

# THE STARA PLANINA COMMUNITY FORUM PROCESS AN EXPERIENCE OF LOCAL DEMOCRACY IN BULGARIA

Structure, Experience and Potential



Municipalities of Aprilze, Gabrovo, Sevlievo, Teteven, Troyan, Tryavna

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## **INTRODUCTION - DEMOCRATIC FORUMS IN STARA PLANINA**

From spring 2000 to autumn 2001, democratic forums were held in six municipalities in the Stara Planina region. They received financial support from SDC. This report sets out the objectives, processes and rules involved together with the results of these forums. As far as we are concerned, they were instruments designed to promote decentralisation and permit the extension of the democratisation process in Bulgaria. Following broad consultation of those involved in the process, SDC intends to continue its support for these forums.

In each of the six municipalities, the forums brought together the main players in community life: businessmen and women, local associations, women's and young people's groups as well as representatives of the local authorities. During the 61 forum sessions held, a wide range of issues were tackled, problems of common interest were discussed, recommendations were made to the local authorities and over 50 projects were drawn up, 31 of which are currently financed by the SDC. They are tangible proof of the exhaustive work carried out in the forums.

Support for local communities and the need for permanent dialogue between society and the local authorities are issues which are at the heart of our cooperation with Bulgaria. These goals are very much in line with the decentralised management in our own country. In Bulgaria, as in Switzerland, democracy is not only characterised by the right to give one's opinion during consultations of the electorate. It also relates to all initiatives of associations, interest groups, enterprises and individuals aimed at ensuring the best possible management of our living environment. This expansion entails dialogue between groups with different objectives and the development of bodies to support exchanges and debates, between interest groups or with State institutions. The establishment and achievement of projects in the public domain through citizens is another aspect of democratisation. This means that those concerned must take up their responsibilities and it also requires a framework of real complementarity between citizens' initiatives and State intervention. These issues addressed in an innovative manner correspond well to the agenda of improved exchanges of experiences among the players in the South-East Europe for which the Stability Pact provides the platform.

Following this initial positive experience, SDC hopes to continue the experience by extending it to other municipalities in the region. It also seeks to make this instrument of dialogue available in situations where complex decisions have to be made. That is the spirit of this report. Our wish is thus to enhance further the debate so that appropriate solutions may be found at local level to the difficult challenges facing Bulgaria during these years of transition.

--Paul Peter, Head of Division South East Europe  
SDC Swiss Agency for Development and Co-operation

## **THE DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION IN BULGARIA**

The last years of transition to a market economy and democratic society totally changed the public perception about the role of the institutions, civic groups and citizens in Bulgaria. Slowly but persistently a process of institutional decentralisation is taking place, enabling communities to search for local solutions. Today, citizens expect local governments to provide more information and better services, and to stimulate public participation and create a favourable business environment. However, they are much more ready to observe and

criticise than to actively participate in community life.

With the development of the democratic process in Bulgaria, better conditions are created to encourage activities within civil society. Mutual confidence and a willingness for partnership are gradually taking root among local authorities, private business, NGOs and citizens. The newly adopted law for regional development provides an opportunity for sustainable development of municipalities and regions. But there is a marked lack of experience in partnership, cooperation and shared responsibility amongst stakeholders at local level.

## **TOWARDS A NEW CITIZENSHIP IN STARA PLANINA REGION**

The present Forum program in Bulgaria is based on the experience of six years of development activities in Stara Planina region. Since 1994, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation have been financing a "Community support program" in the Stara Planina region, assisting five municipalities in a selection of specific sectors (infrastructure, health, tourism, SME) and maintaining a twinning program with Swiss partner municipalities. An evaluation of these activities in 1999 came to the conclusion that municipalities should - above all - be promoted as core democratic institutions. As such, they should become more responsive to citizen's interests, more open and accessible, but above all more inclusive. Compared to previous forms of cooperation, this new emphasis implied a re-orientation of program objectives. The democratic quality and intensity of community life now became the centre of attention. Economic sector objectives became subordinated to this overall concern.

Subsequently, the organisation of a process based on the Forum methodology in the municipalities of the Stara Planina region was recommended, as the most promising approach to meet the objectives stated above. The Forum approach would result in an improved "community discourse", as an essential contribution to civil society. The Swiss financed Forum Program today covers half-a-dozen municipalities in the Stara Planina (in fact, the five communities included in the previous program: Aprilze, Triavna, Troian, Teteven and Gabrovo, plus Sevlievo as a newcomer). It also includes trial runs of discussions on the level of Stara Planina region. The Forum Program was initiated by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation at the end of 1999. It became operative in Spring 2000. This report is designed to describe what took place during one cycle of Forum sessions which terminated in Summer 2001.

