

Bulgaria Democracy Network Program



Phase I
1995-1998

"Democracy is really impossible without a civic society in place, and not-for-profit organizations are its stout heart indeed. It gives me great pleasure to behold how our Bulgarian public can now more and more distinctly hear the beating of such a noble heart."

Petar Stoyanov, President, Republic of Bulgaria, October 1998

The Democracy Network Program raised the stature and increased the effectiveness of more than 100 nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in Bulgaria. From policy think tanks to grassroots advocacy campaigns, many of these groups are at the forefront of efforts to address critical economic, environmental, and social problems while engaging citizens of all walks of life in shaping the country's future.

Coordinated by the Institute for Sustainable Communities (ISC), an American nonprofit organization with an office in Sofia, and funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the central aim of the first phase of the Democracy Network Program (DemNet) in Bulgaria was to strengthen and support a diverse community of civil society organizations (CSOs) throughout the country. ISC provided direct funding totaling more than \$1.2 million, along with 94 group trainings and extensive technical assistance. DemNet helped more than 100 CSOs become more effective in reaching their goals and better able to involve citizens in public policy and decisionmaking.

ISC's goal was to build a critical mass of CSOs in four vital areas:

- **Democracy Building**
- **Social Safety Net**
- **Environmental Protection**
- **Economic Development**

The program continues its work in a four-year follow-up phase that seeks to make the CSO community even more vibrant and enduring.

Key Results

Citizen organizations supported by ISC in the first phase of the Democracy Network Program have:

Influenced changes in laws, rules, and regulations—from local to national levels.

Mobilized public participation in events that influenced public policy—legal defenses in court, legislative changes, and local public hearings.

Formed working partnerships with other CSOs and/or local government, the media, businesses, and educational institutions.

Generated positive media coverage in print, radio, and television to educate citizens about issues and inform them about CSO activities.

Initiated national NGO meeting, bringing together civil society, government, and business leaders to discuss activities and policies.

Institute for Sustainable Communities



USAID U.S. Agency for International Development



Profiles of Selected Projects

Democracy Building

Human Rights Project

The Roma living throughout Central and Eastern Europe face discrimination every day. Since 1991, the Human Rights Project (HRP) has focused on legal advocacy, human rights education, and specific casework on behalf of Roma in Bulgaria. The fight against discrimination in all areas of public life was a unifying force for Roma activists who helped draft and obtain government endorsement of HRP's policy document "For Equal Participation of Roma in the Public Life of Bulgaria." HRP secured one of the first and the largest ISC/DemNet organizational strengthening grants in 1996, and received additional training and financial and technical assistance in 1997 and 1998. DemNet supported the expansion of HRP's monitoring and advocacy operations and helped with administrative costs of the growing organization. The development of HRP and its successful project work resulted in increased support from international donors, civic organizations, independent media, and the Roma community itself. The Government of Bulgaria, which had earlier ratified the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, heard the Roma community's voice and officially adopted the principles of the Roma policy document as a basis for its National Program for Roma. In addition to day-to-day monitoring and policy development advocacy activities, the Human Rights Project continues its community organizing work with Roma minority organizations and communities across the country. "We do not have illusions that our goals can be achieved overnight—or even in five years time," the HRP's executive director said. "But we can see some changes in the whole picture, positive changes...and this gives us enthusiasm to go on."

Social Safety Net

Democratic Society for a Safe and Harmless Work Environment

In many post-communist countries, millions of people are still willing to work under harmful and hazardous conditions, hoping for higher incomes and secure jobs. As recently as a year ago, many employers in Bulgaria did not take labor safety standards and programs to improve working conditions seriously. A small CSO, the Democratic Society for a Safe and Harmless Work Environment, responded to the dilemma by designing an ambitious project to change national labor policy and harmonize it with European Union labor safety standards. With financial and technical assistance from ISC through DemNet, 10 months after its start, the project realized a major goal when a new labor protection law was put forward by Parliament. The goal was accomplished with the active participation of the media, local authorities, social service CSOs, and citizens from most of the industrialized regions. The project attracted the support of key members of the Labor and Social Policy Committee at the National Assembly. In the project's final stage, with the Healthy and Harmless Working Conditions Law a publicly recognized achievement, ISC/DemNet provided additional support to help the CSO undertake a national campaign to explain the implications of the new law for health protection, employment policy, and labor safety practices among at-risk groups. The project received extensive national and local media attention and provided a new legal framework that will affect the life of Bulgarian workers long into the future.

