process. The same is true for the functions to catalyze sub-regional cooperation in the Balkans, global mountain cooperation and liaison.

There is clear evidence that signing of the Convention as a sub-regional instrument for the Carpathians – based on the needs of governments and other stakeholders – was an excellent idea to strengthen regional cooperation. UNEP played a major role in the support and leadership of this process, together with supporting initiatives from the Alpine countries, and in addition, managed to transfer experiences and lessons learnt to other mountain regions, specifically to the Balkans.

Institutional issues and implementation arrangements

As regards implementation arrangements for the Convention, the rules of procedures and financial rules for the Conference of the Parties of the Convention were agreed during COP 1 in December 2006. Guiding, coordination and implementing bodies, such as the Carpathian Convention Implementation Committee and the National Focal Points are performing their duties. Furthermore, to date eight sectoral Working Groups have been established and are operational.

Institutional structures are important for implementing legal, policy and strategic decisions, e.g. the Carpathian Network of Protected Areas and the Carpathian Wetlands Initiative. Both structures are fully operational on the regional level and developed key documents, such as the Strategic Action Plan for the implementation of the Biodiversity Protocol.

At the request of Contracting Parties, UNEP Vienna is serving as the Interim Secretariat for the CC, since 2004 hosted by Austria in the Vienna International Centre. The core team consists of three UNEP employees (Head of UNEP Vienna – ISCC, Programme Officer and Financial Assistant). These employees are supported by one staff member seconded by the European Academy (EURAC). Currently eight professional and support staff are working on a consultancy basis and are financed through projects.

Since the opening of the UNEP Vienna – ISCC, the office is ensuring UNEP’s liaison with the Secretariats of the Alpine Convention, the International Partnership for Sustainable Development of Mountain Regions and the Danube Protection Convention. In addition, UNEP Vienna – ISCC is acting as a Focal Point for the ENVSEC Initiative in the Balkans and plays a major role promoting cooperation between countries and implementing the UNEP Programme of Work (PoW) in the countries of South-Eastern Europe and the Danube-Carpathian region.

UNEP Vienna – ISCC services to the Carpathian Convention are still on an interim basis. The seat of the Permanent Secretariat will be decided by the Contracting Parties to the Convention.

The evaluation could make clear that the establishment of UNEP Vienna – ISCC was an important and sustainable institutional arrangement, that is of broader importance for UNEP and will continue after the end of this project.

Achievements of outputs

The project successfully produced the programmed activities and outputs as outlined in UNEP’s internal planning documents, both as regards the adopted Programme of Work of the Convention and UNEP’s PoW. Concerning the Convention, ratification and implementation is well underway. To the present date three Protocols have been adopted: Biodiversity Protocol, Forestry Protocol and Tourism Protocol. Related documents have already been approved, e.g. Strategic Action Plan for the implementation of the Biodiversity Protocol or are supposed to be adopted by COP4 in September 2014, like the Transport Protocol, the Strategic Action Plan for Forests and the Carpathian Red List of Species.

The Convention process provides the overall framework, and there is evidence that UNEP Vienna – ISCC is effective in servicing the Convention process and steering cooperation amongst Parties. Countries started to agree on joint objectives (through the Protocols and strategic documents) and there are first visible steps to develop laws, policies and programmes in coherence with regional priorities. In the Balkans UNEP Vienna –

ISCC is successful in promoting and steering cooperation between countries, proven by its prominent role in the ENVSEC Initiative, including transboundary activities and the increasing project portfolio.

The evaluation finds that the project is on a good way to achieve its primary objectives related to the facilitation of regional cooperation (on several levels) for the protection and sustainable development in the Carpathians, and to provide best practice examples for sub-regional cooperation and partnership in other mountain regions. Nevertheless, it is obvious that project implementation is a long-term process and there is 'still a long way to go'.

Achievements are heavily depending on effectively facilitated meetings and discussions. In total UNEP Vienna – ISCC organized and/or attended 143 events, such as conferences, regional workshops, working group meetings, steering group meetings, stakeholder meetings, consultation meetings, etc. Furthermore, the Secretariat played an important role, either as the lead or as project partner, in 19 projects covering activities in the Carpathians and Alps, and as regards the Balkans, various projects under the ENVSEC Initiative and 7 GEF project. The number of publications produced is also considerable, over 50 different publications are available, ranging from reports, handbooks, feasibility studies, leaflets, etc.