## **THE FORUM AS A DEMOCRATIC INSTRUMENT**

### **What is a Forum?**

A Forum is a public meeting of citizens to discuss at local level important questions of mutual interest. Forum meetings are to take place within a set format and are continued over several sessions until the questions are resolved and recommendations for future action are worked out and approved by consensus. Recommendations could be addressed to some authority or some institutions involved or outside the Forum Program. With 10 to 12 sessions for one round of discussions, a Forum typically lasts 1 to 1 1/2 years. It would involve between 40 to 70 or even more regular participants. As a public process involving the media it would regularly reach the entire community. In other words, it is a sizeable event which has to be set up and managed in a professional way. Its basic structure has been put to use in Western European countries and its key features

are based on ample experience in a wide variety of situations. (See below for a summary list of specific elements of a Forum process).

#### Elements of a Forum process

- Moderator - A neutral person from outside with no interest in the Forum municipality, responsible facilitator of the Forum-Process.
- Co-moderator - Local person, supporting moderator with information and process monitoring.
- Operative Group - Up to six members, separate bench in a Forum; continuously during lifetime of the Forum, even between sessions, responsible for preparation of the sessions together with moderator.
- Transformer - Preferably from Community Administration, member of the Operative Group, selected by Mayor or Council, responsible for implementing the recommendations addressed to the administration. In some places an Executive Group of several persons takes charge of this function.
- Forum Office - Established and staff selected by Swiss-Cooperation Program in Bulgaria; to coordinate Forum activities and provide logistic support to the Forums.
- Project Committee - To work out criteria for projects, advise forums in project preparation and to advise SDC regarding the financing of projects by the Swiss program or other donors.

A Code of Conduct is to be discussed and accepted by the participants during the first session of the Forum, in order to structure the duties and the rights of the participants, but also to support the role of the moderator in the difficult task of process facilitation.

The strength of a Forum definitely lies in its "engendering" capacity. It is an instrument for the development of ideas amongst groups of persons who would usually not discuss matters, nor cooperate in finding (common) solutions. The Forum is a platform to arrange for new partnerships amongst participants in common endeavours, which could evolve and continue beyond the limited lifetime of a Forum process.

#### **Partnership with municipality**

A Forum includes and works together with local administration and politics, but should not be used for political goals and topics already dealt with by the administration or discussed in the Council. A Forum constitutes an independent process, oriented strictly towards topics raised by the participants. A Forum has no decision-making power comparable to a Municipal Council and does not take votes to decide on its results. A Forum works rather in a consensus-oriented mode and looks for "win-win-solutions" in the case of conflicts.

Participants of a Forum are supposed to live in the municipality in question or to have important socio-economic links to the municipality. Irrespective of their status and background, participants are equal in the sense that each member has the same right to speak and to express her or his opinion. It is a specific feature of the Forum approach that during sessions participants will be seated in groups on particular benches established by:

- |                  |                 |                     |
|------------------|-----------------|---------------------|
| • Administration | • Youth         | • Municipal Council |
| • NGOs           | • Entrepreneurs | • Citizens          |

representing the specific socio-economic background of its members.

To have the participants grouped by benches can enhance the quality of Forum discussions decisively. It allows participants to interpret statements made by individuals in a group context, as it is always clearly perceptible under which perspective an opinion is expressed. To the Chairperson, benches offer the possibility of asking for a consolidated view with respect to some issue from all members of a particular group. Benches are indeed instrumental in the structuring and consolidation of discussions. Since they help to visualise positions in a socio-economic setting, they form a basis for compromise and cooperation on particular issues.

A Forum should be structured into benches in such a way as to reflect the main socio-economic features of the community in question. Concurrently, the local characteristics of a topic of the Forum should be adequately taken care of. As an example: so many issues can only be treated if "Youth" as a group is established and actively participating. The Table below illustrates in which way the six municipalities involved in the program decided to structure their Forum. One may note that the number of Benches increases with the size and the social differentiation of a municipality, from 7 in Apriltze to 11 in Gabrovo.

#### Benches established by Municipalities at their respective Forum

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| • Operative Group                                       | • Villages  |
| • Municipal Administration                              | • Citizens  |
| • Business / Small & Craftsmen<br>/ Small & Middle-size | • International Projects                                |
| • Big Enterprises / Industry & Banks                    | • Healthcare  |
| • Education   | • Social Activities                                     |
| • Culture   | • Tourism and Ecology / Cultural<br>Historical Heritage |
| • NGOs  | • Agriculture   |
| • Youth   | • Water & Forests                                       |
| • Sport   |   |

#### **Themes of common interest**

A Forum should be free to choose its own focus and select its own topics for discussion. The participants may prefer to cover many diverse issues, or only a few, or maybe concentrate on one single topic. A Forum can devote several sessions to a particular issue or limit discussion to one topic per session. Arrangements in this respect greatly influence level and content of the Forum deliberations and the quality of the eventual outcome. As the Table below indicates, each Forum involved in the Stara Planina program selected a wide range of topics to be treated, some of them having to change in topic from session to session. This is certainly not conducive to in-depth discussion of issues. Participants of the Forums may well have been aware of this: however, at the outset they were unable to agree on priorities and resolved the problem by offering at least something of interest to many. At the end of the first round of sessions, Forum participants in general expressed a preference for fewer topics to be treated in a second round. They also considered their particular Forum as more mature now, more aware of the complexities of issues and of the need for more structured discussions, and the ability to set priorities.