Economic Development

Initiative for Sustainable Development

By adopting sustainable practices, farmers surrounding one of the largest national parks in the Balkans are not only protecting the natural landscape, but also improving their own financial future. The Initiative for Sustainable Development (ISD) project was established to facilitate the development of new policies and farm management practices to enhance sustainable environmental farming in the agricultural areas surrounding Bulgarian national parks. ISC/DemNet supported ISD's start up in 1997 and 1998. As a result of its success, farmers, government and CSO leaders, researchers, park administrators, international donors, and investors called for its replication and formed a new CSO-based extension service for the region. The primary beneficiaries of the CSO environmental agriculture extension service, also established with the help of a DemNet grant, were farmers from 56 municipalities in the area surrounding one of the largest national parks in the Balkans, the Central Balkan National Park. Volunteers from the CSO extension service trained hundreds of farmers and seed providers in sustainable farming practices, promoted the local production of crops to the trade community, and involved local and central government officials in adopting new standards for bio-agriculture products. The project had an immediate positive effect on the business returns and seed selection practices of the participating farmers. This helped the community improve its economic situation and penetrate new "emerging" markets for environmental and pharmaceutically valued plants and products. The extension service also expanded its environmentally conscious partnership network to involve new farmers, local communities, agricultural and environmental experts, local officials, and investors from Bulgaria and Switzerland. In addition, experts from the Ministry of Agriculture, the State Agricultural Development Fund, and the Ministry of Environment and Waters used the local experience to draft the new national standards for biological agriculture and national quality standards for environmental food products and medicine-related agricultural products.

Environmental Protection

Green Balkans Association-Plovdiv

Bulgaria is home to some of the most important national parks in Central and Eastern Europe, but not until recently was sufficient legislation in place to protect them. With ISC/DemNet financial and technical assistance, the Green Balkans Association organized a 10-month policy change advocacy campaign designed to influence Bulgarian nature protection legislation. The Green Balkans' project team initiated a coalition of nongovernmental organizations uniting the energy and ideas of the media, environmental policy experts, and thousands of concerned citizens. New concepts for the National Action Plan for Biodiversity Protection and the new Biodiversity Protection Law were developed in public debates and presented to the government. As a result of the campaign, the Bulgarian Parliament adopted 11 amendments to the new Forest Act, 35 new texts in the Protected Areas Law, and two amendments to the new Territorial and Settlements Act. A Public Environmental Council was established to continue the civic control, advocacy, and monitoring function of the project. The council also monitors new legislation enforcement, government adherence to international conventions, and implementation of the national nature conservation strategies. ISC/DemNet assistance included legal and policy analyses, grant management and project implementation feedback, and hands-on financial and networking services. As a result, the CSO was able to mobilize citizens and increase political access. Close collaboration between the ISC/DemNet team and the USAID-funded Global Environment Fund Biodiversity Program was of critical importance for the effective design and delivery of ISC support services. The Green Balkans was awarded the best environmental project for 1997-1998 by the Union of Bulgarian Foundations and Associations.



Crisis Strengthens Democratic Institutions

When ISC launched DemNet in 1995, an elected socialist government was rooted in the communist past, Bulgaria's political and economic troubles were severe, and the climate for civil society organizations was not at all supportive. Even so, hundreds of active local CSOs were doing their best to make a difference in the emerging sector.

In 1996, the country's economy began to collapse, taking with it the state-owned banks and many Bulgarians' real incomes. Students responded by staging daily protests, and were soon joined by a wide cross-section of society. These "people power" demonstrations opened the door for the election of a reformist government in 1997.

As President Stoyanov and the new Union of Democratic Forces government moved quickly to stabilize the economy, they also began listening to CSOs and working closely with them. The government has appointed 30 respected CSO leaders to high government positions or advisory posts as well as an NGO advisor to the President. Bulgaria's leaders now realize that a vibrant civil society is critical to building citizens' support for democracy and government reform over the long term.



The **Mission** of ISC is to promote environmental protection and economic and social well-being through integrated strategies at the local level. ISC projects emphasize participating actively in civic life, developing stronger democratic institutions, and engaging diverse interests in decisionmaking.

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Core Activities

ISC helps communities develop future-oriented solutions to pressing local problems through the following core activities:

Community Action. Demonstrating strategic, participatory approaches to solving problems at the local level.

Education for Sustainability. Developing a new generation of leaders through school-based programs linked to community issues.

Strengthening Institutions of Civil Society. Enhancing the capacity and effectiveness of nongovernmental organizations, government agencies, and businesses.

Improving Policy and Practice. Inspiring new ways of thinking about and resolving environmental and economic problems by increasing awareness and the application of best practices and lessons learned.

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May 1995-November 1998

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\$3.2 million



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