Nevertheless, there are also critical voices as regards project implementation. These voices express regret that the Convention is seen as a 'soft' legislation, different than EU directives and regulations, where real possibility of financial fines and sanctions exist. There is a gap between paper and practice and a pressing need for putting priorities on the decision making levels. In some meetings, too much time is spent with endless discussions with no real output or impact, for instance on the question of the scope of the Convention and the location of its the Permanent Secretariat.

Coordination and networking

The evaluation discloses the importance of the inter-governmental platform, specifically for providing a platform for discussion, identification of needs, information sharing and the development of joint projects. Such meetings contribute to improve coordination amongst countries but also 'to open the eye to see the bigger picture', making participants aware of the connection and inter-dependence of different aspects.

Furthermore, the evaluation stresses the important role which UNEP Vienna – ISCC had and should continue to have as a Focal Point for the ENVSEC Initiative in the Balkans, highlighting the good contacts and the effective contributions to networking, both in the working groups related to specific projects in Balkan countries and also within the Mountain Partnership, e.g. UNEP's involvement in the Bhutan project related to knowledge management for sustainable development in mountain regions.

Cooperation

Compared to the situation a decade ago and knowing that there is no tradition of cooperation, there is clear indication that cooperation between countries increased. The Secretariat serves to bring together governments, partners, stakeholders, and to focus attention on commonly agreed issues.

The evaluation finds not only improved cooperation amongst Carpathian countries, but also good facilitation and cooperation between Carpathian and other mountain regions, such as the Alps, Dinaric Arc in the Balkans and others (Caucasus, Himalayas, Andes).

In the frame of the Convention process, cooperation enhanced either through relevant Working Groups for developing policy papers or through specific projects. Also improved cooperation between Balkan countries is reported, e.g. between Serbia and Montenegro in relevant sectors, which was absolutely impossible in the past. GEF Focal Point meetings, organized by UNEP Vienna – ISCC, also contributed to this aspect and it seems that countries are slowly starting to overcome historical obstacles.

In addition, the Carpathian Convention provides the legal basis for the establishment of strategic partnerships. UNEP Vienna – ISCC played a key role in developing and strengthening partnerships and up to date, the Secretariat has signed seven Memoranda of Understanding and one Memorandum of Cooperation.

Capacity building

Capacity building processes have started from the very beginning of the project and are still ongoing. In all Working Groups of the Convention, systematic capacity building of stakeholders and civil society is the main focus. Progress can be reported in making links between WGs, such as climate change, forest and PAs experts. Capacity building activities are included in almost all projects, most effectively within the CNPA, amongst others related to database and information systems.

For the Balkan countries, capacity building efforts take place mainly on policy level, e.g. the elaboration of the State of Environment Report (2012) in BiH and the preparation of National Reports to the CBD; furthermore, the development of National Action Programmes and Reporting Process under the UNCCD in Macedonia and Montenegro or working on municipalities level in Macedonia regarding desertification issues.

Integrated regional approaches

Early activities in project implementation were mainly related to biodiversity issues, but soon it became clear that the project is implemented in countries in transition with fast developments as regards transport, agriculture, mining, etc. which partly have negative impacts on the environment. UNEP Vienna – ISCC is aware of it and – to the extent possible – tries to promote integration of sectoral approaches. Examples are regional projects related to impacts of climate change or the development of pilot projects to mitigate conflicts between natural capital protection and economic development, ensuring connectivity and trying to facilitate sustainable development. The evaluation finds though that there is still a long way to go to achieve the integration of biodiversity issues into sectoral policies and the coherence with regional priorities.

Stakeholder involvement

Outcomes of the evaluation clearly demonstrate that UNEP Vienna – ISCC is very good and effective in stakeholder involvement by providing a platform for combining national, sub-regional and global aspects. The Convention process is especially unique in entertaining a wide variety of stakeholders, both in the formal meetings and in the area of Convention and Protocol implementation. The project offers many examples of active stakeholder involvement since its very beginning, taking into account their priorities and needs.

All activities are organized in a participatory way; meetings are held in good atmosphere and are open for all stakeholders, but funding for participation is the limiting factor according to NGO representatives.

Few interviewees, not directly involved in the implementation of the project, think the approach is too much top-down and only few local stakeholders are involved. This statement discloses that there is the need for improved participation mechanisms and awareness raising, as well as for strengthening stakeholder involvement on different levels.