It should be stressed, though, that to devote enough time to an in-depth discussion of issues is as much a matter of common sense as of maturity. It does take time to resolve an issue, and for fifty or more people to

be clear and make up their minds takes several rounds. One has to be prepared to assess different points of view, compare advantages and drawbacks, immediate and longer term perspectives. To cut all this short means to unduly simplify matters.

#### Topics for discussion selected in Municipal Forum

##### Aprilze

- |                            |  |
|----------------------------|--|
| 1. Lack of internet access | 5. Privatisation of forests                        |
| 2. Unemployment            | 6. Water sources                                   |
| 3. Tourism                 | 7. Development of Small and Middle-size Businesses |
| 4. Ecology                 |  |

##### Tryavna

- |  |                                   |
|--|-----------------------------------|
| 1. Children and family environment       | 6. Culture                        |
| 2. Youth                                 | 7. Health: Completion of hospital |
| 3. Sustainable economic development      | 8. Sports and tourism             |
| 4. Tourism                               | 9. Water                          |
| 5. Tourism: Reconstruction of old street |                                   |

##### Troyan

- |                                    |                                       |
|------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 1. Youth, Sports, Leisure          | 5. Strategies and information systems |
| 2. Integrative function of tourism | 6. Socially weak people and Health    |
| 3. Culture                         |                                       |
| 4. Infrastructure and ecology      |                                       |

##### Gabrovo

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| 1. Lack of strategy for sustainable development | 6. Health, Preventive Medicine         |
| 2. Tourism                                      | 7. Spiritual heritage                  |
| 3. Infrastructure, City environment             | 8. Education                           |
| 4. Socially weak people                         | 9. Unemployment                        |
| 5. Youth, Sports                                | 10. Integration of NGOs in social life |
|   | 11. High Technology Centre             |

Etc.

#### **Recommendations and projects: two results of a Forum**

The ultimate result of a Forum process is some recommendation for action, either to members of the Forum itself or to institutions outside. Typical recommendations in the Bulgarian Forums would concern, as an example, the provision of access to facilities available with the Municipality, or better consideration of the needs of special groups such as handicapped in public space, etc.

Alternatively, the outcome of a Forum could be a decision to support a particular concrete project proposed by a group of persons within the Forum. If the Forum has a budget available, the participants may decide on the use of these funds, and also set priorities. In the Stara Planina program, the Swiss donor established a small budget up to 10'000 BGN at the disposal of each Forum. This was to acquaint the participants with their own responsibility in decision making. All the Forums used the Funds for small actions, often related to tourism. Yet some Forums experienced considerable difficulties when they had to settle on the details of their decision. In other words, the budget arrangement offered the chance to engage in a learning process.

In the absence of a budget available with the Forum (which is the rule rather than the exception anywhere in the world) one should bear in mind that the Forum in regard of concrete projects would again only issue a recommendation, this time addressed to some authority or donor for financing. The legal responsibility for implementation of a concrete project and for its later sustainability would be solely with the project promoter (an NGO, a public institution, an enterprise) and not with the Forum as a large and heterogeneous group.

In the case of the Stara Planina Program, the outcome from the six Forums over one cycle of sessions has been impressive indeed. Altogether, some 200 recommendations have been addressed to various institutions, centring of course on the local administration. Over 60 project proposals have been worked out (and 45 have in the end been financed by SDC: see Table on Topics and Results, below). To be precise, SDC financed 30 projects to the extent of 986'163 BGN, whereas total value including contributions of the promoters was of 1.735 million BGN as of 31.10.01. Contributions of promoters were mostly in kind, but sometimes also in cash. They also included premises put at their disposal by a Municipality etc. In fact, a contribution of up to 30% in public sector projects and of up to 50% in private sector projects was expected from the proponents of the program. The Table also indicates that recommendations and projects relating to education/youth as well as healthcare social problems feature highest on the agenda, followed by culture, ecology, and tourism. However, one must be aware that many recommendations and projects cover several topics, whereas they have been inserted in the Table according to their main component.

With respect to concrete projects, it is interesting to note that out of the 60 proposals most embrace a new partnership or envisage a new service, and only few are setting up new institutions. In other words, the Forum as an instrument is good at discovering unused potentials and putting them to use. Setting up new institutions is more complex and requires more of a longer term effort. As a result of a Forum it has been comparatively rare (see Table below).

