

Tatarbunary, Odessa Oblast, Ukraine

Partner visit to Mama-86 and Vozrozhdeniye in the frame of the Empowerment & Local Action/MFS Program.

By Anna Samwel, WECF, August 2007 - Tatarbunary

Location: Tatarbunary Centre

Telephones: Office: 00380 - 484431066

Email: ekophon@odtel.

Preparatory project visit in the frame of the MFS-program, financed by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

1. Introduction and Methodology

From Wednesday 15th to Wednesday 22nd of August 2007 I visited Tatarbunary with the Ukrainian partners, to gather more information on water, sanitation and agriculture, and about their organisations. Our partners are Mama-86 Tatarbunary and Vozrozhdeniye, which are housed in one office. In this report I will first describe the local situation on our ELA topics.

2. Environmental challenges of the region:

2.1 Lake Sassyk

The reason of existence of Vozrozhdeniye is the environmental disaster which happened with lake Sassyk. While the current generation used to swim in Sassyk in their childhood, it is now very dangerous and actually impossible to swim there due to the pollution. The lake Sassyk was in former times a bay from the Black Sea, in the south of Ukraine. Since the bay was separated by a dam from the Black Sea, the water looks greenish and smells unpleasant, while in the past health resorts served sick people to get better from the fresh sea air. The margins are now polluted by waste, dumped by the surrounding communities. The region has among the highest rates of cancer in Ukraine. According to a survey conducted by the organisation, 97% of the surrounding population supports to break the dam and give the estuary back to the sea.

Dr. Ivan T. Rusev ((2001) Odessa ‘Astroprint’) gives in his book ‘Break of Sassyk blockade’ a short English summary of what happened.

“Break of Sassyk Blockade;

Thorny way of regeneration of pearl of coastal zone of the black sea

Lake Sasik 208 square kilometre in size, lies between the deltas of the Danube and Dniester rivers in the Tatarbunarsky region, Odessa Oblast. In the late 1970's, Soviet authorities initiated a large agro-industrial project dyking off the lake from the Black Sea and infusing into the lake a large volume of fresh water from the Danube through a 14 kilometres – long artificial channel. Their objective was to transform the Sassyk lagoon into a fresh water lake for irrigation purposes. The project not only failed in achieving its intended objective, due in large part to natural saline underground in the region, it has had serious environmental consequences for the area as a whole. The problem has been aggravated but unregulated commercial fishing practices that are also related to the irrigation project.

The environmental challenges are as follows:”

- Ecological deterioration of the Danube Delta Wetlands.

- “The increased traffic and infusion of contaminants have altered the physiochemical characteristics of the lake.” Exaggeratedly high levels of pesticides and heavy metals are found. “Dissolved oxygen in the summer months has increased the volume of algae bloom during the same months.
- Agricultural lands have become salinized. Fresh water wells have been contaminated, fruit trees have die, and the production of vegetables has dropped. Public health has consequently been undermined.” The wells east of Sassyk have many times of the year no water at all.”
- Deteriorated ecological health in the lake. Fish have disappeared and are found ill.

“The Sassyk irrigation project was completed in 1982 just a few years later, its negative effects has become apparent to local residents. However, powerful parties at higher levels of government were loath to admit they had erred, particularly since the project had resulted in higher budgets for their departments.

Although increased saline in the soil was reducing crop yields, there was fear that further tampering with the water supply would result in yet greater declines in production.” Currently some authorities are reluctant to change the situation. They receive money for the irrigation channel, which has been constructed around the lake, but never has been function.

“Since more than 10 years the organisation is lobbying the local, regional and national authorities to re-connect the lake with the sea. Before 1996 there were occasionally voiced concerns, but it was not until two teenagers died from leukaemia that the citizens took action. The death prompted a group of local doctors to form Vozrozhdeniye. Group members began by trying to obtain the results of environmental research commissioned by local officials, but when they found that data was marked ‘for official use only’, they mobilized and sought support from the community. They conducted a survey and found that 97 percent of the 5000 respondents supported removing the dam enclosing Sassyk and returning the region to its natural state as a brackish estuary. But due to corruption and reluctance of the responsible officials, nothing is happening.” (Isar, 2001) The public lost confidence that they can expect something from the authorities. That makes it difficult to mobilize local communities. It does opens opportunities for more radical actions, about which different groups are already thinking loud up.



Territory of NGO's.
The place where the dam to lake Sassyk is to be cut is marked in red.
The blue dot locates the only drinking water of the region.
The blue line marks the proposed drinking water pipe, to the villages right to Sassyk without water.
On the lagoon which can be seen on the right are health resorts located. In former times all around lake Sassyk, but those disappeared.

2.2 Drinking Water

Situation

In Tartarbutunary 60% of the people obtain their water from a 120 meter deep well, made in former times by the kolkhoz. This is a central water supply systems, which functions very badly because the pipes are out dated and have a too low capacity to serve the demand. The town gets only 4 hours per day water. The water is far too mineralized and has a salty taste. 40% of the population has own private wells, varying from 4 to 35 meters deep. These are not suited for drinking water, i.e. some are very dirty and the water is not clear. The people with no central water supply connection often order water to be transported to a tank in their garden by a tank car.