In the Balkans, there is increasing interest as regards involvement of stakeholders, but for some countries the approach is quite new and benefits are not yet visible. As a starting point, UNEP Vienna – ISCC is organizing stakeholder discussions as regards compliance with laws and conventions.

Projects

Projects on the ground are of utmost importance for the real implementation of decisions made on the policy level. There is concurrent evidence that the project is successful in catalyzing projects. Many projects are connected and linked with the Convention and therefore, responding to the country needs, and results of projects feed into Working Groups of the Convention, where Protocols and Strategic Action Plans are elaborated, which feeds back and complements the policy cycle. UNEP Vienna – ISCC is planting the seed for projects, and some of the National Focal Points together with partner organizations are initiating projects. The number of projects is steadily increasing.

Although the project was able to catalyze many projects, the evaluation depicts some weaknesses in the design of projects, specifically looking at their capacity and experience.

There seems to be a high potential to increase the project portfolio in South-Eastern Europe, providing an even wider range of benefits resulting in a much greater UNEP success, in case there would be additional UNEP support.

Sharing experience and replication

In this respect the project offers numerous positive examples described in publications, progress reports and interview statements. Above all, successful experience sharing with the Alpine Convention has to be mentioned, which started already before the signature of the Convention. The Alpine-Carpathian cooperation among protected areas has a long tradition, as the Alpine Network of Protected Areas helped to establish the network in the Carpathians by providing lessons learned, advice and information exchange.

Some ministries (e.g. the Czech Ministry of Environment) organize round tables for stakeholders to share information and enhance cooperation. The Convention has offered an opportunity to think and deal with different thematic issues in a broader context. Such activities are inspired from best practice in information sharing and best practices in the design of new projects reflecting local, national and Carpathian experience and building on outcomes of other Convention-related initiatives.

There is also common agreement that lessons learned from implemented projects and best practice examples are effectively shared among the countries – sharing experiences in WGs of the Convention is seen as an asset by many people – and that the process can be transferred to other regions. All implemented projects have included thoughts related to the replicability of experiences.

Increased activities of UNEP Vienna – ISCC as regards the global mountain cooperation can be observed. For example, the original idea to develop a similar environmental agreement in the Caucasus region failed due to political constraints, amongst them the Russian – Georgian war. Adapting to the political situation, UNEP

Vienna – ISCC approached the issues from a different angle, and started the process and activities on the level of scientific cooperation between the countries.

Within the Global Mountain Partnership, the Carpathian and the Alpine Conventions are seen as best practice examples, having an outreach and are acknowledged by other mountain regions, e.g. Pyreneans, Andes, ICIMOD in the Himalaya region, African Mountain Forum, etc. This is due to UNEP Vienna – ISCC excellent information sharing and effective presentations of results at relevant events, such as the Rio+20 Conference in June 2012.

Awareness raising and communication

In all countries where project activities are taking place, the internet and specifically websites are playing an increasing role with respect to awareness raising. The Carpathian Convention website together with the websites of all partners and projects are valuable sources of information. In the context of awareness raising, the important role of UNEP Vienna – ISCC in producing and publishing reports, documents, folders, etc. has to be mentioned. The high quality of the publications as well as of other means, such as power point presentations, is noticeable.

The evaluation also confirms increased visibility of the Carpathian region and the recognition of ‘being part of something bigger’ as there is greater awareness on the local level. People on the ground are becoming aware of the common space and understand that they are part of a bigger region.

The project also contributes to awareness-raising on European and global levels. As regards the European level, UNEP Vienna – ISCC has assisted countries in drafting the relevant paragraphs of relevant EU policy papers, and there is increased visibility and awareness of the existence of the Carpathian and Balkan regions and its shared resources. With regard to the global level, UNEP Vienna – ISCC contributed to bringing mountain issues on the global agenda, e.g. the Rio+20 Declaration, the Resolution of the UN General Assembly making a reference to the Convention with respect to its constructive new approaches to the integrated, sustainable development of the Alps and the Carpathians.

As regards public participation and access to information, the evaluation highlights events in the Vienna International Centre organized regularly by UNEP Vienna – ISCC, e.g. organization of the International Mountain Day on 11 December with yearly changing topics, celebrations with respect to the World Environment Day on 5 June and events related to the International Year of Biodiversity 2010.

Financing

The project is implemented with finances from different sources. Governments are paying yearly contributions as agreed by the Parties to the Convention. In 2011, Parties agreed to establish a Trust Fund to cover the costs of administering and meeting the objectives of the Convention and related Protocols, including the functioning of its Secretariat.