<u>Categories</u>	<u>Number of projects</u>	
• New partnerships	33	(one project can cover several categories)
• New services	27	
• Economic development	28	
• New facilities	21	
• New institutions	8	

### **Information for all citizens**

As an instrument to discuss issues and to generate solutions via possible action, the Forum is, above all, a communication process. It only thrives on complete transparency. It is therefore important for a Forum to inform all members of the activities of Working Groups which it may decide to establish. Further, it is essential to keep track of Forum recommendations directed to the Forum participants as such or to outside institutions, during the session period and after. Thus, a feedback mechanism is to be set up covering all results and relating to all participants and contributing parties. An important role has to be played here by the local media. The fate of Forum recommendations and the progress of projects which the Forum has been backing must be monitored.

## A PROCESS ON THE WAY

If it takes a number of pages to describe the key elements necessary to run a Forum, the setting up of this complex structure in reality needs time and requires diligence and circumspection. In Bulgaria, the process the Swiss wished to support was concerned with community development. Consequently, program preparation and introduction of the Forum process covered the stages outlined below. Yet one should be aware that another objective of the Forum might require a different set-up. The central role of the Mayor described below would not be indicated in the case where a forum had to deal with a regional issue, or related exclusively to stakeholders of the private sector.

1. Workshop with program staff and an introductory presentation of the Forum instrument at the Regional Association of Municipalities - (Dec 99)
2. A detailed brochure in local language about a Forum, its structure, process and outcomes is produced
3. Information meetings with Mayor, chair of the Municipality Council, Municipality Administration and public are held - (Feb 00)
4. Local media informed
5. Forum-coordinator and Moderators appointed
6. Core persons of the municipality (won at information meetings) discuss and agree on the local Forum structure (number and indication of benches); Mayor or Chair of the Council should not dominate the process
7. Co-moderator appointed and Operative Group set up involving most of the core persons - (Feb 00)
8. Names of potential participants collected and a selection invited to join the Forum
9. The Moderator or Co-moderator in person contacts many of the potential participants to inform and motivate them; the Mayor and/or the Chair of the Council formally appoints participants - (Feb 00)
10. The Mayor identifies the Catalyst (member of the Operative Group)
11. Test session of the Forum, to get to know structure, way of working and possible results
12. The constituent, first session is held, the Forum starts its work - (May 00)
  - 10 to 12 sessions - (May 00 until July 01)
  - 200 recommendations, 62 project proposals
13. The Project Committee established and its secretariat appointed - (May 00)
  - 10 meetings to discuss project proposals - (Oct 00 until Oct 01)
  - 45 projects financed by SDC

## A "SCHOOL OF DEMOCRACY" IN BULGARIA

This section entirely relates to a Forum tailored to "community development" in which the political structure of the municipalities always plays a central role. A certain emphasis on the political dimension of Forum activities is therefore unavoidable if we are to relate to the particular experience of SDC in Bulgaria. For the Forum methodology as such this represents only one form of its application; it can be applied in a variety of contexts. It could be used by NGOs to cover matters of civil society exclusively.



Or then it could be applied at regional level and there relate to questions regarding private associations such as tourism. Yet the strength of the Forum approach lies in structuring a complex setting of stakeholders, and there political structures are usually implied. As the latter have their established prerogatives in decision making, a Forum is well advised to involve them explicitly from the beginning and to define their respective roles.

### **How a Forum can be initiated?**

As an important series of events within any community, a Forum will have to come to terms with the established and existing political and socio-economic structures. The Forum process therefore has to be officially initiated, and this initiative should come from the highest political or administrative level: the President of the Community Council or the Mayor. Important as it is to have e.g. the Mayor invite the public to take part in a Forum process (and to arrange the financing of the costs involved), he or she should not impose on the process. Once it is set up, the Forum should evolve in its own right. Ideally, the initiator would invite, open the Forum, guarantee a close consideration of forthcoming Forum recommendations (in case they concern her or his office), and once regular sessions of the Forum take place, step back and follow the sessions as a guest or observer only.

In the case of Bulgaria, it was SDC, the Swiss donor agency, who approached all municipalities within the Stara Planina Regional Association of Municipalities, offering financial and methodological support in case they wished to establish a Forum. Subsequently, in all the Municipalities it was the Mayors who officially invited and even nominated participants. All the Mayors and Council Presidents kept enough distance to let the Forums evolve in their own right.

In the case of Bulgaria, SDC as the Swiss donor agency selected the moderators of all Forums, trained them, advised the Mayors and Councils of the municipalities and arranged for introductory workshops and backstopping of Forum sessions by outside experts.

### **A key-person, the Moderator**

The key person to be selected and to be present at an early stage of the Forum process is the so-called "moderator" of the Forum. This is a neutral person coming from outside the community, highly acceptable and of undoubted authority, to facilitate the Forum sessions and to guide the key groups and persons between sessions.