In the villages, 100% gets their drinking water from private wells. The water from the central water supply and the well water is too mineralised, and has a salty taste. It is also polluted with nitrate. It is used as drinking water. The villages east of Lake Sassyk have often no water at all in their wells. If there is water present, it is very salty and undrinkable. It is a disastrous situation, especially when there is no water at all. Drinking water can be bought or important, but they also have to wash and irrigate their gardens.

Many people in Tartarbutunary and surrounding villages are harvesting rainwater for irrigation and washing purposes. Sometimes they drink it, but rain is considered actually as undrinkable. In the school they installed an osmosis water filter to take out the salt and minerals. This filter is at the moment broken, they need external expertise to find out what is wrong. The school is

officially under administration of the local authorities, but it is difficult to get any support to repair the filter.

In the whole region is only one source of clean drinking water, in the Bashtanovka village. It is in danger, because businessmen want to buy it, and sell the water for their profit. Although they are not able to buy the source itself, they want to buy the surrounding land and take the water from there. Bashtanovka is 12 minutes by car from Tatarbunary.



Left: rainwater harvesting at a farm. Right: A water car from which people can order water

2.3 Sanitation

In Tatarbunary there is said to be some kind of canalisation, which is flowing untreated in Lake Sassyk. But by far not everybody is connected. Those people and the people from the surrounding villages use pit latrines.

In some places around lake Sassyk the pit latrines are seen as a problem, because the regular occurrence of flooding. In some places the underground consists of rock, which makes digging a hole for a pit latrine a hell of a work.

2.4 Building and Energy

The farmers and the NGO showed a lot of interest in alternative energies. A farmer showed interest and started talking about it by himself, and explained how with old plastic bottles an isolating wall can be build. He proposed to put the bottles side by side one up right and one up side down, to construct a whole wall that way.

In the cultural house they have installed energy saving infra-red heaters in the big hall. In the past, no activities were held in the winter because it was so expensive to heat such a big room. Now it can be heated effectively and quickly.

It is interesting to mention here an old tradition, the so called Klakov. When somebody wants to build or repair his house, he calls his neighbours and relatives for a Klakov. They come to help him for a whole day, and the owner provides food and drink. This is not happening any more as often as in the past, but is apparently still alive.

2.5 History of decollectivisation

Tatarbunary and three of the surrounding villages had one successful agricultural kolkhoz. The 'chairman' was a good businessman and politician.

In the early nineties, people could choose whether they would remain with the collective or if they would start as independent farmers, the members of the NGO and the organic farmers in Tatarbunary were among the first who went out. The people, who went out, obtained the worst land and no machinery or tools to work their land. They had a hard time in the beginning. The majority remained in the kolkhoz, they saw that it wasn't favourable to be independent, and it was just easier to stay. In 2000 the kolkhozes all privatized. The land and equipment was supposed to be divided equally to all members. But the former leaders kept the machinery and the best plots of land for themselves.

Now many of the people have to rent their land to the big farmers, because they have nothing to work the land with. The rent is very low. The people are forced to work on the land of the big farmers. The big farmers have the possibility to make profit, and invest in more land and equipment. They are also able to access government programs. This way, the gap between the rich and the poor in the rural areas grows bigger and bigger.

2.5 Agriculture

In Tatarbunary nine farmers are growing organically. They are innovative and always in search for new methodologies. One farmer is active in international exchanges and seminars, and takes the information home and makes it available to his fellow organic farmers. The nine farmers are friends and meet frequently. In summer rarer, in the winter almost every day.

The farmers grow wheat, barley and chickpeas. For compost are too little materials available. The fields are fertilized with green manure, and it is make sure that there is enough organic material in his soil. For this reason his tomatoes ripened while his neighbours' ones dried out. In the whole region the most important crops as maize, wheat, barley and different vegetables dried out because it was extremely hot and dry. Irrigation is no option according to one³ of the farmers, as a lot of money is needed to install such a system, and not enough water is available. Dripping irrigation would probably be an option, but is very expensive. The irrigation project launched by the Soviets ended in a disaster and the destruction of fertile land.

But it seems to be that organic farming is more profitable, as money for fertilizer is saved. In the gross margin calculation can be seen that good money can be made with farming, if the weather is allowing it. For other farmers to convert it is difficult, because change is always hard. They are used to do the things the way they always did. But it is a long process, which has to be worked on.



Two organic farmers discussing about how to graft vine, one of the farmers is practicing perma culture

3. The organizations

3.1 Who they are

The office in the centre of Tatarbunary hosts two organisations; Mama -86 Tartarbunary and Vozrozhdeniye, but it are the same people who work for those organisations; Mama-86 is part of the mama-86 network, and had mainly projects on agriculture. They work together with nine organic farmers in Tatarbunary and surrounding villages.

Vozrozhdeniye is a local organisation and works on advocacy and political level on water problems. It is not part of a network in order to maintain its independence and be able to concentrate only on local problems. Communication with other similar organisations however is intensive. They work with several volunteers and associates in the region.

Vozrozhdeniye was established in 1996 by a group of local doctors and people concerned about the regional harsh environmental problems. The region has an extremely high prevalence of cancer, especially among children and young adults.