The majority of funding is coming from external donors for specific projects. There is EU recognition in terms of financing for regional projects in the Carpathians (with the limitation that funding for Ukraine and Serbia has to be covered through other sources), interestingly through the angle of regional development programmes rather than environmental programmes. As regards EU funding the limiting factors are the co-financing for EU projects and the fact that UNEP and EU administrative procedures are not really compatible, which puts additional burden on the shoulders of project staff.

Additional sources are coming from bilateral government contributions, e.g. Governments of Austria, Switzerland, Germany, etc.. The evaluation shows that UNEP Vienna – ISCC has been very effective in fundraising since its beginning, as the organization is seen as a trustful international partner with good reputation. Other voices claim that the Convention is not a tool for attracting finances, as donors see the implementation of a convention as a national obligation.

Moreover, the work in South-East Europe has found its way into the mainstream of GEF operations and a number of sequel projects financed by GEF are currently implemented by UNEP Vienna – ISCC at the country level in closest cooperation with UN country teams. There is a huge potential for UNEP to increase its portfolio in this region as UNEP Vienna – ISCC is seen as the leading implementation agency for environmental projects.

Sustainability of the project

As regards sustainability of outcomes and benefits, the Convention itself is a sustaining strategy, and projects designed within this framework replicate experiences in other mountain regions in Europe, such as the Balkans, and in other regions, such as the Caucasus, etc..

The project contributes to **socio-political sustainability** through partnerships with and support by EU macro-regional strategies and funding programmes. Many projects are demand-led and therefore, activities are contributing to government and local level ownership, which strengthens the implementation of several EU-funded projects. There is considerable interest expressed by several stakeholders to have a follow-up and leveraging funding is being searched.

The **institutional framework and governance sustainability** is laid down in the Convention, which will sustain beyond the life of the project. The governments of the signatory parties, especially the respective Focal Points and related staff, support the project and create positive impressions for long-term sustainability despite the fact of many political changes in SEE countries. Furthermore, representatives CSO and other stakeholder groups seem to have a high level of ownership. The sustainability of UNEP Vienna – ISCC as a multifunctional sub-regional office and Center of Excellence in the UNEP family is de facto secured through the solid work and performance of the office and deserves to be fully recognized and supported in the frame and setting of the organization as a whole.

As regards **environmental sustainability**, infrastructure development (in particular roads and railway lines under the TEN-T Programme), hydropower development and intensive land management might have negative environmental impacts, specifically leading to habitat fragmentation. The conflict between nature protection and economic development can be mitigated by establishing ecological corridors for the maintenance of ecosystem resilience and stability and secured through integrated participatory planning and management approaches. The project addresses these issues on several levels, e.g. working group on spatial planning, the negotiation of relevant protocols (transport, energy), the development of future project, e.g. within the EU Strategy for the Danube Region, etc.

The **financial sustainability** is seen as questionable. There might be risks as the project addresses countries and economies in transition and the financial and economic crisis may have impacts, such as the decline of voluntary contributions by governments, which may affect implementation specifically on the national level. The fact that environmental issues have low priority on the political agenda increases the risk further.

Performance of the Secretariat

The effectiveness of project management is generally well perceived. Partners, both in the Carpathian countries as well as in the Balkans, describe the cooperation with UNEP Vienna – ISCC as uncomplicated and effective. Transparent, integrated, client-orientated but sensitive approaches are applied and delivery is result-based, which is appreciated by several countries. UNEP 's role and competence as mediator in environmental issues and it's advocating role on policy level is apparent.

Since its beginning the office has been growing due to increasing activities and a wide range of projects. There is a motivated, robust and committed team in place, which is well managed and accepted by partners. Nevertheless, there is clear indication, that staff is overloaded with work, which has implications on the quality of work. The evaluation finds that practical work of UNEP Vienna – ISCC could in many case be more efficient and effective with better management and facilitation, which would only possible with additional human and financial resources.

Strategic relevance

The evaluation reveals that the project is of strategic relevance. With respect **to global policies**, the project and its activities interact with major global policies and strategies in fields such as biodiversity, climate change, natural resources management, environment and security, and mountain development as specified in the articles of the CC and support to Balkan countries, specifically to the Convention on Biological Diversity and its Programme of Work on Mountain Biodiversity and related events and the UNCCD 10-Year Strategy. As regards the **regional policy level**, the two main components of the project – the Carpathian Convention and the Protocols and the ENVSEC Initiative – focus entirely on sub-regions in pan Europe and were constituted as part of the inter-governmental 'Environment for Europe' process. And there is also a clear relevance to UNEP strategies and programmes.