In Western countries, no donor agency would intervene or provide finance, and a Mayor or City Council or a group of citizens would have to shoulder these preparatory steps and the obligations for financing on their own - or hire the services of specialised consultancies.

The task of the moderator is certainly complex enough. In order to ensure smooth functioning of the Forum, the position of the moderator is reinforced with a co-moderator and a secretariat person to keep the records/minutes of the sessions.

In Bulgaria, the co-moderator was selected from the community where the sessions were held, to keep the moderator informed and acquainted with the local situation. All positions at the moderator's desk involved substantial work in between sessions and were remunerated by SDC.

## **Local promoters for the Forum**

The Operative Group is composed of very active persons to support the Forum process, especially between Forum sessions. In many ways this is the local management of the Forum as it is responsible for the preparation of Forum sessions, in close cooperation with the Moderator, and for maintaining the impetus of the Forum between sessions. They may participate in Working Groups established to elaborate issues or project ideas which are to be treated at subsequent sessions. Since the Moderator comes from outside the Municipality, the Operational Group (and the Co-moderator) would constitute something like an institutional core permanently accessible to participants, experts, media and guests.

The Operative Group is established early on in the preparation of the Forum and selected by the persons invoking the Forum. The Operative Group has its own Bench, yet it is not homogeneous, and should comprise members of different backgrounds. The Forum should also include a person as Catalyst, a key position with respect to the implementation of Forum decisions. It is advisable to appoint someone as "Catalyst" who routinely deals with administration, as many recommendations are directed towards the public sector. Usually, the Mayor would indicate the most suitable candidate for this position.

In the context of Stara Planina Forum process the Operative Groups (OG) of all Forums became very prominent, and their performance as a rule was up to the mark. In the course of the sessions many OGs became instrumental in project preparation. Some OGs also asked for special training in this respect through SDC. On the other hand, the role of the Catalysts gained no importance in any Municipality; in fact, their role vanished altogether. This was possibly because the Project Committee took care of project preparation. Also, several municipalities officially followed-up on Forum recommendations which received the same status and treatment as the decisions of the Municipal Council in some larger municipalities. Finally, feedback to the Forum was satisfactory, especially in larger municipalities. All this made the Catalysts redundant.

## **A Forum Office for logistics**

The logistics of a Forum process would normally be a matter for the moderator or for the local municipality administration.

In the case of Bulgaria, with little resources and no experience in the running of Forums, it was decided that all logistics should be handled by one specific Forum Office, established in the region, staffed and financed by SDC.

The Forum Office was to check on standards required for Forum venues, on infrastructure arrangements, sound systems, conference equipment, mail, transport, payment of allowances, communication, media and PR, and links to the Project Committee and the Monitoring Group.

## **Opportunities for project financing**

Similarly, as the Swiss wanted the Forums in Bulgaria to deal with development issues concerning the community, they inserted a project financing facility into their community development

program. The facility was placed with SDC Coordination Office in Sofia, to which a Forum could send project proposals discussed and worked out by its participants, to apply for financing.

In "real life", outside a development policy context, such a facility would not exist. In Western Europe, NGOs and firms as well as municipalities and regional authorities participating in a Forum would dispose of more economic substance to finance recommended activities from their own resources - a state of affairs which still has to evolve in Bulgaria.

### **An appropriate environment**

It has been emphasised that a Forum is structured into Benches. A Bench may comprise up to six persons. With about seven, or up to a full dozen Benches, a Forum session involves possibly 40 to 70 participants, a figure to which a considerable number of visitors, guests, media representatives and experts should be added. It is therefore absolutely essential for the venue of the sessions to afford enough space to set apart the Benches physically. They must become visible as distinct units. Arranging Benches in a circle is certainly the most effective setting. Compromise with local conditions is inevitable, but at the very least it should be seen to that no particular Bench receives a more prominent position.

As important as adequate premises are the technical means to properly manage the Forum discussion. Facilities should include sound systems, overhead projectors, bill boards to display documentation, several flip charts e.g. to allow a running summary protocol during sessions to be kept, etc.

### **A Committee for project decision**

The intention first was to have the PC advise Forum participants on how best to elaborate a project documentation to meet the standards of SDC, or those of other potential donors for that matter. Two facts soon had to be accepted: (1) First, the only donor readily accessible to finance the particular brand and wide range of projects evolving from Forum sessions was SDC. Other donors, even those working in related fields of development policy, would not have the opened budget available to be in a position to react on time. Consequently, SDC evolved as the almost exclusive source of finance (although examples of other financing sources exist and may yet evolve). (2) Secondly, given geographic and communication distances between the Forum and PC, plus the PC session calendar, plus slow pace of treatment on both sides of the process, all advisory activity by PC tended also to delay project decisions. Further, since SDC later transferred decision-making for projects below 10,000 BGN to the PC, and the SDC representative on the PC used to announce decisions on larger projects during PC sessions - PC's advisory function in the eyes of the Forum participants was more and more replaced by that of a decision making unit.

PC meetings were kept as transparent as possible. Delegations of a Forum could personally present their proposal to the Committee, and the Minutes of the meetings were circulated to all Forums. As financing matters are always sensitive, and the PC also had to learn how to deal with pressure groups, and above all, how to establish clear criteria and live by the criteria - its role has not been uncontested by the Forum participants. However, at the internal evaluation sessions, participants of the Forums mostly wanted the PC to exist. Some of them appreciated its advisory role, after all, and the expertise put at their disposal via the PC secretariat. Others were even skeptical whether their Forum would be in a position to decide on financial allocations to individual projects without causing a stir within the Municipality.

## **A Secretariat by a Bulgarian NGO**

The PC secretariat was assigned to a Bulgarian NGO. The main function was to provide expertise on behalf of the PC to Working Groups in Forums. But the Secretariat was also to support the Moderators in the preparation of the sessions, or to provide expert contributions to the sessions as such. The PC Secretariat carried out a number of training workshops (on project appraisal, PR activity etc.) with Forum participants, especially with Operative Groups. For the Monitoring Group supervising the Forum process, the Secretariat organised regular workshops for the moderators.

## **Public relation for better transparency**

Feedback to the general public (Public Relations, PR) is an important feature of any Forum. Even more so is feedback to the Forum participants for the sake of the transparency of the Forum process.

PR in the Bulgarian program had a substantial share in the support budget. A specialist of national renown was dealing with the program - and activities under this heading carried out by the PC Secretariat.

Internal feedback was taken very seriously when the Forum process was established. Each participant should regularly receive the Minutes of the Forum session. In addition all Forums issued a Forum Newsletter reporting on activities and results. The Newsletter in some places was distributed as an insert with local newspapers. Regarding specific Forum results in the form of either recommendations or project activity, the Operative Group as a rule would report to the plenum on the subsequent Forum session. At the conclusion of the sessions, SDC arranged for the Operative Group to continue its feedback function via the newsletter which was retained in all Forum municipalities.

Of all the sidelines of the Forum process as such, feedback arrangements were possibly the most successfully administrated.

## **THE RULES OF THE GAME**

### **Code of conduct for participants**

To guide the Forum discussions amounts to something like social engineering. Rules have to be established. Usually a General Code of Conduct of the participants is presented and discussed at a first session. Members should become aware that they take part in a common endeavour; they should not as much criticise statements by other participants but offer alternative solutions to an issue at stake. They should attend in person and no replacement would be allowed etc.

A typical set of Code of Conduct rules would require regular attendance by members of the Forum, from the beginning to the end of a cycle of sessions. It would require members to remain at the Bench they consented to in the beginning of the Forum.

An important rule would be for all members to speak freely, but to concentrate on matters

under discussion. Energy should not be wasted on criticism, but rather more appropriate solutions should be suggested.

Conduct Rules regarding the Mayor would oblige him to take recommendations of the Forum seriously, to process them in administration and to further their implementation at community level to the extent possible.

When evaluating the Forum process, participants found the rules important, but argued for more flexibility in certain structural aspects. With a wide range of topics on hand, at least ad hoc formation of additional benches should be possible, e.g. on a special topic such as "forest issues". Also to ask e.g. business persons to attend each single session is asking too much. As a result, in some Forums no business representation could be arranged, even if in general their interest in local development is recognised as high. Therefore, e.g. if the bench "Business" arranges internally to maintain its representation by taking turns to attend within the group, then this should be acceptable. Some desired flexibility could also be reached by allowing "guests" of the Forum to have the right to participate as regular members, at least in particular topics - which would avoid creating a new bench.

Other rules have a bearing on the quality and orientation of the discussion process during sessions. If it is the rule to have "issues" discussed, then the Forum deliberations may become lengthy and protracted, but with a chance to reach a deepened understanding and a fresh approach to the issue. If "solutions to issues" are made the starting point of discussion, then the sessions may become more antagonistic and yet remain at the surface of the issue. The Operative Group and the Moderator are instrumental at this stage as they organise, initiate and guide Forum discussions.

Outside expertise may be helpful in Forum discussions as they open up new insights by relating to outside experience. Other instruments to include and reflect the opinion of outsiders should be considered (surveys, questionnaires).

In the Bulgarian program all this could be made available to the Forum via the PC Secretariat financed by SDC. Regarding core expertise (such as project appraisal standards, particular sector issues etc.) it is advisable that a pool of experts is checked and established prior to session activities.