Recommendations

As regards **institutional arrangements**, it is important to have robust governance structures in place. Therefore, continue to building up and effectively manage these structures. Independently of the Secretariat responsibilities, there is the clear need for UNEP to build on the de facto role and functions and track record of achievements of UNEP Vienna – ISCC, and secure its multifunctional mandate as well as the necessary cash and in kind support, to ensure long-term presence in the region and as UNEP's global resource center for sustainable mountain development.

There is a also the need for commitments from governments and the political will to steer development towards sustainability. Parties to the Convention are encouraged to focus on strategic issues, to further develop and implement new Protocols, such as on agriculture, energy, mining, etc. and the role of National Focal Points should be strengthened to effectively promoting the Convention.

For the Balkan countries it is advisable to keep the approach to respond to country needs, because it is benefiting the countries, and UNEP and in the long-term the environment. A follow-up project should look for new partnerships and further support governments in the development and revision of strategic policy papers, as well as in the design and implementation of projects.

As regards **coordination, cooperation and networking** good mechanisms are in place and should be further used and strengthened, specifically looking for synergies and new partnerships and the negotiation of additional Memoranda of Understanding and Cooperation.

Although a lot has been done in the project, **capacity building** is an ongoing process. Capacity building efforts should be a main component in a follow-up project; activities in this regard should be strengthened at different levels as there is still a long way to go to achieve the intended impacts as regards sustainable development and environmental protection.

There is a clear need towards more **integrated approaches** to land management and the linkages between nature and other relevant sectors. A follow-up project should support such approaches on policy and project level, ensuring a greater focus on land use and spatial planning and incorporating biodiversity aspects into other sectoral policies.

The project has proven to be successful with respect to **stakeholder participation**. Nevertheless, there is the need for continued strengthening of stakeholder involvement, specifically as regards the Civil Society Organization. There are proposals to more strongly involve the community level (county councils, mayors, etc.) in a follow-up project. Furthermore, there needs to be a strategic approach towards the involvement of the European Commission, e.g. foster the relationship through participation in working groups and meetings, or to increase UNEP's role as a partner for EU, for example in the implementation of the Strategy for the Danube Region.

Ensure a good mix of formal processes on policy level and **projects**, there should be a balance of top-down and bottom-up approaches linking institutional work with practical work on the ground. Follow the current path in catalyzing projects, but improve project design and the elaboration process of projects by a better involvement of partners from the very beginning and looking at their experience and real capacity for implementation. For projects in the Balkans, additional UNEP support, e.g. from the Environmental Fund would be needed to enhance the project portfolio and UNEP's reputation in the region.

Sharing and learning from experience made in the Carpathians and further building up the global mountain agenda has a high potential to promote the Carpathian experience and UNEP's role, but relevant activities would need additional human and financial resources. On request of governments, UNEP Vienna – as a resource centre for sustainable mountain development – should be ready to support the negotiations for similar environmental agreements, adapted to the political, ecological and economic situation in the countries.

There is the obvious need to invest more resources as regards **communication and awareness raising**. Specifically, the UNEP website providing information on activities other than the Convention has to be newly designed and expanded. Synergies with and support from partners should be thought upon as regards the promotion of the Convention and other mountain related activities. A strategic approach toward collaboration with municipalities and communities as regards awareness raising is needed.

In terms of **funding**, UNEP Vienna – ISCC is heavily depending on project funding, which might not be sustainable on the long-term. There is the need to strengthen the involvement of participating countries and encourage governments – whenever possible – to increase their yearly contributions or provide additional in-kind support. As regards EU money the question of co-financing, which is sometimes very

difficult to arrange for partner organizations, should be taken serious and solutions have to be found. There is also the need for making internal UNEP administrative procedures more compatible with donor procedures. With respect to UNEP Vienna's role for liaison work and strengthening the mountain partnership, there is the need for additional resources to effectively implement activities and to sustain the outcomes.

With respect to the **performance of the Secretariat**, although there is a qualified and motivated team in place and the project management is well perceived, there is the clear indication that the exceptional wide range of activities cannot be effectively and efficiently managed with the current resources, meaning that human and financial resources should be adequate to the numerous tasks.