Session preparation is of vital importance. Moderator and Operative Group are challenged here. Preparatory steps have to be planned over months and sometimes several sessions ahead. Working Groups have to be established and coached. The long preparation time also implies that several topics have to be prepared in parallel. Furthermore, material and documentation necessary to present the topic to the participants has to be produced and distributed with the mailed session invitations. They must also be available at the sessions. In the Stara Planina program the Forum Office could support these technical aspects. In a development context this function is as important as it is demanding.

A delicate issue related to basic rules is the question of how to involve established politicians in a Forum process. In Bulgaria, some Forums assigned them to a separate bench. In others the members of the Municipal Council have been individually assigned to benches reflecting their respective professional background. This has added a built-in lobby function to some benches and strengthened their position in Forum discussions.

In any case, Forum decisions should never be in conflict with official decisions, nor interfere with the regular handling of public matters. Projects evolving out of a Forum and relating to public space (e.g. to establish a gym, an artisans' centre, a park) should be part of a Municipal long term development plan, and may require some decisions of Council or Administration to this end.

Rules of the game certainly shape the Forum discussion. However, the community as such offers the human basis of any Forum. In this respect, experience everywhere shows that a minimum of social differentiation within a community must be given to have a rich and fruitful discussion - and also to justify the use of a comparatively costly and heavy instrument such as the Forum approach. In smaller communities, a simpler approach may quite serve the purpose. An "open space conference" run by public experts might be sufficient. Alternatively, a cultural animation program could be established. Or, finally, a sectoral development program (e.g. centring on agriculture, or SME, or health), as in the previous SDC approach in Bulgaria, may bring satisfactory results.

### **Legitimated results of the Forum**

Follow-up on recommendations (as an outcome of Forum discussion) should be "officialised", if possible, and should best be treated in the same way as Municipal Council decisions are observed by the Municipal Administration. This would confirm that a Forum has found its public role. The arrangement with the Municipal Council and Administration may be part of the Code of Conduct established at the inception of Forum sessions.

Forum Newsletters to all participants would ensure a proper feedback on recommendations and projects. This requires proper arrangements by the donor (e.g. to finance the Operative Group to remain in charge beyond the lifetime of the Forum).

In a development context, project proposals must be supported closely by the donor agency in order to reach the required level of appraisal standards. An advisory body established by the donor (e.g. Project Advisory Committee) would certainly be approached for assistance by potential project groups who engage in project preparation. Training on request (in project appraisal; NGO management etc.) should be arranged.

If there is a financing facility for Forum projects, then the rules for project selection are at the core of a number of concomitant effects. Selection criteria can relate to certain principles of interaction amongst Forum participants on which a project should be based (solidarity, cooperation between social groups, new services etc.). On the other hand, if sector and size is regulated in detail by the selection criteria (such as upper limits to financial volume, eligible sectors, cash flow requirements, sustainability arrangements etc.), then the ideas discussed at Forum sessions tend to emulate project conditions and cease to deal with the needs and the issues perceived at the local level. In the Forum it is better to be uncertain but openminded, than to be overconfident and narrow-minded. After all, its main objective is to improve community life.

Decision making regarding project financing is and remains a donor responsibility. The donor may delegate this function to an agency or to the Forum as such in various forms:

- to have small projects below a specified volume decided directly ad hoc by the Forum (with a budget limit, of course)
- to fix in advance an upper limit of the budget available for financing all projects of a

Forum over the entire sequence of sessions. Thus the Forum would decide how to grade and prioritise the proposals developed by its participants and would submit to the donor in batches of graded proposals. The donor in turn would decide which projects to accept following the grading indicated by the Forum, until the total budget available is reached.

- The donor may decide to keep an element of competition between Forums and establish a total budget for all Forums in the region. Maybe an arrangement awarding some additional funds outside the particular individual Forum budget to outstanding proposals would be feasible here.

Whatever the arrangement, the donor should take care to keep decision-making on project financing as transparent as possible. After all, the Forums are asked to follow the same policy internally. To have projects presented by their supporters in a Project Committee may be cumbersome and time consuming, but healthy, in the sense of assuring openness.

### **An improved civil participation**

One and a half years and over 50 Forum sessions later, SDC as the donor agency held a close review of the outcome of the Forum process. The review took place in summer 2001 and included questionnaires to the Forum participants during final sessions, separate evaluation workshops with the Moderators and with the Operative Groups, meetings with Mayors, Council Presidents, Regional Associations etc. Independently and in the same period of time, the participants of the Forums played a special role in an assessment of the state of civil society in Bulgaria, a study carried out by UNDP in preparation for its Human Development Report 2001. Finally, an external SDC evaluation of the Forum program in preparation of its second phase was carried out in October 2001.

We do not have to report again on the immediate real outcome of the Forums in terms of recommendations and projects, as this has been done under Section Results above. Let us simply recall that the sheer number of projects and recommendations has been surprisingly high and of an impressive quality. A positive impact can already be reported regarding some projects, but of course an assessment will have to wait for full implementation of all accepted proposals. In general, though, this "real side" of the medal is a source of pride and satisfaction to most of the participants interviewed. Yet this concerns only one of the objectives of the Forum process - the aim to contribute to local development - which is subordinated to the central objective of improving the quality of community life in the Forum municipalities.

An impact of the Forums on community life has indeed been measured by the Human Development Report 2001 of UNDP, mentioned above. More than 1600 Bulgarian citizens were interviewed and as an experimental sample an additional 143 members of the six Municipality Forums were interviewed separately. The results shed some light on the particular characteristics of Forum participants and on the impact of the Forums against the backdrop of the general Bulgarian population which never experienced Forum activities.

According to the UNDP survey the participants of the forums show a higher education level than average Bulgarians (university background of 77%, average 11%), higher monthly family income (427 BGN against 261 BGN average). They are more often engaged in NGOs (59% are NGO-members against 5% average). They are also more active in politics: 66% of them had submitted a suggestion at some time to an administration (educational, at work, local government, central government), whereas much less than half of the Bulgarians

(30%) had done the same. 73% of the Forum participants undertook activities to control the work of an administration; only 26% of all Bulgarians had done the same. These few figures indicate a positive experience in participation processes compared to the majority of Bulgarians. While 86% of Bulgarian citizens state: "No one would listen to us" (if they were to take part in citizen activities) only 28% of the participants of the forums say the same.

The results of the survey establish that answers of the participants of the forums differ significantly in all topics related to "civil participation" from the average Bulgarian citizen. With respect to the participants of the forums the authors of the "National Human Development Report 2001" come to the conclusion that "citizen participation can generate participation and solidarity...". In other words, there is an indication that the Municipality Forums have a positive impact on participative behaviour of the individual as well as on civil society in general, and that forums contribute to democratic attitudes and procedures.

By way of conclusion we may reflect on the potential of the Community Forum based on the experience of the Swiss Forum Program in Stara Planina region. This is a limited experience conditioned by the orientation of this program. One may keep in mind that the Forum methodology may be applied to a variety of social contexts and issues, with participation limited e.g. to NGOs or focused on questions of regional importance (see also section on standard procedure, above).

The Community Forum is an organised and structured form of citizen participation at local level with set objectives, time frame, procedures, participants and expected results.

## **WHAT FUTURE FOR THE COMMUNITY FORUM?**

### **Positive advantages**

- Compared to other forms of citizen participation, the Community Forum creates equal opportunities for participation of different interested groups and has well defined procedures and organisational structures to reach the final results - project ideas and recommendations. It is a learning process and in some small communities an educational process.
- There is a good balance between outside support to the process (Moderator, outside experts, Monitoring group) and local efforts (Benches, Operative group, Municipal administration and Council).
- The role of the PC as an advisory body for project development is of significant help to the process of building local capacity.
- The decisions and recommendations of the Forum are accepted as a consolidated public opinion and are highly respected by the locally elected officials. The democratic approach of the Forum process can influence and improve the work of the Municipal councils.

### **Some limitations**

- There is a potential risk of the Community Forum becoming a closed structure and/or institutionalising itself as an additional decision-making body at local level, which could



compromise the main idea of open and transparent discussion with broad public participation

- Great care is needed to avoid the danger that the Forum be perceived as a structure duplicating or taking the role of the officially elected municipal council and to avoid "negative competition". On the other hand, it would be unfortunate if serious contributions of Forum participants were blocked only because they originated outside the set political pattern.
- The Community Forum is a time and human resources consuming process and needs support from people with excellent understanding and knowledge of the Forum process itself. At the same time a lot of flexibility is needed to adjust the methodology to the local environment. It is no easy game.
- Obviously the opportunity to receive financial support for some of the project ideas is crucial for the motivation of the participants to actively take part on a voluntary base in all Forum sessions. At the same time there is a potential danger of limiting the discussion only to project-related ideas and foregoing the chance of deeper and more persistent work on issues and possible options for solutions.

### **Promising opportunities**

- Fair and open discussion and consensus building between different interested social groups and local government bodies (administration & council)
- Opportunity to citizens of exposure to a public exchange of ideas and opinions
- Bottom-up approach for setting up of community priorities and searching for possible solutions
- Open and manifest process of preparation of the recommendations and project ideas
- Increased public awareness of local problems and issues and identification of all interested parties and their possible contribution
- Increased individual understanding of the difficulties faced by authorities and administration in finding commonly acceptable solutions.
- Mobilisation of local resources and building new partnerships between different interested groups as well as public-private partnerships
- Building up new political culture of active listening, dialogue and balance between private, group and public interests
- Increased capacity of civic groups for project writing and project implementation
- Cross-sector approach to local needs
- Increased community spirit and sense of ownership High publicity of the Forum process - newsletters, local, regional and national media, promotional materials, etc.